



The Death of Bin Laden: Implications for Europe

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On Monday May 2, at approximately 1.00 am local time, US Navy Seals stormed a fortified compound on the outskirts of Abbotabad in the North-West Frontier Province of Pakistan. With President Obama sitting with other high-level national security officials in the Situation Room, a Navy Seal declared “Geronimo EKIA” [Enemy Killed in Action]. Five hours later at 23.35 Eastern Standard Time, President Obama declared to the world that “the United States has conducted an operation that has killed Osama Bin Laden, the leader of al Qaeda”.

The significance of these events has yet to be fully determined. Indeed, President Obama has warned that although the death of Bin Laden is “the most significant achievement to date in our [the US] effort to defeat al Qaeda ... his death does not mark the end of our effort”. Yet, the death in many ways, almost 10 years on from ‘9/11’, marks a symbolic end to a phase of the West’s “war on terror”, even if few would really argue that there will be an immediate substantive change. Most notably, there is a sense of closure in which the war on terror narrative has seemingly removed one of the most significant actors in the plot; as the United States claims that “justice has been done”, a new act in the play appears to have started. As such, at this early juncture it is possible to evaluate, albeit tentatively, the implications that the death of

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Bin Laden has for Europe and its relationships with the three main actors in that drama: the United States, Pakistan, and of course, Al Qaeda.

With regard to European-US relations, it is clear that there is much discomfort with the way in which the US story changed from the immediate report, over the following few days. First, we were told that Bin Laden was armed; then that he was not. Second, we were told that he used his wife as a human shield; then that this was not so. Third, contrary to first reports, the woman killed was not his wife. Suspicions have been raised that this was really a shoot to kill mission. While few in the United States would be concerned with that, many Europeans have been worried about implications for international law of this mission. Indeed, this apparent execution foregrounds serious divisions that Europe has had with the US led war on terror. Whilst much of Europe has regarded the events of September 11 2001 as a criminal offence, the US (and the UK, under Tony Blair in particular) militarised a “war” on terror. Consequently, whilst many in Europe appear to have wanted to capture a criminal and secure conviction through a legal route, the US appears to be rejoicing in the death of an “enemy commander in the field”. This helps generate a greater understanding of why many Europeans have baulked at the President’s use of the term “justice”. Not only does such a definition have much in common with the assertions of President George W. Bush that “dead or alive, justice will be done”, but it conflates justice with violent retribution and revenge; that Obama, the commander-in-chief, is a former law professor has only added to the sense of bemusement over such a definition. In many ways, this definitional disagreement has deeper cultural roots, and plays out between Europe and the US over issues such as the death penalty. Nonetheless, it is little wonder that whilst the US has been able to assert that Bin Laden’s “demise should be welcome by all that believe in peace and human dignity”, Europeans have been a little less sure.

Given such divisions it is unsurprising that Europe has been similarly discomforted about the manner in which the Obama administration has not significantly reformed US policy. Indeed, in many ways he has enhanced many aspects of his predecessor’s policy with which many in Europe have been ill at ease. Since becoming President, Barack Obama has massively increased the numbers of drone strikes – attacks by unmanned aerial vehicles– and such attacks had tripled in the first eighteen months of his presidency. As a result, drones have killed roughly the equivalent number of people who had died in 9/11. Republicans may have sought to present Obama as weak on the use of force; those living in the tribal areas of Pakistan would probably beg to differ. For Europeans, so many of whom were so delighted at the end of the Bush Administration, it is important to understand the limits to the change that Obama has brought. A surge of military forces in Afghanistan, increased and ongoing drone strikes in Pakistan, the continuation of Guantanamo Bay, while the man suspected of providing Wikileaks with their vast amount of US official documentation, Bradley Manning had to endure conditions where he would be stripped naked to wear a smock at night, had no bedding, was permitted no personal items in his cell, and was kept locked in solitary confinement for 23 hours a day in a windowless cell. The death of

Bin Laden seems to show that even an Obama led America is uncomfortable for many Europeans.

On Pakistan, much has and will be made of the suspicion that Pakistani authorities knew of Bin Laden's whereabouts, and therefore in a very real sense that Pakistan colludes with Al Qaeda. Christopher Hitchens has written of '... this smoking-gun proof of official Pakistani complicity with al-Qaida'. And if that is so, how can Pakistan be a partner for Europe? This is another complex set of decisions for European policy makers – how should they react? It is possible that the view expressed by Hitchens is correct; or that some in Pakistani establishment knew, but that this knowledge was contained to a small minority; or that in some senses Pakistan was colluding with the United States over the whereabouts of the Al Qaeda leader. Which route one takes has implications for how to continue to work with Pakistan. But even with a worst case analysis of Pakistan's role, it is a vitally important country for Europe's interests in the South Asian region and beyond. And those who have worked with Pakistan know that it is a very complex country, and perhaps in some ways, a country with an even more complex governance structure.

Which leaves the final element of those involved in the violence in Abbottabad: al Qaeda. No one believes that the death of Bin Laden will impact on al Qaeda's operational abilities. In many ways, his death is just another in a line of senior al Qaeda officials that the United States has killed over the past several years. Yet, it is nonetheless possible to argue that the death of Bin Laden represents an enormous loss of a vital intelligence resource. The US navy seals may well have taken hard drives and flash drives from the Abbottabad compound, but surely the inspirational leader of the organisation would have been able to provide significant information about the organisation's finance, the location of other important al Qaeda personnel, information about the elements of the Pakistani establishment that may have aided him, and even perhaps information that may well aid in the ongoing war effort in Afghanistan against the Taliban. In the US rush to eradicate "evil" it may well be the case that a disservice to countering terrorism and winning ongoing campaigns may well have perpetrated, as such we may have lost an opportunity to gain insight into what Donald Rumsfeld once called "known unknowns" and "unknown unknowns". But then again, would Europeans have been prepared to see an incarcerated Bin Laden, subjected to the range and number of tortures inflicted on another al Qaeda leader, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed – torture not as defined by the US government, but by the likes of the Red Cross, and Human Rights Watch.

This is not to say, of course, that al Qaeda is a centralized machine of violence; rather it has acted as a source of inspiration for some around the world, and may well now be inspiration for those that believe Osama Bin Laden has been 'murdered' by the Americans. For those inspired by al Qaeda, there will undoubtedly be a rush to be the group to revenge that death, with a concomitant increase in the dangers of terrorism globally. What remains to be determined of course is will such plots be an accelerated enactment of those already planned be undertaken, or will new plots emerge as a result of a new cycle of violence? This means that in the short term, the

likelihood of terrorist attacks against European targets globally, as well as against targets in European cities, is much increased. Of course, it is America that will be the primary target; but there are many American sites in Europe, whilst the violent supporters of al Qaeda have already demonstrated for many years a willingness to attack Europeans as well as Americans.

So the death of Bin Laden illustrates that America is a less comfortable partner with Obama than many Europeans had thought; that really difficult and delicate calculations have to be made by Europe in the relationship with Pakistan; and that Europe, and Europeans, may possibly face a greater risk of terrorist attack than before. As such, whilst the importance of Osama Bin Laden had clearly been diminishing in terms of his role in al Qaeda and global terrorism whilst he was alive, his death is raising serious and fundamental questions for both the US and Europe.