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SNAPSHOT

Al Qaeda's Prognosis

Can Terrorist Groups Live Without Their Leaders?

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What will the death of Osama bin Laden mean for the future of al Qaeda? That depends on whether al Qaeda more closely resembles the Shining Path (*Sendero Luminoso*) and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) -- or Hamas and Hezbollah.

The former two groups were crippled by the capture of their leaders. Peruvian authorities apprehended the Shining Path head Abimael Guzmán in 1992, virtually eradicating the group. Turkish authorities arrested the PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan in 1999. Although the PKK continues to exist, it lacks the operational capacity it once had under Öcalan's direction.

Hamas and Hezbollah, in contrast, have flourished despite the past loss of their top brass. In 2004, Israel eliminated Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, Hamas's founder, and then his successor, Abdel Aziz Rantisi, employing helicopter-fired missiles in both cases. Israel killed Hezbollah's secretary-general, Abbas Mussawi, in a helicopter strike in 1992, and its director of military (i.e., terrorist) operations, Imad Mughniyeh, with a car bomb in 2008. Yet both organizations are stronger today than when they lost their respective leaders. Hamas now controls the Gaza Strip. Hezbollah recently managed to topple the pro-Western government of former Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri and install Najib Mikati, a candidate more to its liking. Both movements are quickly becoming quasi-regular forces, armed with a frightening array of missiles provided by their patrons in Damascus and Tehran.

Why do some terrorist organizations wilt from a decapitation strategy, while others manage to flourish? In the aforementioned cases, much of the answer has to do with the fact that the Shining Path and the PKK, although large movements, were built around a cult of personality. Remove that personality, and it becomes difficult for followers to fill the gap. Hamas and Hezbollah, however, have always had a more collective leadership that could better survive

losses at the top. Both groups also control substantial territory, which makes it harder to uproot them no matter how many leaders they lose.

That points to another major difference: in the case of the Shining Path and the PKK, the capture of their leaders represented only one part of a concerted (and often brutal) counterinsurgency strategy to root out those organizations. Israel, by contrast, has never made a real attempt to eradicate either Hamas or Hezbollah. Instead, it has been content to strike them periodically in the hope of establishing a degree of deterrence. To go further would involve having to occupy territory -- something most Israelis are loathe to do after the end of their traumatic 18-year experience in southern Lebanon from 1982 to 2000.

At which end of the spectrum does al Qaeda fall? Osama bin Laden had at least as much of a grip on his group as Guzmán and Öcalan had on theirs. He represented the face of al Qaeda and his removal constitutes a serious blow. Many experts doubt that Ayman al-Zawahiri, al Qaeda's longtime deputy, will be able to replace bin Laden successfully, because he is not as charismatic or popular.

Al Qaeda is also hurt by the fact that it does not truly control any territory -- not the way it once did in Afghanistan. Today, it is able to operate in places such as Pakistan and Yemen but only by staying on the run. It cannot plant its flag over "liberated" territory, as its Iraqi affiliate, al Qaeda in Iraq, once attempted to do in the Sunni Triangle. As a result, al Qaeda is more vulnerable to being uprooted than Hamas or Hezbollah.

Yet the United States is unable to conduct a real counterinsurgency campaign in countries such as Pakistan and Yemen that would root out the remnants of al Qaeda. Those countries are considered off-limits to most U.S. forces, save for occasional commando raids of the kind that targeted bin Laden. Meanwhile, the leaders of those nations are at best ambivalent about the U.S.-led war on terror, as demonstrated by the fact that bin Laden was able to live for years in an opulent mansion in a military garrison town just 35 miles north of Pakistan's capital, Islamabad.

The U.S. inability to target al Qaeda in such areas is a critical shortcoming in U.S. efforts to dismantle not only al Qaeda but also related groups such as the Pakistani Taliban, the Haqqani network, the Somali al Shahab, and others that operate in ungoverned or misgoverned space. Under those conditions -- which more closely resemble Lebanon or Gaza than Peru or Turkey -- it is hard for the United States to prevent a terrorist group from regenerating itself.

Al Qaeda may be dealt a crippling blow by bin Laden's loss; it remains too soon to tell. But the larger Islamist terrorist network, with far-flung affiliates in countries such as Algeria, Yemen, and, of course, Pakistan, will surely survive his death. Bin Laden's demise could even provide an opportunity for a new group or leader -- someone like Anwar al-Awlaki, the American-born chief of al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula -- to step forward and assume the leadership of the global jihad.

In the final analysis, targeting the leadership of an insurgent group is important but not sufficient. Defeating a terrorist or guerrilla organization requires a comprehensive approach that provides ground-level security and basic governance to prevent a shadow regime from taking root. That was the approach taken by the United States in Iraq and now in Afghanistan. Because the United States is not willing or able to make a similar commitment in Pakistan, Somalia, Yemen, or other chaotic societies, Islamist insurgencies are likely to flourish long after bin Laden's demise.

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[Home](#) > [Snapshot](#) > [Al Qaeda's Prognosis](#)

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