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Crowd gathers in excitement near Ground Zero after hearing Osama bin Laden was killed in raid in Abbottabad, Pakistan

The Elusive Defeat of al Qaeda

By GINA M. BENNETT

When the United States began its war on al Qaeda in September 2001, the objective was to destroy the group by eliminating its leadership, dislodging the group from Afghanistan, and preventing future al Qaeda terrorist operations.¹ Americans also hoped to reduce the appeal of al Qaeda's message, particularly among the populations the group targeted for recruitment and support. Washington viewed these goals as representing victory in the war on terror, or at least the war on al Qaeda.

This concept of victory against al Qaeda differed, however, from the group's vision of its own defeat, and according to terrorism experts such as Peter Bergen, this critical disconnect continues to obscure whether the war is over.² The disparity resulted from several inextricable paradoxes, the first of which emerged early when the highly publicized term *war* unintentionally elevated al Qaeda's stature to that of a state enemy. But since al Qaeda was not a traditional enemy, conventional concepts of defeating one's foe through annihilation or attrition may never have fully applied to it.

As a fringe Muslim extremist ideology, al Qaeda drew from dozens of nationalities but spoke for no set population the way states or subnational actors do. Despite its use of Taliban-controlled territory, it did not operate as a terrorist arm of the Afghan state nor did it conduct its activities on behalf of the Taliban. Rather, the group behaved much like a cult, acting upon its leader's premise that attacking the United States would force U.S. withdrawal from the Islamic world. Its members fanatically followed its leader without any objective measurement of his logic or effectiveness.

Osama bin Laden made no secret about his desire that al Qaeda serve as the vanguard for violent revolutionary movements in the Muslim world.³ Nonetheless, to take his ambition seriously would have grossly inflated the capacity of the organization and the credibility of his ideas. This challenge left Washington with little choice but to center its war machine on destroying al Qaeda's terrorist capabilities, which in turn led to the second paradox.

The counterterrorist agenda of the war on al Qaeda created the expectation that preventing the group from conducting terrorist operations against U.S. interests would be the critical indicator of the group's defeat. The problem with this premise is that it also created the logical argument that any al Qaeda terrorist operation would become an indicator of its victory. Neither is necessarily true. Preventing terrorism is a noble goal, but the tactic of terrorism will remain an easy-to-employ, violent method adopted by the few to obtain the immediate attention of the many. There will be no unconditional surrender by a tactic. Making terrorism prevention the objective of war increases the potential for an endless state of conflict, given that even a failed terrorist attempt reignites the battlefield.

Events over the past decade further illuminate this dilemma. American-led operations in Afghanistan crushed al Qaeda's leadership, reduced its ranks, and dislodged the group.⁴ Continued pressure has prevented the group from reconsolidating its presence and is close to destroying the entirety of the original leadership. The group survives only by living underground and on the move. Furthermore, persistent operations against incoming leaders have thinned the back-bench, leaving individuals with limited experience in charge.

While the United States might look at these developments as indicators of U.S. victory, al Qaeda likely does not view them as lasting signs of its defeat. According to

Gina M. Bennett wrote this essay while a student at the Marine Corps War College. It won the Strategy Article category of the 2013 Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Strategic Essay Competition.

personal accounts of his family, bin Laden prepared to live underground for long periods.⁵ He apparently anticipated that his actions would constrain his ability to operate in the open. The group's committed members believe time is on their side because as long as one man inspired by al Qaeda can pose a threat, the United States by its own definition cannot claim victory.⁶

In addition to inadvertently raising an expectation that every terrorist attack could be prevented, Washington's counterterrorism focus in its war on al Qaeda may have minimized other avenues for defeating the group, leading to a third paradox. Dismissing the credibility of bin Laden's vision of global insurgency unintentionally led to overlooking developments that were destroying the cohesion of the group and defeating its ideology.

The raid on bin Laden's safe house in Pakistan in 2011 included the capture of letters between bin Laden and his subordinates that provided a fuller picture of internal discord over al Qaeda strategy.⁷ These documents along with detailed accounts of bin Laden by Peter Bergen and Steve Coll offered a more comprehensive picture of his grand strategy and revealed the relatively minor role terrorism played in it.⁸

Bin Laden's vision of a global struggle appears to be a poorly applied interpretation of Maoist protracted warfare theory.⁹ His writings revealed that he made a priority of methodically organizing his followers and creating safe enclaves for jihadist rule for others to emulate. Over time, he grew to appreciate that his followers should not attack until they were in a position of strength against local security forces. Bin Laden's strategic focus, therefore, was on changing the balance of power between local Islamic militant groups and the regimes they sought to overthrow. Terrorist attacks against the United States were his preferred method for shifting that balance.

In his final years, bin Laden continually urged his leaders and affiliates to attack the American homeland rather than U.S. interests throughout the Muslim world. His letters strongly cautioned that striking American regional interests would only foster closer ties between Washington and the local regimes and justify an expanded U.S. role in the region.¹⁰ Furthermore, bin Laden warned that launching jihad against local governments before jihadists were unified would provoke

destructive infighting and risk significant Muslim bloodshed.

By the mid-2000s, al Qaeda members largely resisted bin Laden's direction to stay focused on the U.S. homeland.¹¹ Their severely constrained operating environment along with a hardened America may have deterred them from following his lead. Moreover, the group relaxed cumbersome bureaucratic requirements for establishing affiliates, which ultimately produced a substantial disconnect between bin Laden's emphasis on attacking the U.S. homeland and the preferences of the affiliates for attacks in their local areas of operation.¹²

Against this fuller understanding of the divide over strategy, the emergence of the "Arab Spring" may have played a more prominent role in driving al Qaeda toward defeat than was apparent at the outset. Just before his death, bin Laden cautioned that the Arab Spring could create the belief among Muslim populations that an Islamic revolution was possible without the expulsion of U.S. influence in the Middle East and without the use of violence.¹³ Both of those conditions would deeply discredit his theory.

The greatest challenge to the affiliate groups might be the emergence of popular political Islamic groups in transitioning Middle East nations that reject bin Laden's extreme version of Islamic rule while advocating a greater role for Islam in governance. In internal discussions, al Qaeda leaders have recognized that differences over Islamic jurisprudence between indigenous Islamic militants and al Qaeda in places such as Egypt, Libya, and Syria could be irreconcilable disputes that would prevent al Qaeda from making lasting inroads.¹⁴

This fuller picture of the divide that emerged over bin Laden's strategy reveals a fourth paradox. To follow his course of clandestinely organizing and exercising patience risks rendering the group's ideology irrelevant during the greatest modern-day period of revolution in the region. To maintain even minimal currency, the group must be engaged in action. But because al Qaeda rejects participation in political processes that it does not dictate, it leaves itself with few options for action other than terrorism. However, terrorist attacks provoke precisely the collaboration of regional players, popular opposition movements, and the United States that bin Laden feared as an existential threat to the organization. Because these groups are not following

his vision, their validity as an extension of the original al Qaeda—and the level of threat it once posed—is questionable.

Today, the world could conclude that regional affiliates are destroying the al Qaeda of bin Laden by choosing to adopt exactly the provocative, high-visibility strategy he counseled against. Alternately, a political party or candidate using the moniker al Qaeda could represent the final death blow to bin Laden's vision. Either way, changes in the Middle East may not lead to bin Laden's caliphate but could still produce a region of states whose governments include more Islamic rule than the previous set of autocrats. Furthermore, the threat of al Qaeda may be around for decades even while the group and its ideas continue to weaken, just as anarchists, fascists, Nazis, and other fringe groups whose vanguard leaders dominated the world's political and military agenda many decades ago continue to exist and inspire occasional tragedies. **JFQ**

NOTES

¹ "George W. Bush Speech to Congress," *CNN.com*, September 20, 2001, available at <<http://archives.cnn.com/2001/US/09/20/gen.bush.transcript/>>.

² Peter Bergen, "Time to Declare Victory: al-Qaeda is Defeated," *CNN.com*, June 27, 2012, available at <<http://security.blogs.cnn.com/2012/06/27/time-to-declare-victory-al-qaeda-is-defeated-opinion/>>.

³ Peter Bergen, *The Osama bin Laden I Know: An Oral History of al-Qaeda's Leader* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006).

⁴ Bergen, "Time to Declare Victory."

⁵ Najwa bin Laden, Omar bin Laden, and Jean Sasson, *Growing up bin Laden* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2009), 123–144, 192–218.

⁶ "Bin Laden Calls Abdulmutallab a Hero," *Nairaland Forum*, January 25, 2010, available at <www.nairaland.com/387047/bin-laden-calls-abdulmutallab-hero>.

⁷ Harmony Program, *Letters from Abbottabad: Bin Laden Sidelined?* (West Point, NY: Combatting Terrorism Center, 2012).

⁸ Bergen, *Oral History*.

⁹ Mao Tse-Tung, "On Protracted War," lectures, *Yenan Association for the Study of the War of Resistance Against Japan*, Peking, June 3, 1938.

¹⁰ *Letters from Abbottabad*, 19–21.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹² *Ibid.*, 9–12.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 48–50.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 18, 23.