



RSIS COMMENTARIES

RSIS Commentaries are intended to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy relevant background and analysis of contemporary developments. The views of the authors are their own and do not represent the official position of the S.Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced electronically or in print with prior permission from RSIS. Due recognition must be given to the author or authors and RSIS. Please email: RSISPublication@ntu.edu.sg or call (+65) 6790 6982 to speak to the Editor RSIS Commentaries, Yang Razali Kassim.

No. 70/2011 dated 3 May 2011

Osama's Demise: End of Al Qaeda?

By Kumar Ramakrishna

Synopsis

While the death of Osama bin Laden is a genuine success in the ongoing war against terrorism, it is a mistake to let our guard down now. The threat has become more complex and requires continued vigilance on the parts of governments and civil societies.

Commentary

THE DEATH of Al Qaeda founder Osama bin Laden in Pakistan at the hands of US Navy Seals is the most significant single development in the decade-long global campaign against terrorism. That Osama – or bin Laden as some referred to him -- was a high-value target has long been beyond doubt. He was the man who created the Al Qaeda organisation, brand and ideology in the late 1980s in Afghanistan. Like-minded terrorists throughout the world lionised him, were inspired to emulate his exploits in their own regions and even named their children after him. What does his demise mean for the ongoing global counter-terror campaign?

Need for Circumspection

Without doubt, Osama's elimination represents a huge political and symbolic victory for the US and its allies. Lest it be forgotten, the September 11 2001 Al Qaeda attacks in New York and Washington represented the worst terrorist atrocity in history, claiming almost 3000 lives in a single day. It was a profoundly humiliating blow to US prestige and its psychological impact on Americans both within and outside government linger to this day. By finally eliminating Osama, Americans everywhere – particularly those who lost loved ones in the strikes that day - can rightly feel that justice has been served and a sense of closure attained.

The killing of Osama also represents a vindication of the professionalism and skill of US counter-terrorist and intelligence forces and hence provides a vital morale booster in the ongoing struggle against Al Qaeda and its allies. Finally, the demise of the Al Qaeda leader is also a welcome fillip to the morale of governments worldwide that are also struggling with Al Qaeda or similar terrorist networks themselves. Little wonder that many world leaders have come out to congratulate President Obama on the success of the operation and declared the world a safer place now that Osama is gone.

However, some degree of circumspection is needed, for several reasons.

Firstly, while Osama certainly enjoyed iconic standing with the international Al Qaeda-led and inspired militant movement, for many years he had not played a very significant role in any operational planning. This is because US military operations in Afghanistan against Al Qaeda and its Taliban allies after the September 11

attacks, disrupted Al Qaeda's central leadership and infrastructure in that country and led to the dispersal of many key militants elsewhere.

Secondly, this forced dispersal of many Al Qaeda functionaries led to an increased reliance on the Internet for purposes of recruitment, training and indoctrination. Indeed some Al Qaeda strategists subsequently argued that a global grassroots-based Islamist resistance could be generated through the Internet.

Thirdly, the US invasion of Iraq in March 2003 and subsequent occupation resulted in two outcomes of enduring strategic significance: it created a global pool of resentful young men who bought into Osama's "The-West-is-at-War-with-Islam" theme and became more easily radicalised; the Iraq intervention also arguably distracted the US from Afghan affairs and this led in part to the resurgence of Taliban and Al Qaeda in that country and Pakistan. The Iraq intervention thus on balance created conditions for Osama's ideology to thrive even further.

Fourthly, the resulting transmutation of the Al Qaeda structure led to the emergence of Al Qaeda offshoots in North Africa, Iraq, Yemen and elsewhere, including in Southeast Asia. Anwar Al-Awlaki, the so-called "Bin Laden of the Internet", who arguably better represents the current Internet-based face of Al Qaeda more so than Osama, is part of the very active Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) group based in Yemen. Fifthly, thanks to Al Qaeda's presence on the Internet, ideologues such as Awlaki have been able to extend their reach worldwide beyond the Afghanistan-Pakistan zone, to radicalise individuals such as US Army Major Nidal Hassan, who killed fellow servicemen in Fort Hood, Texas in November 2009. It should not be forgotten that Awlaki also radicalised individuals in Singapore last year.

Implications

Hence the threat facing the world today is not entirely identical to that which Osama first presented a decade ago. In Southeast Asia for example, in addition to organised Al Qaeda-like and linked terror networks such as Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) and its various affiliates, self-radicalised individuals and small groups have emerged. They have no direct institutional connection to Al Qaeda or JI but nevertheless embrace Osama's violent worldview to some extent. These groups must also be contended with. In fact as long as Al Qaeda's ideology is permitted to thrive every single terrorist leader and combatant who is eliminated will likely be replaced by freshly indoctrinated recruits. What then are the implications?

Firstly, Osama's elimination should rightly be seen as validation of the continuing importance of so-called "kinetic", or "hard" military and law enforcement measures. Such measures are needed to neutralise active, real-time physical threats to societies everywhere. Hence continued investment in comprehensive counter-terror capacity-building, especially in countries targeted by Al Qaeda and its associates – such as the key states of Afghanistan and Pakistan - remain very much a priority.

Secondly, such hard measures must be supplemented, however, by "soft" measures. These soft measures are needed to diminish the underlying conditions that generate hordes of readily radicalisable young men as well. Such soft measures include good governance that promotes safe and secure communities where families can earn a decent and dignified living. They must also include education that equips young people with the critical faculties to evaluate what they see, read or hear online or in the real world. Ultimately then, a holistic counter-terrorism approach involving, government, non-Muslim civil society and religious community leaders remains the key to coping with the complex threat posed by Al Qaeda and its ideological bedfellows worldwide.

Almost six decades ago the iconic British High Commissioner in the Federation of Malaya, General Sir Gerald Templer, broke the back of the Communist Party of Malaya's revolt. Worrying that a sense of complacency would quickly set in, he reportedly warned with characteristic bluntness: "I will shoot the b*stard who says the war is over." Certainly Osama bin Laden's passing is a significant victory. But General Templer's trenchant injunction to keep the foot on the pedal is surely relevant now as it was then.

Kumar Ramakrishna is Associate Professor and Head of the Centre of Excellence for National Security at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University.