

# ISA S Brief

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469A Bukit Timah Road  
#07-01, Tower Block, Singapore 259770  
Tel: 6516 6179 / 6516 4239  
Fax: 6776 7505 / 6314 5447  
Email: [isassecc@nus.edu.sg](mailto:isassecc@nus.edu.sg)  
Website: [www.isas.nus.edu.sg](http://www.isas.nus.edu.sg)



## Post-Osama: Is it the Beginning of the 'End' in Afghanistan?

Shanthie Mariet D'Souza<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

*The killing of Osama bin Laden has sent a chilling message to its affiliates in the region. However, at the same time, it has initiated speculations that having achieved their objective of eliminating Osama, the United States (US) can safely commence the 'drawdown' of forces. Will the US abandon Afghanistan, yet again, as it did when it shifted focus to Iraq? Will it stay put and focus on the groups like the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and the Pakistani Taliban who have vowed revenge? Will it pursue the Quetta Shura so that they become amenable to the reconciliation process underway in Afghanistan? If the goal of the US is to pursue the region, answers to these questions remain vital for the prospects of stabilisation in Afghanistan and Pakistan.*

The killing of the Al-Qaeda leader, Osama bin Laden on 2 May 2011 is seen as a significant achievement of US counter-terrorism policy. The elimination of this iconic figurehead is said to have sapped the morale of the Al-Qaeda, while it has boosted the image of the Obama presidency and prospects for his re-election. The timing of the incident is significant as it coincides with the purported drawdown of forces, to commence in July 2011. At the same time, this event has brought to the forefront the tumultuous relationship the US has with its frontline ally, Pakistan. A situation which surfaced with the Raymond Davis scenario and now further complicated with the fact that Osama was harboured right under the nose of the Pakistan authorities.

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<sup>1</sup> Dr Shanthie Mariet D'Souza is Visiting Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS) at the National University of Singapore (NUS). She can be reached at [isassmd@nus.edu.sg](mailto:isassmd@nus.edu.sg). The views reflected in the paper are those of the author and not of the institute.

Amidst the chaotic claims and counter-claims, several theories have emerged, pointing fingers at the possible harbourers of Osama. While the initial circumstantial evidence suggests that bin Laden was effectively being housed under Pakistani state control,<sup>2</sup> the possibility that the military used Osama as a bargaining chip to accrue large amounts of US aid for almost a decade cannot be ignored. Irrespective of the fact that the identities of the people or establishments harbouring bin Laden may never be established, Pakistan has emerged as a weaker and more vulnerable state than it was when the hunt for bin Laden began.<sup>3</sup> The processes of addressing these weaknesses – divisions between the military, intelligence and administration and an unending desire to use ‘terrorism’ as a matter of state policy – will continue to be issues that a new US policy towards the region will have to take into account as it moves towards an ‘end game’ in Afghanistan.

### **Impact on Al-Qaeda and its Affiliates**

The killing of Osama bin Laden, the symbolic figurehead of the Al-Qaeda, is a definite blow to the movement and to the global Jihadi network. It is variously argued that the incident may have only limited impact on the operational aspects of the organisation. Post-9/11 Al-Qaeda has functioned as franchisees and local chapters – Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). The Al-Qaeda movement has been operating through local groups. Bin Laden did continue to provide the inspiration and ideological content that indirectly generated funds and recruits, but there is very little evidence to suggest that Osama controlled or provided directions for other local operations.

The movement had indeed become amorphous, and hence could absorb the losses of key leadership roles (Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, Mustafa abu al-Yazid, Abu Zubaydah and Khalid Sheikh Mohammed) over the years relatively easily. Despite the killings of Al-Qaeda’s third and fourth in command, the local chapters were able to continue with their operations. Early responses on jihadist internet forums underline the determination of Al-Qaeda members and supporters to continue their struggle.<sup>4</sup> A number of key Al-Qaeda figureheads who could play a similar leadership role in the movement in the future are Ayman al-Zawahiri (currently the second in command), Abu Yahya al-Libi (of Libya), Naser al-Wuhaishi (in charge of AQAP), Anwar al-Awlaki (of Yemen). These leaders, however, lack the charisma and wide appeal of Osama bin Laden. Thus, a scenario of succession battles and lesser known groups vying for

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<sup>2</sup> Steve Coll, ‘Notes on the Death of Osama bin Laden’, *The New Yorker* (2 May 2011), [www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/newsdesk/2011/05/notes-on-the-death-of-osama-bin-laden.html#ixzz1LGSIUoCO](http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/newsdesk/2011/05/notes-on-the-death-of-osama-bin-laden.html#ixzz1LGSIUoCO). Accessed on 2 May 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Ahmed Rashid, ‘Pakistan and al-Qaeda’s Future’, *New York Review of Books* (3 May 2011), [www.nybooks.com/blogs/nyrblog/2011/may/03/pakistan-and-al-qaedas-future/](http://www.nybooks.com/blogs/nyrblog/2011/may/03/pakistan-and-al-qaedas-future/). Accessed on 2 May 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Aaron Y. Zelin, The bin Laden aftermath: The Internet jihadis react, *The Af-Pak Channel* (2 May 2011), [http://afpak.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/05/02/the\\_bin\\_laden\\_aftermath\\_the\\_internet\\_jihadis\\_react](http://afpak.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/05/02/the_bin_laden_aftermath_the_internet_jihadis_react). Accessed on 2 May 2011.

more prominence cannot be ruled out. For instance, groups like the LeT are said to be making a bid to replace Al-Qaeda, by expanding its focus to joining the fight against US forces in Afghanistan, launching terror attacks against India, participating in the global jihad and furthering non-violent activism in Pakistan.<sup>5</sup> Osama's death has indeed opened up a vacuum, for which there are too many capable claimants.

### **Is the 'Timing' Right for the Drawdown of Forces?**

Invariably, much of the US policies towards Afghanistan and Pakistan will have its impact on the security and stabilisation efforts in the region. In Afghanistan, Osama's death has vindicated President Karzai's long-held stand that the problem of Afghanistan is rooted in Pakistan and the present war on terror has erred by not focusing enough on the terrorist sanctuaries and support structures. He said on 2 May 2011, 'We said many many times, and continue to say every day, the fight against terrorism is not in Afghanistan's villages, the fight against terrorism is not in the houses of poor and oppressed Afghans, the fight is not in bombing women and children... The fight against terrorism is in its sanctuaries, in its training camps and its finance centres... Today, this has been proven right.'<sup>6</sup> It remains to be seen whether Karzai's renewed calls will bring about a correction in course to the war on terror.

It has been argued that Osama's death has led to the desired political and strategic conditions for the drawdown of US forces from Afghanistan. Pressures have started mounting for the Obama administration to declare victory, much as it did in Iraq, and ensure that the US troops in Afghanistan are brought home. It has also lead to a renewed debate in America on the US role and objectives in Afghanistan and Pakistan?

A drawdown of forces is slated to begin in July 2011 and culminate by July 2014 with a 'transfer of authority' to the Afghan forces. July 2011 will also mark the beginning of the process when the international forces will confine themselves to counter-terrorism while gradually allowing the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSFs) to do the bulk of the counter-insurgency duties. Osama's death has altered US domestic perceptions regarding the Afghan War. According to an opinion poll on 2 May 2011, about 45 per cent of the Americans now think that the Afghan war has been worth fighting. Polls conducted in the months prior to bin Laden's death showed that as many as two-thirds of Americans felt the war was not worth the loss of life and money.<sup>7</sup> The Obama administration would like to

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<sup>5</sup> Stephen Tankel of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace has told US lawmakers that LeT had not been able to shake off its regional dynamics, but may plot a larger international terror role after bin Laden's death. See, 'LeT may plot to replace al-Qaeda as terror umbrella outfit', *The Economic Times* (4 May 2011).

<sup>6</sup> Aunohita Mojumdar, 'Osama dead: Afghans see it as another chapter in conflict', *Economic Times* (3 May 2011).

<sup>7</sup> Richard Solash, 'U.S. Afghan Mission Under Scrutiny After Bin Laden's Death', *RFERL* (3 May 2011), [www.rferl.org/content/us\\_afghan\\_mission\\_under\\_scrutiny\\_after\\_osama\\_bin\\_laden\\_death/24090602.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/us_afghan_mission_under_scrutiny_after_osama_bin_laden_death/24090602.html). Accessed on 4 May 2011.

augment the new found public support by keeping true to the date of the promised troop pullout.

### **Is the ‘Time’ Ripe for Talks?**

What would be interesting, however, is to see if the US will use enough force or diplomatic finesse to influence the Quetta Shura of the Afghan Taliban leadership to the negotiating table, before it ventures on a retreating mission. The Taliban have announced the launch of its spring offensive. A spike in violence during the post-Osama period will provide tale tell signs of Taliban’s future intentions and disruption capacities without the blessings of the figurehead.

US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, has said that Osama’s death could advance efforts to reach a political resolution for the war in Afghanistan, because it might convince the Taliban and Al-Qaeda to come to the negotiating table. She further commented, ‘In Afghanistan, we have to continue to take the fight to Al-Qaeda and its Taliban allies. Perhaps now they will take seriously the work that we are doing on trying to have some reconciliation process that resolves the insurgency. So our message to the Taliban hasn’t changed; it just has even greater resonance today. They can’t wait us out, they can’t defeat us; they need to come into the political process and denounce Al-Qaeda and renounce violence and agree to abide by the laws and constitution of Afghanistan.’<sup>8</sup> She also speculated that Osama’s death would make Al-Qaeda and the Taliban more likely to strike a deal with Afghanistan, because of their lack of a grand leader to rally around. Similar thoughts have been expressed by experts predicting a positive political change within Afghanistan. For example, Anne-Marie Slaughter, the former director of policy planning at the State Department, said that the death of Osama ‘may change the willingness of some Taliban to negotiate. With [bin Laden] gone, that may create some political space. It’s at least worth exploring.’<sup>9</sup> At best, these are early thoughts and possible moves to pre-empt an inclination for the US to stay present in Afghanistan.

However, the fact remains that without dismantling the sanctuaries and terrorist infrastructure in Pakistan and breaking the linkages of these groups with Al-Qaeda, it would be foolhardy to predict an early end to the conflict in Afghanistan. In the absence of a US policy towards addressing the anomalies within the Pakistani state, the latter would retain the ability to maintain its linkages with these groups, which would further ensure a lingering conflict in Afghanistan. This would make the prospects of ‘complete withdrawal’ a difficult proposition

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<sup>8</sup> Josh Rogin, ‘Clinton: Taliban more likely to negotiate after bin Laden’s death’, *The Cable: Foreign Policy* (4 May 2011), [http://thecable.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/05/04/clinton\\_taliban\\_more\\_likely\\_to\\_negotiate\\_after\\_bin\\_laden\\_death](http://thecable.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/05/04/clinton_taliban_more_likely_to_negotiate_after_bin_laden_death). Accessed on 4 May 2011.

<sup>9</sup> Richard Solash, ‘U.S. Afghan Mission Under Scrutiny After Bin Laden’s Death’, *RFERL* (3 May 2011), [www.rferl.org/content/us\\_afghan\\_mission\\_under\\_scrutiny\\_after\\_osama\\_bin\\_laden\\_death/24090602.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/us_afghan_mission_under_scrutiny_after_osama_bin_laden_death/24090602.html). Accessed on 4 May 2011.

for the US. These are serious concerns for the US to address. Mullah Omar and Al-Qaeda's second in command, Ayman al-Zawahiri, probably enjoy refuge in Pakistan. The location of Mullah Omar, in particular, is believed by US officials to be well-known to some Pakistani military and intelligence officers.<sup>10</sup> Whether the US pursues these terrorist leaders, with the same seriousness as it inked Operation Geronimo (the killing of bin Laden) remains to be seen. Beyond the 'use of force' to eliminate the Al-Qaeda leadership, it is critical to address these conditions and break the nexus that bred and nurtured such groups, if the objective of stabilisation in South Asia is to be realised.

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<sup>10</sup> Steve Coll, 'Notes on the Death of Osama bin Laden', *The New Yorker* (2 May 2011), [www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/newsdesk/2011/05/notes-on-the-death-of-osama-bin-laden.html#ixzz1LGSIUoCO](http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/newsdesk/2011/05/notes-on-the-death-of-osama-bin-laden.html#ixzz1LGSIUoCO). Accessed on 2 May 2011.