

# COMMENTARY

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## Osama is Dead, His Legacy Lives on...

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Despite the death of Al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, his malevolent legacy will continue to plague the twenty-first century as security agencies carry on the battle with this new transformed terrorism. Bin Laden's enduring legacy is the manner in which he transformed contemporary terrorism, that is, making it more decentralized, less hierarchical and organizational, and more unpredictable and altogether far more lethal. Command and control as we traditionally understand it has been jettisoned in favour of highly localized cells. To be sure this was not always the case. Al Qaeda used to be a highly centralized organization when it came to planning, staffing and command and control. However after its base in Afghanistan was destroyed during the US-led military campaign they were forced to re-strategize thereby creating a flatter, highly dispersed network consisting of permanent, semi-permanent or independently operating cells in over seventy-six countries.

Al Qaeda's global reach is also facilitated by its ability to co-opt local structures into its network as we recently witnessed with Somalia's Al Shabab taking a *bayat* or oath of allegiance to Bin Laden. Indeed whilst Al Qaeda central consisting of Bin Laden, Ayman al-Zawahiri and their cohorts have been weakening for some time; local Islamists affiliated to Al Qaeda are mushrooming. The Islamist ideology penetrates first, and then there is the formation of the Islamist group. In addition, Al Qaeda's use of technology specifically the internet and audio and video broadcasts screened on Al Jazeera and other outlets also served as a force-multiplier. The Al Qaeda leadership has, therefore, been playing less the role of command and control and more of an inspirational role for rank and file Islamist for the past decade. In this situation the glue that keeps Al Qaeda and its disparate parts together giving it cohesion, is ideology. Given the dispersed nature of the organization, the ideology of radical Islamism occupies central place.

Commenting on these developments, the inimitable Robert Fisk states, *‘No one grasped that the leader of the Islamic side in this so-called war – bin Laden – was not relevant. The billions of dollars spent on trying to find him proved that we had still not understood the reality of 11 September 2001: bin Laden had created al Qaeda; but his role was now largely ceremonial, ideological, rather than military. Seeking to discover his whereabouts was akin to arresting the world’s nuclear scientists after the invention of the atom bomb: al Qaeda now existed in the minds of thousands of Muslims. The monster – as Western journalists would like to refer to their enemies – had grown up and propagated’*. Is it any wonder then that when Al Qaeda launched its first English-language magazine in July 2010, it named it ‘Inspire’?

All these developments have been further facilitated by what I would term is the ‘democratization of jihad’ – Bin Laden successfully breaking the monopoly of the *ulema* and giving the right to interpretation to the Muslim street, especially on matters of jihad. Undoubtedly, this process has been assisted by Islamic clerics, scholars and jurists who have often been co-opted by authoritarian governments and have therefore lost legitimacy in the eyes of the Muslim masses as they serve as praise singers to corrupt and dictatorial elite. This Islamist anti-clericalism of course predated Bin Laden: Islamists killed *ulema* too close to the governing elite as early as 1977 with the assassination of Muhammad al-Dhahabi, the Egyptian Minister of the Waqf; Bin Laden certainly built on this anti-clericalism. By June 2003 Bin Laden essentially declared war on the *ulema*, accusing them of ‘*deception and misguidance*’ and having ‘*sold their faith to temporal gain*’.

As they lost legitimacy, and therefore authority in the eyes of Muslims everywhere, the Islamists’ cause was greatly strengthened as they rapidly took over the vacuum left by an increasingly discredited *ulema*. It was the Islamist interpretation of the *Qur’an* that held sway since the *ulema* did not speak for God or the people but for the kleptocratic ruling elites. It is no co-incidence as Olivier Roy notes that with the exception of Iran the Islamist movement everywhere are led not by clerics but by young intellectuals who challenge the *ulema* everywhere.

Moreover, the esteemed Saudi academic Dr. Madawi al-Rashid pointed out how by individualizing Islam, Bin Laden has broken the ‘...*monopoly of jurisprudence, which was established under the umbrella of the state*’. In the process each Muslim has become his own *imam* and in this context, fatwas from *ulema* opposing violence has little resonance since they represent the *status quo*—one that excludes the vast majority of disenfranchised and disempowered Muslims. Long after Bin Laden’s passing, this individualization of Islam and consequent democratization of jihad will be his enduring legacy and one which we all have to live with as acts of terrorism become more individualized, more sporadic and ever more difficult to control.

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