

//Notas de Análisis//

The killing of Bin Laden: End of a chapter

**By Maria L. Fornella*

“If there was ever a doubt about just how American Mr. Obama is, Sunday’s raid eliminates it better than any long-form birth certificate. This was his finest hour.” Bret Stephens, the Wall Street Journal

Late at night on Sunday May 1st President Obama announced to the nation that Osama Bin Laden had been found and killed by a US Navy Special Operations team. The Navy SEAL team Six, as it is known here, landed two helicopters inside a walled three-story compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan, where years of painstakingly gathered intelligence had led authorities to believe there was a high chance the Al Qaeda leader may be hiding. This may well have been the largest, most successful intelligence operation in US history; the President acted boldly and decisively and for that he received accolades from both sides of the political divide. Coming as it did just a month after the President launched his re-election campaign, this victory immediately boosted his approval rate by eleven points, according to surveys.

Even if the strategic defeat of Al Qaeda has not yet been accomplished, this was a huge milestone and the closing of a chapter that started ten years ago when the hunt for Osama Bin Laden was launched by the Bush administration. Last week’s operation resulted in the largest trove of data ever found on Al Qaeda, including information on immediate threats being planned, location and structure of its leadership, and scores of data that will help piece together a deeper understanding of their long-term tactics, techniques and procedures.

Disposing of such a reviled figure who, for over ten years had ordered the killing of innocent civilians around the world, is undoubtedly a great blow both symbolic and real, to Al Qaeda, a decentralized movement whose members are tied together mainly by feelings, emotions and mythology. But does it sound the death knell for the organization? What are its short and long term implications? Al Qaeda has proven to be quite resilient, but is it still spreading and growing? More importantly, how relevant is it in the face of the Arab Spring moving throughout the Middle East and Northern Africa?

All these questions need to be pondered carefully, since they have deep implications for US foreign policy in the region, for the war in Iraq and Afghanistan, and for its difficult and troubled relation with Pakistan. This unexpected win will lead to a comprehensive reassessment of US military presence in the area, its strategies of counterinsurgency and counterterrorism, and its alliance with Pakistan.

American reaction to Osama Bin Laden’s death was one of noisy, overt celebration in New York and DC, and of relief and jubilation in the rest of the country. It was indeed the reverse of the deep shock, terror and bereavement of

9-11, but both instances had one common denominator: there was a sense of collective emotion, of a long-forgotten and now recovered national unity. However, this did not last long as incipient criticism and second-guessing started 24 hours later over Bin Laden's burial at sea and the decision by the administration not to show pictures of his death. It came from both sides of the ideological spectrum and, in some cases, it was bolstered by strong arguments. For example Alan Dershowitz, the Harvard Law professor, considered the burial at sea a "willful destruction of evidence that may arise suspicions that there was something to hide." Others used the occasion to stir up doubts and demanded pictures to certify Bin Laden's death, but then again, these are not to be taken seriously since they were the same groups that had to be shown a long version of the President's birth certificate as evidence he was American.

A second criticism coming mainly from some Neo-conservatives, was the administration's failure to recognize publicly that the intelligence gathering that led to the finding and killing of Bin Laden was a vindication of the "enhanced interrogation techniques" (read: water boarding) used by the Bush administration in foreign detention centers and at Guantánamo, which Obama had consistently and very publicly condemned during the 2008 campaign and into his years in office.

To the first, members of the administration responded that the point was to dispose of his body in a respectful manner, not because he deserved it but to deny a source of friction with other Muslims and to deprive his followers with a shrine and an opportunity to exploit him as an iconic martyr. A similar argument was used to explain the decision not to release the pictures: the President wants to avoid ostentatious displays of triumphalism that may come back to haunt him. His sobriety and restraint further reinforce the boldness of his decision and his steadfast determination to "disrupt, dismantle and defeat" Al Qaeda and not be distracted from his goal by premature claims of "mission accomplished".

To the second claim, the White House responded that the success of the operation is far from a vindication of such unconstitutional techniques, since it was the result of the hard work of professionals over time and across two administrations, who integrated thousands of small pieces of intelligence gathering coming from human and technological sources into one gigantic puzzle, and that no one single piece led the US to Bin Laden. It took all the resources only the US can muster, from military bases to networks of human intelligence, to electronic eavesdropping, to specially trained forces, to locate and kill one hidden individual in a foreign country, and then match his DNA in an aircraft carrier before disposing of the corpse. But it also took a courageous American president to make such a risky call, namely, authorizing a covert operation deep into Pakistani territory based on circumstantial evidence at best, and without alerting the Pakistani authorities about it. Fortunately, wide recognition was given to the President's courage and many on the Right called it "Obama's Finest Hour". Both former President Bush and his prickly vice-president Cheney congratulated Obama and gave him full credit.

A more productive conversation that has already started in academic and diplomatic circles is how relevant Bin Laden's death is for the Arab world. If he

had died eight years ago, says one French scholar, he would have instantaneously become a martyr in the Arab street, an icon of anti-Western sentiment. However, in 2011, he had receded into the back of the consciousness of young Arabs for several reasons. First, because he had been in hiding for so long that his presence in the media had been noticeably diminished: out of sight, out of mind. Time spent out of the limelight erases mystiques and cools down emotions. Secondly because many saw him as the culprit for bringing the United States into Iraq and Afghanistan, which in turn gave an excuse for authoritarian regimes in the region to become even more repressive and extend their time in power. In Iraq, local Sunnis blame Al Qaeda for bringing the Shiites to power and expanding the influence of Iran in their country. Also, Bin Laden and Al Qaeda had increasingly lost the allegiance of many Muslims around the world for their indiscriminate bombings of hospitals, mosques and shrines and the killings of non-combatant Muslims in Baghdad, Basra and Amman (even if many were Shiite, the slaughter of innocent women and children caused revulsion in these populations).

More importantly, the wave of pluralistic revolutions sweeping the Middle East and North Africa has rendered Al Qaeda irrelevant. There is an emerging sense of strong national identities, whereby the masses are thinking of themselves first as Egyptians, Tunisians or Libyans, with ethnicity and religion taking a secondary role. Indeed, Nasser's Pan-Arabism died in the 1960s, and the dream of a Caliphate "extending Islamic rule from Indonesia to Spain", which Bin Laden proposed as Al Qaeda's ultimate goal is no longer an interesting proposition to the extremely young populations of the region, many of whom have access to the new social media in the Internet, and who crave freedom and modernity more than anything else. The "Arab Spring" may spell the end of Al Qaeda's political aspirations for the region: the Turkish model of a secular, modern state with an overwhelmingly Islamic population and a pluralistic party system is far more appealing than the pan-Islamic caliphate of the Prophet's era. In the words of Professor Fouad Ajami, "It is risky to say, but Arabs appear to have wearied of violence...It was Bin Laden's deserved fate to be struck down when an entirely different Arab world was struggling to be born."

Time and treasure spent in a ten-year war have also changed perspectives in America, especially for the younger generations. There is an on-going unofficial revision of the Bush doctrine of invading whole countries "that harbor, train or fund terrorists" in favor of narrower, more focused actions against the terrorists themselves. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have taken their toll on the American military as far as recruitment and resources. The main concern of voters is the American economy, especially unemployment and the ever-expanding national debt. A hundred and forty thousand American and NATO troops are involved in counterinsurgency operations in Afghanistan, with no endgame in sight. Killings of Americans by despondent Afghan soldiers and other groups whose "hearts and minds" the US is supposed to win, occupy the headlines daily. Counter-terrorism increasingly seems to be a much more appealing and productive strategy.

Expressing this widely-held sentiment, Senator Kerry recently declared: "There is no possible victory to be had in Afghanistan".

Even though President Obama called it a war of necessity and has invested deeply in it, this is no longer a popular war: two-thirds of the American electorate is against it. Therefore, there will be pressure on President Obama to accelerate the phased withdrawal from Afghanistan, and complete it before the set deadline of 2014. He is a rational decision-maker who does not easily cave under pressure, but the 2012 election is likely to enter into his calculations. As a champion of counter-terrorism and opposing counter-insurgency from early on, Vice-president Biden might still be vindicated in his wisdom. When Obama opted for the surge in Afghanistan two years ago, he overruled Biden and sided with the military. Will he change his mind and speed up the withdrawal now? The killing of Bin Laden certainly gives him an opening to change his initial timetable. "Al Qaeda is no longer there, and the Taliban must be beaten by Afghans themselves", says Leslie Gelb, president emeritus of the Council of Foreign Relations.

Finally, the fact that Pakistan has proved to be an unreliable partner in the war against terrorism is also putting pressure on the President to review his Afghan policy. The alliance is frayed; Pakistan is giving sanctuary to violent militants of all sorts, and another high Al Qaeda operative now in American custody, Khalid Sheik Mohammed, was also found in Pakistan (Rawalpindi). Indeed, by the rationale of the Bush doctrine, the US should be invading Pakistan next. The White House says they have no evidence that there was any "foreknowledge" by the Pakistani leadership that Bin Laden was holed up in a one-million-dollar compound, in a military town, only 30 miles away from Islamabad. Pakistan will conduct its "own investigation" and will have to prove itself a worthy ally, for example, by sharing information gleaned from Bin Laden's three wives and several children now held under Pakistani custody. On the other hand, veteran security experts retort, more terrorists have been arrested by the Pakistani authorities since 2001 than anywhere else in the world.

In this case, was it incompetence or complicity? Pakistan is a very complex country, where the military are an autonomous force above civilian rule, and they also control the Intelligence Services (ISI). It is a house divided against itself. It harbors numerous militant groups, and goes after some but not others. It hedges its bets this way so as not to lose influence and power in the region, for example by supporting the Taliban and Haqqani networks fighting to seize power in Afghanistan, and the Lashkar-e-Taiba organization against India in Kashmir.

Pakistan's foreign and national security policy is built around its obsession with India, its most vilified enemy and against which it has fought several wars. It is clear now that ISI gave sophisticated support to the Mumbai terrorist attack in 2009. Pakistan needs a friendly government in Afghanistan so that it can maintain its "strategic depth" vis à vis India. Armed with over a hundred nuclear weapons and with some control over this wide array of militant groups, Pakistan is pivotal in the stability of South Asia. Those are the two main reasons why the US-Pakistani relationship survived after the Cold War ended. Because of the weakness and corruption of civilian governments, past and present, the US has preferred to engage with the military, who control the nuclear arsenal, and has made them the recipient of most US aid (indeed, by the end of this year alone the

Pakistani military will have received \$3 billion from the US). But this may be about to change if Pakistan rejects the US request to be in charge of the internal investigation on whether Bin Laden was given sanctuary, and if so, by whom.

Now that its main leader has been killed, and in spite of its virtual irrelevance, Al Qaeda is likely to undergo an internal struggle to determine its future. The mystique of its international role has already somewhat dissipated and the different groups in the network are shifting their focus to their national agendas. Indeed, this has already been the case in Egypt, where after days of ominous silence on the Tahrir Square Revolution, Al Qaeda's second in command, Egyptian-born Al-Zawahiri injected himself in the process by supporting the leader of an Islamist party that wants post-Mubarak Egypt to adopt Sharia law. But his attempt did not resonate with the young revolutionaries, most of which want a pluralistic society and are much more concerned with jobs and government accountability than with religious utopia.

However, revolutions are just the beginning of a long process, transition periods are by definition unstable, and post-revolutionary regimes have historically been hijacked by extremists. So one can only be cautiously optimistic about what will come next, but it appears as if the Middle East and the Arab world are moving on and beginning to spell the end of Al Qaeda's aspirations. Bin Laden's demise is the appropriate end of this chapter in the region's history.

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