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STRATFOR Book

- [The Devolution of Jihadism: From Al Qaeda to Wider Movement](#)

By Scott Stewart

U.S. President Barack Obama appeared in a hastily arranged televised address the night of May 1, 2011, to inform the world that U.S. counterterrorism forces had located and killed Osama bin Laden. The operation, which reportedly happened in the early hours of May 2 local time, targeted a compound in Abbottabad, a city located some 31 miles north of Islamabad, Pakistan's capital. The nighttime raid resulted in a brief firefight that left bin Laden and several others dead. A U.S. helicopter reportedly was damaged in the raid and later destroyed by U.S. forces. Obama reported that no U.S. personnel were lost in the operation. After a brief search of the compound, the U.S. forces left with bin Laden's body and presumably anything else that appeared to have intelligence value. From Obama's carefully scripted speech, it would appear that the U.S. conducted the operation unilaterally with no Pakistani assistance — or even knowledge.

As evidenced by the spontaneous celebrations that erupted in Washington, New York and across the United States, the killing of bin Laden has struck a chord with many Americans. This was true not only of those who lost family members as a result of the attack, but of those who were vicariously terrorized and still vividly recall the deep sense of fear they felt the morning of Sept. 11, 2001, as they watched aircraft strike the World Trade Center

Towers and saw those towers collapse on live television, and then heard reports of the Pentagon being struck by a third aircraft and of a fourth aircraft prevented from being used in another attack when it crashed in rural Pennsylvania. As that fear turned to anger, a deep-seated thirst for vengeance led the United States to invade Afghanistan in October 2001 and to declare a “global war on terrorism.”

Because of this sense of fulfilled vengeance, the death of bin Laden will certainly be one of those events that people will remember, like the 9/11 attacks themselves. In spite of the sense of justice and closure the killing of bin Laden brings, however, his death will likely have very little practical impact on the jihadist movement. More important will be the reaction of the Pakistani government to the operation and the impact it has on U.S.-Pakistani relations.

Foundations

To understand the impact of bin Laden’s death on the global jihadist movement, we must first remember that the phenomenon of jihadism is far wider than just the al Qaeda core leadership of bin Laden and his closest followers. Rather than a monolithic entity based on the al Qaeda group, jihadism has devolved into a far more diffuse network composed of many different parts. These parts include the core al Qaeda group formerly headed by bin Laden; a network of various regional franchise groups such as al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP); and last, a broad array of grassroots operatives who are adherents to the jihadist ideology but who are not formally affiliated with the al Qaeda core or one of the regional franchises.

The al Qaeda core always has been a fairly small and elite vanguard. Since 9/11, intense pressure has been placed upon this core organization by the U.S. government and its allies. This pressure has resulted in the death or capture of many al Qaeda cadres and has served to keep the group small due to overriding operational security concerns. This insular group has laid low in Pakistan, and this isolation has significantly degraded its ability to conduct attacks. All of this has caused the al Qaeda core to become primarily an organization that produces propaganda and provides guidance and inspiration to the other jihadist elements rather than an organization focused on conducting operations. While bin Laden and the al Qaeda core have received a great deal of media attention, the core group comprises only a very small portion of the larger jihadist movement.

As STRATFOR has analyzed the war between the jihadist movement and the rest of the world, we have come to view the battlefield as being divided into two distinct parts, the physical battlefield and the ideological battlefield. The post-9/11 assault on the al Qaeda core group hindered its ability to act upon the physical battlefield. For the past several years, they have been limited to fighting on the ideological battlefield, waging a war of propaganda and attempting to promote the ideology of jihadism in an effort to radicalize Muslims and prompt them to act. The danger has always existed that if pressure were taken off this core, it could regroup and return to the physical struggle. But the pressure has been relentless and the group has been unable to return to its pre-9/11 level of operational capability. This has resulted in the grassroots and franchise groups like AQAP taking the lead on the physical battlefield.

As we noted in our annual forecast of the jihadist movement, the al Qaeda core group not only has been eclipsed on the physical battlefield, over the past few years it has been

overshadowed on the ideological battlefield as well. Groups such as AQAP have begun setting the tone on the ideological realm — as in its call for Muslims to assume the leaderless resistance model rather than traveling to join groups — and we have seen the al Qaeda core follow the lead of AQAP rather than set the tone themselves. We believe this deference to AQAP is a sign of the al Qaeda core's weakness, and of its struggle to remain relevant on the ideological battlefield. There also have been many disagreements among various actors in the jihadist movement over doctrinal issues such as targeting foreigners over local security forces and attacks that kill Muslims.

The Emir is Dead, Long Live the Emir

While the al Qaeda core has been marginalized recently, it has practiced good operational security and has been able to protect its apex leadership for nearly 10 years from one of the most intense manhunts in human history. It clearly foresaw the possibility that one of its apex leaders could be taken out and planned accordingly. This means keeping bin Laden and his deputy, Egyptian physician Ayman al-Zawahiri, in different locations and having a succession plan. There is also very little question that al-Zawahiri is firmly in command of the core group. Even prior to bin Laden's death, many analysts considered al-Zawahiri to be the man in charge of most of the operational aspects of the al Qaeda group — the “chief executive officer,” with bin Laden being more of a figurehead or “chairman of the board.” That said, the intelligence collected during the operation against bin Laden could provide leads to track down other leaders, and this may make them nervous in spite of their efforts to practice good operational security.

Certainly, bin Laden was an important person who was able to raise much funding and who became an international icon following 9/11; because of this, it will be hard to replace him. At the same time, the jihadist movement has weathered the loss of a number of influential individuals, from the assassination of Abdullah Azzam to the arrests of the Blind Sheikh and Khalid Sheikh Mohammed to the death of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Yet in spite of these losses, the ideology has continued, new members have been recruited and new leaders have stepped up to fill the void. Ideologies are far harder to kill than individuals, especially ideologies that encourage their followers to embrace martyrdom whether their leaders are dead or alive. This means that we do not believe the death of bin Laden will result in the death of the global jihadist movement: A man is dead but the ideology lives on.

The Threat

The survival of the ideology of jihadism means the threat of terrorist attacks remains. The good news is that as one moves down the jihadist pyramid from the al Qaeda core to the regional franchises to the grassroots, the level of terrorist tradecraft these individuals possess diminishes and the threat they pose is not as severe. Certainly, grassroots terrorists can and will continue to kill people, but they lack the ability to conduct dramatic, strategic attacks. Thus, though the threat becomes more widespread and harder to guard against, at the same time it becomes less severe.

There obviously will be some concerns regarding some sort of major attack in retribution for bin Laden's death. Indeed, jihadists have long threatened to conduct attacks over the arrests and deaths of key figures. Analytically, however, the idea that al Qaeda or one of its regional franchise groups has some sort of superattack on standby for activation upon

bin Laden's death is simply not logical. First, the al Qaeda core group has attempted to conduct many attacks against the U.S. homeland following 9/11, as have franchise groups like AQAP. While these plots did not succeed, it was not for lack of trying. Jihadists have also made many empty threats regarding a follow-on to the 9/11 attacks — only to be embarrassed by their inability to follow through. Third, so many plots have been thwarted over the past decade that if the core al Qaeda group or a franchise group had a plan primed and ready to go, it would not sit on it and run the risk of its being discovered and compromised. Instead, it would execute such an attack as soon as it was ready. Furthermore, jihadists — especially those at the grassroots and regional franchise levels — have not demonstrated the sophisticated apparatus required to conduct off-the-shelf planning exhibited by groups like Hezbollah. They generally tend to work on attack plans from scratch and execute those plans when ready.

Undoubtedly, there were jihadists planning attacks on the United States before the death of bin Laden, and there are jihadists planning attacks today. However, these individuals probably would have carried out this planning and any eventual attack — if possible — regardless of bin Laden's fate. Will groups conducting future attacks claim they were acting in retribution for bin Laden? Probably. Would they have attempted such an attack if he were still alive? Probably.

The potential for low-level impulsive retribution attacks by unprepared individuals or groups directed at American or other Western targets does exist, however. This type of impromptu attack would be more likely a shooting rather than an attack using an explosive device, so there is good reason for the U.S. government to increase security measures around the globe.

The result of all this is that the threat from the global jihadist movement will continue in the short term with no real change. This means that pressure needs to be maintained on the al Qaeda core so it will not have the chance to recover, retool and return to attacking the United States. Pressure also needs to be maintained on the jihadist franchise groups so they cannot mature operationally to the point where they become transnational, strategic threats. Finally, efforts must continue to identify grassroots jihadists before they can launch attacks against soft targets. But these same imperatives also were valid last week; nothing has really changed at the tactical level.

Where the big change may be happening is at the political level. That bin Laden was located in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province (formerly known as the North-West Frontier Province) did not come as a surprise — STRATFOR has discussed this likelihood since 2005. We have also discussed the distrust and suspicion between the U.S. and Pakistan — which was clearly evidenced by the unilateral U.S. action in this case. The significant thing to watch for is the reaction of the Pakistani government and public to the raid. In the past, the Pakistani government has found creative ways of displaying its displeasure with the actions of the U.S. government — like manipulating the Pakistani public into the November 1979 sacking and destruction of the U.S. Embassy in Islamabad. While the average Pakistani may not care too much about bin Laden, public sentiment is running very high against U.S. operations in Pakistan, and this operation could serve to inflame such sentiments. These two elements mean that the coming weeks could be a very tense time for U.S. diplomatic and commercial interests in that country.

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