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Death of Osama Bin Laden: Reactions in Jihadi Cyber Forums

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Synopsis

The death of Osama bin Laden was confirmed by Al Qaeda almost a week after the fact. The Arabic jihadi cyber forums have since been flooded with condolences, laments, eulogies as well as threats of attacks to avenge the fallen leader.

Commentary

NEWS OF Osama bin Laden's death was met with denial, disbelief and anger in the Arabic jihadi forums on the Internet. Osama is now officially dead in the eyes of the online jihadists. However, some forum members insist that Osama remains alive through his ideas and legacy. Previous deaths of Al Qaeda leaders and ideologues such as Abu Omar Al-Baghdadi, his deputy Abu Ayyub Al-Masri and Mustafa Abu Al-Yazid had evoked similar sentiments in the Arabic mainstream media.

Initial Response

Many in the online forums expressed scepticism over the news of Osama's death and shared opinions and even analyses to demonstrate the improbability of his demise. Some argued that the fact that the US did not release any photographs of Osama's body and that he was buried in the Arabian Sea indicated deception on the part of the US. Others found it hard to believe that there were only three men in Osama's compound to protect him and that all of them had died while not even one of the US Navy SEALs was injured.

Nevertheless, there were those who neither believed nor denied the news, choosing to wait for Al Qaeda or any jihadi media to confirm the news. This indicated the distrust towards the mainstream media. However, all the speculations and scepticism were debunked following the confirmation issued by the Al Qaeda central leadership.

In one forum post, a poll was conducted asking readers what they would do if the news of Osama's death were indeed true. Readers were given two options: to conduct individual or group operations, or to follow events and limit oneself to waging 'media jihad'. Almost 80% of 27 participants in the poll voted for the former – to wage reprisals. Promises of revenge and threats of attack against the US were subsequently made, raising concerns over possible retaliatory attacks.

One forum member posted a letter in the name of 'Yamaan Mukhdab'. Entitled 'Letter to US Intelligence,' it contained a promise for an 'attack' on 6 May without specifying where it would be conducted. Demonstrations did occur on 6 May 2011 in Pakistan, Egypt, Turkey and Sudan. However, aside from Mukhdab's subsequent

boast that his “promise” was fulfilled, there was no hard evidence that these non-violent demonstrations were inspired by him.

Laments, Eulogies and Threats

Subsequent to Al Qaeda Central’s confirmation of Osama’s ‘martyrdom’, there was an outpouring of statements of condolences, laments and eulogies by various Al Qaeda-affiliated groups such as Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghrib (AQIM), Islamic Emirates of Afghanistan (Afghan Taliban) and Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) also known as Al Qaeda in Iraq. There were also lesser known jihadi groups (groups propagating armed war and classifying it as ‘jihad’) such as Fathul Islam (The Opening/Victory of Islam) Group, Jaishul Islam (Soldiers of Islam) and Abdullah Azzam Brigade. There were also abundant tributes from individuals.

Jihadist media and forums such as Al-Fajar Media, Shumukh Islamic Network and Ansar Mujahideen Network, too, have extended their condolences notwithstanding the laudatory wishes on the ‘martyrdom’ of Osama. Minbar Tawhid Wal Jihad (Pulpit of Oneness and Jihad) in particular stated that in spite of their grief, they are happy for “Osama has achieved what he had been seeking and striving for in the past three decades”.

In summary, in the eyes of these groups and a number of online extremists who view Osama as a symbol of heroism, his death is considered a loss in the “world of jihad”, but a victory in the afterlife -- a claim that will remain debated in the Muslim world.

What Next?

It is not at all surprising that the online jhadists would be deeply grieved by Osama’s death. At present, almost all the discussions in the forums revolve around his passing. But will this grief translate into action? Or is it just their mourning period over the death of their “idol”?

One previous case can be instructive. Almost two weeks after the death of ISI’s Amir (leader), Abu Omar Al-Baghdadi and his deputy in 2010, Somali terrorist group Al-Shabaab conducted a suicide attack on the African Union base camp for peacekeepers in Banadir Somalia. They claimed the attack was in retaliation for al-Baghdadi’s death. The following month, a picture of a suicide bomber with a caption (Abu Omar Al-Baghdadi) appeared in the forums. He was killed in a botched attempt to assassinate the British ambassador in Sanaa, Yemen. This appears to be an attack to avenge the late Amir’s death.

The recent statement issued by Al Qaeda Central expresses unequivocal intention for retaliatory attacks. The extremist community online has also shown an eagerness to continue their “jihad”. These warnings, which are substantiated by the violent responses to the deaths of prominent terrorists in the past, have underlined the need for nations to stay vigilant.

Tackling the Ideological Legacy

It is clear that neither terrorism motivated by the misinterpretation of Islam, nor Al Qaedaism, will end with the death of Osama. Will the terrorists conduct a campaign of reprisals? This is most likely. The Taliban has already carried out a retaliatory strike in Shabqadar, Pakistan. The death toll has climbed up to 98. We can expect more attacks in the future, though how, where and whether they will strike is another matter. Efforts to combat terrorism and counter radical ideology will not and should not cease with the death of Osama, who has left an ideological legacy that will not die easily. It is a hateful ideology that the majority of Muslims reject as it is not representative of the true teaching of Islam.

Nevertheless, the Muslim community needs to be continually engaged with the true message of Islam as a religion of peace; they should be educated about the dangers of radical ideology so that they will not be vulnerable to radicalisation by extremist discourse. The leader of Al Qaeda is dead, but the battle against radical ideology is far from over.

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