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Uses and abuses of Al-Qaeda

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The assassination of Osama Bin Laden has been celebrated as a great strategic victory by the White House, the European capitals and all the major mass media outlets throughout the world. The killing has served as a major propaganda tool to enhance the standing of the US military in the eyes of the US domestic public and to serve as a warning to overseas adversaries.

However, contrary to this immense propaganda campaign and despite whatever symbolic value the killing may have in the eyes of his executioners, there is no evidence that the death will have any impact on the deteriorating military and political position of the US in South Asia, the Middle East, North Africa or elsewhere.

Even in terms of weakening, let alone defeating Al-Qaeda, the killing will have minimal effect. Al-Qaeda is a highly decentralised organisation, a loose collection of groups distributed throughout the conflict zones, each with its own leaders, programmes, tactics and strategies. Al-Qaeda is not a centralised international organisation dependent on a "central command" directed by a single person: Bin Laden was an ideological symbol more than an operative leader directing operations.

His death will merely lead to a new leader and will have zero impact on the rest of the loosely associated global network of groups that call themselves Al-Qaeda. Hence, actions and activities taken in the past will continue into the future.

The killing of Bin Laden will have the most minimal impact in Afghanistan, for the obvious reason that the major forces carrying out the armed resistance there are the Taliban and various other independent nationalist movements. The Taliban is totally independent of Al-Qaeda in its origins, structure, leadership, tactics, strategy and social composition. Moreover, the Taliban is a mass organisation with roots and sympathisers throughout the country.

The Taliban has tens of thousands of trained Afghan fighters; it has deeply penetrated the Afghan government and military, and it announced a major "spring offensive" on 1 May. The Taliban is overwhelmingly "national" in its composition, leadership and ideology, while Al-Qaeda is "international" in its membership and leadership.

The Taliban may have tolerated or even in certain circumstances tactically collaborated with Al-Qaeda, but at no point is there any evidence that the Taliban took orders from Bin Laden. The overwhelming majority of US and NATO casualties in Afghanistan were inflicted by the Taliban. The major bases of operation and support in Pakistan are linked to the Taliban.

In summary, the killing of Osama bin Laden will have zero impact on the correlation of forces in Afghanistan, and it will have zero impact on the capacity of the Taliban to carry-out its prolonged war against the US occupation and inflict dozens of casualties each week.

Moreover, in the mass popular revolts that from Tunisia to the Gulf states have either overthrown US collaborator regimes or are on the verge of doing so, Al-Qaeda has played a minor role, except perhaps among the Libyan "rebels". In Egypt and Tunisia, the mass movements embracing a wide gamut of secular students, trade unions and civic groups and moderate Islamist movements have dominated the uprisings.

Al-Qaeda is a marginal factor and Bin Laden is a very marginal figure, even where he is not openly rejected. The killing of Bin Laden will not have any impact on the rising anti-imperialist sentiments that inform these mass movements. Some commentators even suggest that the killing will weaken White House propaganda efforts to justify US military operations under the pretext of "anti-terrorist" activities.

Regarding the situation in Iraq, the major sources of opposition to the US in this country are composed of the Shia majority, minority Sunnis and ex-Baathists. Al-Qaeda's terrorist actions have played a minor role and do not resonate with the mass of Iraqis demanding a US withdrawal. The major religious-based mass anti-occupation movements have their own leaders and militias and community bases, and none accepts Al-Qaeda leadership or even collaboration.

The US withdrawal from Iraq is a response to mass pressure from below, it is not a result of civilian deaths from the occasional Al-Qaeda "suicide bombers". Clearly, the retreat of the US from Iraq will not be affected by the killing of Bin Laden; nor will the transition be affected by his local followers.

In Iran, the Islamic regime was a mortal enemy of Al-Qaeda, jailing suspects and early in the Afghan war (2001-2003) collaborating with the US in pursuit of its followers. Both sections of the political opposition, secular and religious, were hostile to Al-Qaeda. As a result, Bin Laden

had very little organised influence in Iran, even as he may have had a mass appeal as a symbol of armed resistance to the US: "the enemy of our enemy is our friend."

The killing of Bin Laden will not have any impact on Iran, which has its own icon in Khomeini and its own brand of Islamic nationalism, and is much more engaged in supporting Syria, Hizbullah and Hamas. The US will not gain the least advantage in its efforts to undermine or destroy its Iranian adversaries.

Clearly, the killing of Bin Laden has absolutely no strategic or tactical importance in the major theatres of war and political revolt in the Arab world.

The major significance of the killing is in the context of the strategic military and political defeats suffered by the US, especially most recently in Afghanistan. On 27 April 2011, nine senior US military officers were assassinated by a "trusted" Afghan fighter pilot in the high-security Kabul airport. Four majors, two captains and two lieutenant-colonials were killed in the single biggest killing of senior US military officials in the 20th and 21st-century wars.

Several facts mark this out as a strategically important event. It took place in a high-security installation, suggesting that no place in Afghanistan is safe from deadly armed attacks by the Taliban or the armed resistance. Secondly, all US military, no matter how high their rank, are vulnerable to deadly attack. Thirdly, no US trained Afghan military official or soldier can be considered "loyal" -- even those most closely in collaboration can and will turn their guns on their "mentors".

If the US cannot protect its senior officers in its highest- security compounds, how can it claim to have "secured" any of the territory outside -- namely the cities, towns and villages? Two weeks earlier, with the collaboration of jail officials, almost 500 jailed Taliban fighters and leaders escaped via a 300-metre tunnel to a dozen waiting trucks. Only two years earlier 900 prisoners also escaped. In its aftermath the US insisted on the appointment of "highly screened" loyalist collaborators as heads and directors of security and prisons, to no avail.

The overwhelming evidence shows that the US war effort is failing to create an effective puppet regime in Afghanistan. The Taliban is slowly but surely eroding US influence. In the face of major strategic losses, as evident in the astonishing assassination of top military officials, Obama had to mount a political spectacle -- a "military success story" -- in the killing of unarmed Bin Laden in order to buoy the spirits of the American public, military and its NATO followers.

Every popular uprising against US puppets in North Africa and the Middle East is a political defeat, and the enduring regime in Iran is a defeat for bellicose US- Israeli efforts at regime change. Even Muammar Gaddafi's resistance in Libya is a defeat for believers in instant victories. So, Obama and his mass media acolytes have to magnify the killing of an isolated political leader of a loose association of marginal terrorists as a world- shattering, game-changing event, when in fact the losses and defeats accumulate every day before, during and after the assassination.

The Taliban didn't even blink -- their spring offensive marches on. US military officials continue to be wary of encounters with any "loyal" Afghan collaborators. Egypt rejects US-Israeli politics in favour of the unity of Palestinians. The revolts in the Gulf continue. The only stalemate -- not victory -- that Washington can celebrate -- including the killing of Gaddafi's grandchildren -- is in Libya, where, allied with Al-Qaeda in Benghazi, the war continues.