

Q&A: Strategic Implications of Bin Laden's Death

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The world knows Osama bin Laden was killed in Pakistan by an elite team of U.S. Navy SEALs and that the body was recovered, photographed, and buried at sea. But perhaps some of the substantive questions to be asked are not about the details of the operation, but rather its implications. For example, how will the removal of Osama bin Laden really hurt al-Qaida? What should be the United States' next goal in the battle against terrorists? What are the real pros and cons of releasing the bin Laden death photos?

To help shed some light on some of the more meaningful aspects of the death of Osama bin Laden, I spoke with a renowned expert on terrorists and terrorism, [Dr. Adam Lankford](#), who is also an assistant professor of Criminal Justice at the University of Alabama.

Dr. Lankford, you wrote in your book "Human Killing Machines" back in 2009 that "the best scenario might be if [Osama bin Laden] is killed by soldiers in a surprise attack, leaving a clearly identifiable corpse. It would be quick, degrading of his lofty image, and could shake al-Qaida's agents' confidence in their system and its goals." Does that hold true today?

Lankford: Yes, absolutely, it's a tremendous blow against al-Qaida and all its subsidiary branches. In general, the death of bin Laden and the fact that he was killed in this manner which makes it incontrovertible. He hasn't been vaporized, and there's not going to be the conspiracy theories that would occur otherwise. It really shows these people who for a while believed that Allah favored bin Laden and Allah favored al-Qaida over the U.S. that they really have to start questioning that now. Because they believe in a kind of guiding, divine hand, bin Laden's death can be interpreted as a sign that al-Qaida is being punished. If al-Qaida is out of favor, then doing things that support them would be morally and religiously questionable.

The one piece that's missing from the equation that you laid out is the clearly identifiable body, because they have apparently dropped it into the ocean. Should the White House release Osama bin Laden's death photographs, in your opinion?

Lankford: Well, that's a good question and it's pretty tricky. I can see why they are hesitating there. In other words, the fact that they killed him in a manner that left, apparently, a clearly identified body is important and they took photos which apparently document that. The question is: do you release the photos? Right now, I would say there is nothing to gain from releasing the photos. In other words, it's important to have the photos in case people really start to doubt the truth about having killed bin Laden. Unless people are really doubting that, unless these conspiracy theories really become prominent, it's probably not worth releasing the photos, because there can be some backlash if you do so. For instance, we've seen in the past with sort of mocking cartoons of Muhammad or with people burning the Koran, those acts can be so offensive that they actually become a rallying point for terrorists. There's some danger that releasing photos of bin Laden's corpse could

have the same effect. So, unless there's something clear to gain from it, it's probably best to kind of keep them in the hip pocket and proceed with an open mind as we move ahead.

Do you think the biggest impact to al-Qaida will be to recruiting and loyalty of existing members?

Lankford: Yes, in fact, I think that we could probably mix that down in a couple ways. For instance, in terms of regular terrorists and terrorist leaders, interviews have shown that these individuals want to fight, but they also want to survive. They have pretty much admitted that they're willing to take on risk, but they're not willing to deliberately sacrifice their lives in support of the cause. They have come out and said that in interviews. Bin Laden's death may be a wakeup call that no one is invincible and if they continue their active support of terrorism, it's only a matter of time before they are killed or captured. Recently, just within the last 24 hours, [there are reports](#) of a senior al-Qaida member named Khaled al-Qahtani who apparently surrendered to Saudi Arabian security officials. Certainly we don't expect everyone to do that, but he's one example of someone who may have seen Osama bin Laden's death and lost faith in the mission he had been supporting.

If, on the other hand, bin Laden had been captured alive, do you think that would have had the same destabilizing effect on al-Qaida or would it have been more of a call to action?

Lankford: Well, it would have given them an instant recourse. In other words, if he were captured alive, it would have given them a sense that there was something to do, and that something would have been hostage-takings, other sorts of attacks, other ways to put pressure on the U.S. and the West to essentially acquiesce or give in to terrorist demands. Now that the whole situation has been resolved, there's no point in making demands. If bin Laden had been captured, we really could have had some serious hostage-taking around the world. In the past, hostage-takings with demands of prisoner-release have been relatively common. For instance, the 1972 Olympics in Munich where the hostages were taken, that was done for prisoner release. So, fortunately, we seem to have avoided that situation in this case.

Retired Brigadier General Mark Kimmit is reported [\[by Al Jazeera\]](#) as saying that "it has been a number of years since bin Laden has exercised day to day control over operations." Do you think Osama's death has an effect on al-Qaida's day to day operational capability, or is it a psychological effect only?

Lankford: I wouldn't think it affects their day to day operations. There's no indication, as far as I can tell, that he was a tactical leader at this point, but attacks were being carried out in his name. That would certainly be reduced. It would certainly seem to be a symbolic effect more than a tactical effect, but that symbolic effect matters. It affects recruiting, and it affects people's confidence in their leaders, and their own desires for self-preservation.

What about those al-Qaida members already captured who are resisting interrogation? Does it have an effect on them?

Lankford: That's a good question. I wouldn't assume that it would. I guess, potentially, it may reduce their will to keep resisting, but, frankly, I would say that in a lot of those cases, they have already decided whether to give in and cooperate or to stick by their personal standards and refuse to cooperate on any level.

Ayman al Zawahiri, presumed to be next in line to succeed Osama bin laden as the head of al-Qaida, is

still at large. How does his personal stature or reputation compare to the almost mythical status of Osama bin Laden within al-Qaida?

Lankford: Well, I think he is the presumed replacement, but his stature is considerably less than bin Laden's. For years, bin Laden really crafted his own image. He would even craft his own statements in a way to make sure they were perfect and that he could almost be seen as a flawless, infallible character. The number two, he's less primed to take on some symbolic power. I believe, a few years ago, he started trying to interact online. He would ask questions and answer questions of al-Qaida members around the world through online chat forums, and he quickly stopped that, because, frankly, he couldn't handle the kinds of questions he was being asked. So I think there are pretty significant questions about his ability to lead and lead effectively.

In your view, now that bin Laden is out of the picture and removed as a central figure, what would the next biggest blow be that could be struck against al-Qaida?

Lankford: Well certainly, if the U.S., the West, or any of our allies could take out Zawahiri in some reasonable, relatively short amount of time, that would be following up with another tremendous blow. At that point, it would seem not just like one impressive maneuver, but it would seem like a sudden pattern. I think people would really start to jump off the ship, so to speak, at that point.

In the absence of that follow-up in the near-term, do you think the loss of bin Laden will "break the back" of al-Qaida, or will they be able to continue on in strength for years?

Lankford: It's hard to speculate at this point, but I would say that, in the short term, we won't see any difference and things will basically stay the same. In the long run, I would expect a diminishing of their power and legitimacy worldwide. I would make a distinction between al-Qaida and Islamic fundamentalism. Islamic fundamentalism is much broader than al-Qaida and even broader than terrorism and that probably has some social, political, and economic roots that are broader.

One area in which I would think we would gain a tactical advantage through the demoralization of al-Qaida by Osama bin Laden's death is that it probably makes our intelligence gathering easier through infiltration and recruitment of key al-Qaida members to our side. Do you see that as well?

Lankford: Well, it certainly seems reasonable. This senior al-Qaida member who is in the news for surrendering to Saudi Arabian security officials, presumably there are other people like him, and if they're not surrendering on the front page of the news and instead doing it in a covert fashion, then they could potentially be flipped and used as assets.

Is there anything else that we haven't covered that you think is important to add to the discussion?

Lankford: Well, I would just say something about suicide terrorists.

Sure.

One thing which is probably important is that I have done a lot of [research on suicide terrorism](#) and some of the misconceptions about it over the past two or three years. Suicide terrorists are motivated by their own personal

problems as much as they are motivated by the ideology. A lot of people who carry out suicide bombings are doing so because they are depressed, they're struggling with hopelessness, shame, guilt, rage, and all sorts of personal crises. They are essentially being exploited by terrorist recruiters. What I would say about these individuals is that personal problems, hopelessness, shame, guilt and rage aren't going away for a certain portion of the population in any conflict-ridden area like Palestine, Afghanistan, Iraq. So there will continue to be people who carry out suicide terrorism, because the reasons they were doing it had very little to do with terrorism or bin Laden at all.

One follow up question on that: oppressive treatment of the Palestinians breeds hopelessness, depression, and many of the factors you just mentioned.

Lankford: Sure.

Could you elaborate on how effective you think Israel's strategy of isolating the Palestinians is?

Lankford: That gets a little tricky when you say effective. I mean, the fact that they have built a fence or a wall is very effective in preventing suicide terrorism in Israel, but that's not a strategy which is applicable everywhere. Anything that any government does that increases the number of desperate and suicidal people in a population helps recruiters have a bigger pool of future suicide terrorists.

Brad Sylvester is a freelance journalist. Read more of Brad's interviews on Yahoo! News by clicking the links below.

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