

This is an ICSR insight by Senior Fellow, Shiraz Maher, and Research Fellow, Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens

The loss of a figurehead as iconic as Osama bin Laden will come as a blow to al-Qaeda and its supporters, but is unlikely to fatally undermine the movement.

Early responses on jihadist internet forums eulogise him as a figurehead and lament his loss, but insist that this will not diminish their determination to continue the jihadist cause.

In the last few hours jihadist forums monitored by ICSR are carrying a statement from the Taliban which threatens to avenge bin Laden's death by launching attacks against American and Pakistani interests.

A subsequent statement by the Pakistani Taliban made specific threats against Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari, the Pakistani army, and the United States. They warned that Pakistan would be their first target and the United States their second.

Implications for al-Qaeda

- A senior member of the Haqqani network – one of the main insurgent factions in Afghanistan led by Jalaluddin Haqqani – claims to have met with bin Laden at his Abbottabad compound less than three months ago. However, al-Qaeda's strategy no longer depends upon a hierarchical structure and bin Laden's death is unlikely to significantly disrupt the operational dynamics of the organisation. Early responses on jihadist internet forums underline the determination of al-Qaeda members and supporters to continue their struggle.
- Since the invasion of Afghanistan after 9/11 much of al-Qaeda's leadership has been unable to operate freely or independently. This led to the 'franchising' of the movement with local chapters created around the world: al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).
- Al-Qaeda's best known strategist Abu Musab al-Suri has previously said: "Al-Qaeda is not an organisation, it is not a group, nor do we want it to be. It is a call, a reference, a methodology".
- One participant on a jihadist forum reminds his peers: **"We were not fighting for Osama. We were fighting for Allah. The Jihad will continue even if the Amir [leader] is Shaheed [martyred]!!"** Another adds: **"Those who fought for shaykh usaamah, know that shaykh usaamah has passed away, but those who fought for Allaah, know that Allaah is alive and will never die"**.
- A more stoic observer reminds contributors: **"Whatever befalls us, whether martyrdom or victory in battlefield, is a victory for us who believe"**.
- One contributor warned **"a million new bin Ladens will be born! And the flag of jihad will be raised! Inshallah"**.
- Jihadist groups typically absorb the death of their leaders better than other movements. Al-Qaeda

has been sustaining serious blows to its leadership ever since 9/11 with the death or capture of key figures such as Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, Mustafa abu al-Yazid, Abu Zubaydah and Khalid Sheikh Mohammed.

- Historically, too, the global jihad movement has continued to proceed despite the capture or killing of its senior leaders, including the death of Abdullah Azzam or the incarceration of Sheikh Omar Abdul Rahman.
- It is possible that one consequence of bin Laden's death will be that al-Qaeda's bonds with its international chapters – and with AQAP in particular – will weaken, allowing them to enjoy greater autonomy in the future.

The place of bin Laden's death underlines the importance of Pakistan in the context of global terrorism

- Osama Bin Laden was killed in Abbottabad which is located in Pakistan's North West Frontier Province (recently renamed Khyber Pakhtunkhwa), 30 miles (50 km) north of the Pakistani capital of Islamabad.
- The compound which housed bin Laden was built in 2005, and was heavily fortified with 12–18ft walls, topped with barbed wire. There are also inner walls protecting other parts of the compound and there was no telephone or internet connections linked to the property.
- Three other people were killed along with Bin Laden in the operation; US officials are saying that one of them was the son of the al-Qaeda leader and the other was a woman used as a human shield.
- US Special Forces and Marines have a base relatively close to Abbottabad. They are stationed in Tarbela Ghazi, about 60 miles west of Abbottabad.
- Other significant members of al-Qaeda and the Taliban have previously been captured in big Pakistani cities. Khalid Sheikh Mohammed was captured in Rawalpindi. Elsewhere, the Taliban's military commander Mullah Baradar was captured in Karachi, as was al-Qaeda member Ramzi bin al-Shibh.

A number of key al-Qaeda figureheads could play a similar leadership role in the movement in the future

- **Ayman al-Zawahiri** – The most obvious successor to bin Laden, Zawahiri has been a constant figure in al-Qaeda propaganda and operations since 9/11.

Strengths: Often referred to as bin Laden's second in command, Zawahiri has leadership experience and is an easily identifiable figure in the global jihad movement.

Weaknesses: A senior US administration official notes *"As the only al Qaeda leader whose authority was universally respected, [Osama bin Laden] also maintained his cohesion, and his likely successor, Ayman al-Zawahiri, is far less charismatic and not as well respected within the organization, according to comments from several captured al Qaeda leaders. He probably will have difficulty maintaining the loyalty of bin Laden's largely Gulf Arab followers"*.

- **Abu Yahya al-Libi** – Now one of al-Qaeda's leading propagandists and strategists, gaining renewed prominence since the Libyan uprising.

Strengths: Libi is an established figure in al-Qaeda propaganda videos and possesses formal scholarly credentials. He currently holds a place on al-Qaeda's Shura Committee.

Weaknesses: Does not enjoy widespread support within the movement and lacks the charisma needed to inspire lone wolves. He is not well known amongst extremist sympathisers in the West.

- **Naser al-Wuhaishi** – Formerly a chief confidant of Osama bin Laden, Wuhaishi is now one of the leaders of AQAP. The group currently enjoys a high profile among the global jihad movement due to its brazen attacks which include targeting both Saudi Arabia and the United States.

Strengths: Wuhaishi was previously held in Guantanamo Bay, giving him added credibility among some al-Qaeda supporters.

Weaknesses: Is not in Afghanistan or Pakistan and is therefore unable to unite 'al-Qaeda central' around his leadership. It would be difficult to stake his claims to a leadership role for the entire movement from Yemen.

- **Anwar al-Awlaki** – One of the most senior American citizens in the al-Qaeda network, Awlaki is thought to be hiding in the Shabwa province of Yemen. He is believed to have directed and inspired several attacks against the United States and its interests, including the attack at Fort Hood carried out by Nidal Hasan.

Strengths: Awlaki enjoys a large following among some English speaking radicals and receives extensive attention from the Western media. He is fluent in English, has demonstrated an acute awareness of popular culture, and is a highly charismatic speaker. Awlaki also possess formal scholarly credentials.

Weaknesses: Lacks significant support within the Arab world and would therefore struggle to establish himself among this core constituency. Awlaki is also regarded by some as a late comer to the movement and has not 'proved' himself in battle the way his rivals have. Thus, despite his high profile, Awlaki is among the least likely of these candidates to succeed bin Laden.

In the short-term, the threat from al-Qaeda-inspired terrorism is likely to increase significantly, in the West and in Pakistan

- The prospect of 'revenge' terrorist attacks by al-Qaeda and its affiliates is highly likely in coming months, with the primary aim of demonstrating their ongoing resilience.
- US relations with Pakistan may come under strain in the coming months despite President Obama praising Pakistan for their assistance in his official remarks. Questions will be asked about Pakistan's involvement in all this. Abbottabad is a garrison town, home to scores of Pakistani military personnel and retired officers. Just how bin Laden was able to establish a sanctuary there without arousing suspicion will raise serious questions. Indeed, the expansive compound in which he was discovered is adjacent to an elite military academy – sometimes referred to Pakistan's Sandhurst.
- Political instability in Pakistan is likely to increase significantly in the short term. Jihadists will renew their campaign against the state. Meanwhile nationalist and Islamist parties will express outrage that US military forces were able to conduct a large and delicate operation inside Pakistan so soon after the Raymond Davis incident.

Find out More +

ICSR, King's College London, 138-142 Strand, London. WC2R 1HH

Phone: +44 (0) 207 848 2065 | Email: mail@icsr.info

You are receiving this email because you signed up to receive newsletters on our website. If you do not wish to receive these emails please [unsubscribe from this email](#)