

# COMMENTARY

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## **The Good, the Grey and the Scary: What Osama bin-Laden's Death Means**

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Counter-terrorism scores a big one, as the snake's head, Osama bin Laden, has been killed. But, as much as this is cause for a feeling some closure and emotional redress for Americans, especially those who lost loved ones in the 9/11 attacks, this is a snake that regenerates its head. This should not mean that the world should rest easy. Counterterrorism is a long-term ongoing effort, and bin-Laden's demise does not signal the end to terrorism.

Nonetheless, bin Laden's death is extremely good news. Undoubtedly the world is a better place without bin Laden lurking in the shadows – or rather in a mansion near Islamabad.

As celebrations and emotions release themselves, one cannot avoid some tough questions about the operation: the US-Pakistani relations, and uncertainties pertaining to revenge attacks. In other words, surrounding these developments we have the good, the grey, and the scary. The good is obvious, and for President Obama in particular, it might translate into re-election next year.

The grey areas are much thicker. The most visible difference between the Western covering of bin Laden's death and the Pakistani newspapers is the size of the headlines and how much space the news covered on page one. Clearly, the Pakistani newspapers opted to go with smaller space for the coverage, compared to the US newspapers and the BBC. This in itself manifests the difference in views and opinions between the US and Pakistan. This also illustrates many grey

areas in the operation and the US-Pakistani relations. Al Jazeera initially reported that the US led this operation with Pakistani cooperation, and later on the claims of Pakistani cooperation became muted and in some cases even retracted. Until now it is unclear what specific role, if any, the Pakistan's intelligence and security forces might have played in this operation. The smaller size of the headlines in Pakistani newspapers also indicates a degree of fear and sensitivity towards the potential reactions of some powerful elements within the Pakistani public. This speaks for itself.

Another dimension is Pakistan's sensitivity to the role of a foreign (Western) power operating militarily inside its borders. This conjures strong anti-colonial sentiments, still very fresh in the minds and emotions of many Pakistanis. In fact, the BBC received a caller, a woman from Pakistan, who angrily expressed that, despite Al Qaeda and bin Laden's responsibility for killing many Muslims, the US drone attacks in the Afghan-Pakistan region have killed many civilians. This shows the rawness of the anti-American sentiments in Pakistan and how complicated the relationship between the US and Pakistan remains, even in a post-bin Laden world.

This whole action puts the Pakistani government in an extremely difficult position in terms of domestic sentiments and security. It does not really matter whether or not the Pakistani government and security forces cooperated with the US, because those Pakistanis who embrace counter-terrorism will be extremely alarmed by bin Laden's hideout in an upscale area not far from the country's capital, Islamabad. This raises a lot of questions about how much Pakistani intelligence knew—and some would allege that they even assisted—bin Laden and company hiding in Abbottabad. The ISI is denying knowledge of bin Laden's presence in their backyard. India was quick to point out Pakistan's vulnerabilities and alleged complicity in harbouring terrorists.

Some Pakistanis who embrace extremism might go after President Asif Ali Zardari's jugular for allowing the US operation killing bin Laden to take place on Pakistani soil. The Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) has already threatened reprisal actions against the US and the Pakistani government. A third group of Pakistanis, including the famous cricketer Imran Khan, have immediately called on the US to withdraw all its forces from the region, since now the top priority of killing bin Laden has been achieved. Many are saying that this signals the end of the 'war on terror,' and Afghanistan's President Hamid Karzai emphasized that this war should no longer be waged on Afghan ground. These outbursts further complicate the US foreign policy pertaining to the region.

Another grey area is the prompt 'burial at sea' of bin Laden's body. The Internet is buzzing with speculation about the reasons behind such a quick disposal of his body. Of course, Islamic law requires prompt burial of a deceased Muslim, but this action of burial at sea actually complicates the matter, not to mention that bin Laden did not deserve the honour/respect affording an Islamic burial. Also, Muslim burial is underground, not at sea unless in extraordinary circumstances. To claim that the body was disposed so quickly due to Islamic legal requirements does not fly. The body was dumped at sea in order to prevent any potential for bin Laden sympathizers from creating shrines at his burial site. There are also valid security reasons behind the body's disposal at sea.

As for the scary, the BBC posted a lengthy list of successors and field commanders in Al Qaeda, who might be likely successors upon each leader's death. For now, Ayman al-Zawahiri is expected to replace bin Laden. There are many scary aspects to this successors list: one, it indicates the terrorists' global reach, as they are from and operating in diverse corners of the earth. Two, their ideologies and militancy, and particularly their hatred for the US, are not different from bin Laden. Three, the uncertainties behind the terrorist reaction, and likely thirst for revenge for bin Laden's demise, have already triggered high security alerts in the US and worldwide.

The Al Jazeera reports global reactions to bin Laden's death from heads of state and political and military figures. According to this report, the Pakistani foreign office made the following statement: 'The death of bin Laden is a 'major setback to terrorist organizations around the world. This operation was conducted by the US Forces in accordance with declared US policy that Osama bin Laden will be eliminated in a direct action by the US forces, wherever found in the world.'

A host of world leaders are quoted in this report, including Angela Merkel, Alain Juppe, Silvio Berlusconi, David Cameron, NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen, New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg, Benjamin Netanyahu, George W. Bush, to name a few; all expressing relief and satisfaction upon bin Laden's death. However, one voice was actually sympathetic to bin Laden: Ismail Haniyeh, the Prime Minister of the Hamas government in the Gaza Strip who is quoted as saying: 'We condemn the assassination and the killing of an Arab holy warrior. We ask God to offer him mercy with the true believers and the martyrs. We regard this as a continuation of the American policy based on oppression and the shedding of Muslim and Arab blood.' Given the recent Fatah-Hamas reconciliation, this quote is not just scary, but ominous.

At the end of the day, one less terrorist in the world, especially the 'calibre' of bin Laden, is a great thing. But, what US Army Brigadier General (Ret.) Mark Kimmit, told Al Jazeera, is a food for thought: 'Capturing or killing bin Laden has more iconic value. It will have symbolic value, because it has been a number of years since bin Laden has exercised day to day control over operations. We still have an al-Qaeda threat out there and that will be there for a number of years. This organization (al-Qaeda) is more than bin Laden, it may be symbolized by bin Laden, but it definitely is more than him.'

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