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Opinion Piece - The Peril of Hasty Triumphalism and Osama bin Laden's Death

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On May 1, 2011 the headlines of a large number of newspapers and TV channels around the world were saying “justice has been done”. Those were the words used by the US President Barack Obama to announce to the world the killing of Osama bin Laden, the number one terrorist on the US most-wanted list.

Exactly eight years earlier, on May 1, 2003, another US President, George W. Bush gave a famous speech declaring the end of major combat operations in Iraq. President Bush delivered the speech on the aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln under a banner titled “Mission Accomplished”.

Hasty triumphalism turned out to be profoundly misleading in the case of Iraq. It may be wise not to make the same mistake regarding the fight against international terrorism in general, and against Al-Qaeda in particular.

The killing of the Arab Sheik Osama bin Laden obviously represents an extremely important achievement in the global effort against international terrorism. First and foremost, it puts an end to one of the major criticisms to the US military intervention in Afghanistan. “Osama bin Laden was why the United States went to war in Afghanistan” correctly writes the Washington Post[1]. The disturbing fact that bin Laden was still free and alive would have prevented the United States to consider the Afghan War a complete success, no matter the possible significant results in other areas, such as, for example, the democratic stabilization of the country. Secondly, the death of the leader of the terrorist organization responsible for the September 11th attacks bears with it a certain sense of justice and retribution for those directly or indirectly affected by such attacks.

Osama’s demise may also result in a morale boost for the United States. A positive shake after a decade during which the conflict in Afghanistan has dragged on and on without substantial improvements. In addition, it generates a widespread sense of unity at a time of harsh partisan division within US politics. As reported by The New York Times, the US administration “drew praise from unlikely quarters”, even from Republicans such as former Vice President Dick



Journal of Terrorism Research

Volume 2, Issue 1

Cheney, New York's former Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani, and a likely challenger for the 2012 presidential election Donald J. Trump[2]. As far as electoral politics are concerned, the killing of the Arab Sheik represents a great accomplishment for President Obama. And although it will not make disappear other, mostly economic, challenges lying ahead, it will probably increase Obama's chances of re-election for a second term next year.

However, there are several reasons to be skeptical about the far-reaching effects of Osama's death on the global effort against international terrorism. As pointed out by several studies[3], Al Qaeda has developed into a loose and decentralized network of independent cells, with no clear hierarchical chain of command. After 9/11 bin Laden, in fact, has mostly been acting as a source of inspiration for other terrorists, which have been independently planning and carrying out their plots, as it apparently was the case in the March 11th 2003 attacks in Madrid. Therefore, cutting the head of an organization which has no head may have little or no significant effects on the ability of such organization to strike again in the future.

Moreover, the killing of Osama bin Laden may have the unintended consequence of making him a martyr and to increase the appeal of his figure and his message. According to the Al Qassam website, which is closely associated with the Islamic movement Hamas, Ismail Haniya, the Palestinian Prime Minister of the Gaza government, strongly condemned Osama's assassination and mourned him as an Arab holy warrior[4]. A better solution would have probably been to capture the Sheik, give him a fair trial and imprison him for crimes he had already claimed to be responsible for. That would have depicted Bin Laden as a criminal and not as a martyr.

Finally, by eliminating Osama bin Laden the United States addressed only one, although highly important, *symptom* of international terrorism. In fighting terrorism the distinction between symptoms and underlying causes is critical. Experts generally agree that both elements of the terrorist threat should be dealt with[5]. Individual terrorists, terrorist organizations, sponsor states and host states are all examples of symptoms of terrorism. The underlying causes, instead, could be defined as the reasons why people make the decision to turn to the strategy of terrorism. A policy of counter-terrorism strictly focused on the cure of the symptoms may be effective in the short term but not in the long one. Indeed, if the underlying causes are dismissed the terrorist threat would be stopped until a new generation of terrorists will start to fight for the same reasons. A more effective response, therefore, should deal also with such underlying causes, as for example with the enabling environment from which the terrorists draw support and recruit new members.



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All that considered, President Obama's satisfaction in announcing the death of Osama bin Laden and the subsequent joyous and relieved response of the American people is both understandable and legitimate. However, as in the past, hasty triumphalism could prove deceptive, in so far as it could lead the United States to believe that the global effort against international terrorism is close to an end.

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Notes:

- [1] K. Tumulty and P. Kane, (May 3, 2011) 'Bin Laden's death may give Obama new authority on Afghan war' / The Washington Post.
- [2] J. Zeleny and J Rutenberg, (May 2, 2011) 'Obama Finds Praise, Even From Republicans' / The New York Times.
- [3] National Commission On Terrorist Attacks Upon The United States, (2004), '9/11 Commission final report'; J. Stern, (2003), 'The Protean Enemy' / Foreign Affairs/ (82:4)/ p.27-44; The Economist Staff, (May 2, 2011) 'The Evolution of Al-Qaeda' / The Economist.
- [4] Al Qassam Staff, (May 2, 2011) 'Hamas condemns killing of Osama Bin Laden' / Al Qassam Online.
- [5] E. Berman and D.D. Laitin, (2008) 'Religion, terrorism and public goods: testing the club model' / Journal of Public Economics/ (92:10-11) p. 1942-1967; A.K. Cronin., (2003) 'Behind the curve' / International Security/ (27:3) p.30-58.