



GUEST COLUMN: Ely Karmon

Death of a Mega Terrorist

THE TARGETED ASSASSINATION OF OSAMA BIN Laden in Pakistan in early May will not stop Islamist terror. In the short term, it could actually spark an escalation in the form of a string of attempted revenge attacks. But in the longer term, the impact on international terror could be significant.

True, on both the operational and PR levels bin Laden had not been active for years. In 2005, he handed the leadership in the key Iraqi and Levant (al-Sham) theaters to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who played a major jihadist role until his assassination by the Americans a year later. Moreover, for years bin Laden's deputy, the Egyptian Ayman al-Zawahiri, has been the real strategic engine behind what remains of the crippled al-Qaeda hard-core.

Still, bin Laden's assassination is an important, if belated, political, psychological and counter-terrorism triumph for the American people, world democracies and President Barack Obama personally. The message it sends is that sooner or later terrorist leaders will pay the ultimate price.

More importantly, the Americans seized a veritable treasure trove of documents and computerized data from the house where they killed bin Laden. This is bound to give them invaluable leads in their Sisyphean struggle to dismantle the organization's leadership and operational infrastructure worldwide, the way they did in Iraq in 2006 and 2007.

Although there could be an internal power struggle for control of al-Qaeda and one of the leaders of the relatively independent Yemen-based "al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula" (AQAP) could stake a claim, the natural choice would be Zawahiri. Al-Qaeda in Iraq has already thrown its weight behind Zawahiri in a statement by its "caliph" Abu Baker al-Baghdadi.

In the context of the "Arab spring," bin Laden's killing is another major setback for the jihadist strategy in the Arab world. It follows the popular uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, Yemen and Libya, Syria and Bahrain, which point the way to freedom, self-determination and meaningful social change by political means, not al-Qaeda-style terrorism.

Significantly, the killing of al-Qaeda's leader occurred near Pakistan's capital, Islamabad. Since 2002, six of the most important leaders of the organization, including Khaled Sheikh Mohammed, the mastermind of the 9/11 attacks, have been killed or arrested in the heart of teeming Pakistani cities, not the remote tribal grottoes where they were initially presumed to have been hiding. This suggests that the Pakistani military and intelligence services are playing a double game, and cannot be trusted by their American or even their Chinese allies, and certainly not by India, Afghanistan and other neighboring countries.

Indeed, bin Laden's assassination could have major repercussions for Pakistan. Together with other Islamist movements, the Pakistani Taliban could launch a terrorist offensive to destabilize an already shaky civil regime in Islamabad. A statement from a Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan spokesman vowed retaliation for bin Laden's killing, saying: "President Zardari and the army will be our first targets; and America will be our second."

As for the Middle East, the threat to American targets as jihadist groups and individuals seek to avenge bin Laden's death will be greater in those Arab countries, like Egypt, Yemen and Syria, where the police



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and security services are crippled or on the defensive as a result of popular uprisings.

Although in Europe we have witnessed the growth of jihadist "homegrown" terrorism by disaffected young Muslims, after the Madrid (2004) and London (7.7.2005) bombings all attempted attacks have either been foiled by the law enforcement agencies or simply failed. But "Londonistan," it seems, remains the hot spot of dangerous jihadist incitement and potential terrorism. Describing bin Laden as a "hero" to jihadists, firebrand British Islamist Anjem Choudary, the former UK leader of the banned al-Muhajiroun organization, said bin Laden's death would inspire his followers to step up their attacks against the West. Choudary, whose group "Muslims against Crusades" threatened to disrupt the royal wedding, warned: "I think Britain is more likely to face (another) 7/7 today than ever (before)."

With regard to Israel, we should bear in mind that the organization bin Laden created is called "the World Islamic Front for the Fight against the Crusaders and the Jews," and the first terrorist attack after its demise in Afghanistan was against the synagogue on the Tunisian island of Djerba in April 2002.

Moreover, under the Hamas strategic umbrella, several Salafi and jihadist groups have taken root in Gaza. They have fired more than 300 rockets and mortars into Israel so far this year, sometimes in coordination with Hamas, sometimes independently. Given Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh's condemnation of the killing of the "holy warrior," these groups could think it legitimate to try to avenge bin Laden's death by attacking America's ally, Israel.

This could provoke strong Israeli retaliation and spark a new crisis at a very delicate juncture, following the unity agreement between Hamas and Palestinian Authority President Mahmud Abbas's secular Fatah movement. ●

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