

The Taliban and Afghanistan post-bin Laden

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Bin Laden's death may be a watershed moment for al-Qaeda, but for the war in Afghanistan and for the Taliban it changes little. This is not to understate the importance (however symbolic) of the US raid, since the circumstances have called the US relationship with Pakistan into question along with the fundamental rationale for an extended foreign troop presence inside Afghanistan. Bin Laden himself does not seem to have played a key operational role in the day-to-day running of his organisation — much as some experts believe he might have liked to do so — but rather his value came in offering some level of ideological cohesion to various disparate groups along with the propaganda value of his continuing to evade capture.

For the Afghan Taliban's leadership, his death comes at an opportune moment when the United States and other governments are reconsidering their stance on negotiations, allowing for the possibility of an adjustment of their relationship with other militant organisations based in Pakistan. It comes at a time when senior political cadres are increasingly offering various signs of distance or ambivalence to the foreign fighters of al-Qaeda and their affiliates. In the United States and Europe, the mood for some kind of political reconciliation involving the Quetta-based Taliban leadership also has grown more propitious.

In this short paper, we will examine some of the consequences of bin Laden's death for the Afghan Taliban movement, for al-Qaeda's operations inside Afghanistan as well as suggest possible implications for the political solution to the ongoing conflict.

How did the Taliban react?

The Taliban have, as of early June 2011, put out three written official statements relating to the death of bin Laden.(1) None of these address the major substantive issues raised in the wake, focusing instead to redirect attention back to the war in Afghanistan.

A very short initial statement was released on May 3. In the light of the lack of confirmation from those close to bin Laden, Zabiullah Mujahed noted, and given the lack of evidence provided by the United States, it would be 'premature' to release an official statement (2).

A second, longer statement was issued on May 7, almost a full week after bin Laden's death, and this was signed by 'the leadership council' (3). Part of the delay seems to have resulted from problems in getting a consensus view from the various council members — communications were restricted and phones turned off in the days that followed bin Laden's death. This statement includes the expected pro-forma Qur'anic quotations. The council called bin Laden a "great martyr" and a "caller to Islamic jihad against the invading infidels." A small potted biography notes that he took part in the jihad against the Soviets, "fought shoulder to shoulder with the Afghans", "offered sacrifices" and was an "ardent advocate for occupied Palestine" and that he fought against "Christian and Jewish aggressions in the Islamic world".

All of this is framed in rhetoric that emphasises Islam and a shared sense of purpose. The council talks back against the idea that bin Laden's death will sadden people in Afghanistan because "the sapling of jihad has always grown, spruced and reached fructification through irrigation by pure blood." This abstracts the discussion away from bin Laden's actions, refocusing attention on the war inside Afghanistan. In a similar vein, they continue to say that the raid was "a strike by colonialism" which in turn "breed[s] sympathy and produces an urge to strike back". This is all redirected back to the Afghan situation: "But the ground realities have it that the use of force brings in opposite consequences here. This popular movement can be bracketed with a spring which, when you pressurize [sic], bounces back with the same intensity." To conclude, they predict that it will give 'new impetus' to the jihad.

The statement in its entirety did little to address basic questions about the Afghan Taliban's view on al-Qaeda, and is more an acknowledgement that is meant to take the two audiences it addresses into account: other militant Islamists who stood and support bin Laden, and the West spearheaded by the United States. It tries to bring attention back onto the war in Afghanistan — a “war against colonialism” or “war against invaders” — but is interesting more for what isn't said than what is. There is, for example, no mention of the September 11 attacks, no mention of Pakistan, and no mention of the claims of Taliban-al-Qaeda links.

A third statement was issued as an op-ed opinion piece on May 11 (4). It was accordingly unsigned and with less weight than the second May 7 statements, but still reflecting the orthodox position of the movement. Again, bin Laden is referred to throughout as a “martyr”. His death is part of the “crusade against the Islamic Ummah for the past decade” and he was a “skyscraper of bravery, a dedicated supporter of the Islamic Ummah.” He spent a big part of his life “striving to deliver the Muslims lands from the claws of the infidels and gain freedom” (with specific mention of “occupied” lands) and as such helped out in “the task of rearing, training, enlightening [sic] and equipping Mujahideen.”

The statement then broadens out to say that the jihad will continue as long as the “invading infidels” are “continuing their colonialist ambitions against the Islamic Ummah.” All of this, the writer says, is part of getting rid of the “occupation” and then the ushering in of an “Islamic reign.”

A central point is the world view that the Taliban statement seems to support, that of an ongoing crusade against the umma, which has been propagated by bin Laden and al-Qaeda since the mid-1990s. In this context it is essential to understand the Afghan Taliban's understanding of the concept and duty of jihad — i.e. to what extent do the Taliban today subscribe to the doctrine put forward by Abdullah Azzam in the mid-1980s that frames jihad as the individual duty of all Muslims wherever Muslim lands are under attack? (5)

The Afghan Taliban's record over the past ten years shows an exclusive focus on Afghanistan, encouraging others to join ‘their jihad’ in a rerun of the 1980s jihad against the Soviet Union. While matters of doctrine are not static -- apparent in the evolution of the Taliban throughout the 1990s and post-2001 -- the stance the Taliban would take once they took control over the whole country or following any kind of settlement is open to speculation given the reactionary nature of the Taliban.

None of these statements address the really key issues that are raised by the death of bin Laden, but it is often the case that the Taliban take their time in responding to major incidents like this.

Impact on day-to-day operations

In terms of the ongoing field operations of the Taliban's commanders and fighters, the death of bin Laden has few implications. The Taliban have independent funding, training and logistical hubs and it is hard to see what the short term effect might have been. It even seems unlikely that Afghan Taliban figures were meeting with bin Laden, despite the claims of at least one figure from within the movement. (6)

A senior Taliban commander in Helmand that we reached in the initial hours following President Obama's announcement had not even heard the news himself (7). He didn't seem concerned, though. “We are fighting for Mullah Mohammad Omar,” he said. “He is our amir. We have never fought for Osama bin Laden. His death does not matter to us, we will continue with our struggle.”

Taliban commanders, fighters and others affiliated with the movement that we spoke to all made similar basic points — that they had not been fighting for bin Laden in the first place, and that he and the fighters of al-Qaeda had offered minimal to no input into day-to-day operations inside Afghanistan. The evidence that we have to date backs this up: al-Qaeda's involvement in the day-to-day fighting is minimal and limited to certain areas and certain Taliban sub-groups. Since bin Laden's death the Taliban have continued their spring offensive announced on April 30th and named Badr after the battle fought in 624 by the Prophet Mohammad. The so-called spring offensive and the numerous operations the Taliban have carried out since its launch have seen a shift in focus and demonstrated their ability to conduct complex attacks and operations. See the appendix for a list of some of the more prominent instances.

Similar dynamics were at play even during the 1990s. Bin Laden contributed fighters and some logistical support for the Taliban during the late 1990s in an attempt to cement his friendship with the Taliban leader, Mullah Mohammad Omar, but it was far from the only support that the Taliban received. Even though the two didn't see eye to eye ideologically, bin Laden was keen to support the Taliban's continued existence — especially insofar as it benefited him to continue to remain in Afghanistan — but many within the Taliban's leadership sought to find a way to limit his influence and presence in the country, to the extent of trying to find a way to get him to leave the country. Bin Laden also occasionally brought scholars from the Gulf into Afghanistan in order to shore up the Taliban's religious credentials (which were increasingly criticised at that time by many Muslim groups) (8).

What does this mean for Al-Qaeda inside Afghanistan?

In the short term, senior al-Qaeda members and affiliates will no doubt be laying low, especially since they don't know if larger parts of the network were exposed prior to the operation that led to bin Laden's death, or whether there was any contact/location data stored in bin Laden's compound. For Pakistani al-Qaeda affiliates — particularly lower-level fighters — it will have less effect; we have, for example, already seen increased involvement of Lashkar-e Taiba fighters in Nuristan in recent weeks (9).

In the long term, foreign fighters remain under threat in both Afghanistan and Pakistan, especially if they are senior in any way. Drone strikes continue unabated — Ilyas Kashmiri seems to have been killed last week (10) — and the possibility of further unilateral US raids remains. (11) However, Pakistan is still the safer option for foreign fighters; a raid targeted a group of foreigners operating out of Zabul province last month, illustrating how much they stick out. The larger threat to al-Qaeda, however, is the promise of a negotiated settlement with the Afghan Taliban (and/or Haqqanis) as well as the implicit threat by Pakistani Islamist figures (12).

The death of bin Laden also means relatively little in terms of the links and contacts that exist between the various militant jihadi groups along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. These links post-2001 have been largely personal rather than due to group allegiance so bin Laden himself (and even al-Qaeda) does not affect the ability of the Afghan Taliban or Haqqanis to operate as a group.

In this sense, the death of Ilyas Kashmiri was much more significant in that he was a node connecting various groups together (albeit not always in an active sense).

On the ground inside Afghanistan, only in certain places are we seeing an increased linkup (although it is mainly by way of the Pakistani al-Qaeda-affiliates rather than al-Qaeda itself). Zabul, Wardak and Nuristan, for example, are all places which have seen such contacts.

What does this mean for the US in terms of the Taliban?

For the United States, bin Laden's death gives President Obama more room to manoeuvre (at least in terms of Afghanistan and the number of troops to be withdrawn in July). Space for negotiations has also widened following bin Laden's death and US officials are more willing to admit the existence of these kinds of discussions; we have seen the continuation of discussions, for example, with senior Taliban officials in Germany recently.

The success of the operation against bin Laden might have increased the likelihood of this kind of operation being attempted in the future, particularly against very senior targets (i.e. like the list of five people that Hillary Clinton presented on a visit to Pakistan on May 27, 2011). (13) Mullah Mohammad Omar is one of those five, but his capture or death would have a negative effect (14).

Implications for the Afghan Taliban's Strategic Vision

The death of bin Laden could potentially have direct implications for political calculations being made with regards to the long-mooted possible political settlement between all parties to the conflict in Afghanistan.

We have already seen what the Taliban said in public in reaction to bin Laden's death -- i.e. very little -- and while the discussion within senior circles was vigorous in the initial weeks, it changes very little for them in terms of their strategic vision. They are concerned with the conflict inside Afghanistan which they term a defensive jihad against 'occupiers' and 'invaders'.

Operationally, as we have already discussed, there is also little that needs to change, so there doesn't need to be any strategic shifts to alter how they currently are engaged in the war.

The only potential effect of significance is that a public political shift in the future on the Taliban's position regarding al-Qaeda is more possible now -- now that the personal relationship between Mullah Mohammad Omar and bin Laden is no more. But this is both speculative and changes had started to happen anyway (and independently of considerations of al-Qaeda and bin Laden).

Implications for Reconciliation

The personal tie that Mullah Mohammad Omar had with bin Laden was the last close personal link that he had with the non-Pakistani foreign jihadists. In and of itself, this is important. A lot of what happened pre-2001 while the Taliban were in power was bound up in this personal relationship. Without it, it would have been somewhat easier for Mullah Mohammad Omar to chart a different course. It is impossible to assess the likely effect bin Laden's death has had on the Taliban leader, his view of the conflict and long-term considerations as to his and the Taliban's relationship with the United States.

We can probably expect some commentary on the matter in at least one of the 'Eid letters this year, although it is unlikely that there will be strong or sharply divergent sentiments expressed. There will also need to be a good deal of reading between the lines -- as always with his statements.

There have been discussions between senior Taliban figures and international representatives since bin Laden's death, so clearly it doesn't seem to have affected the possibility of talks in general. Some parts of those discussions are completely independent of the issue of foreign fighters -- i.e. internal Afghan political matters -- so this is perhaps understandable -- but

other parts are completely wound up over the issue of al-Qaeda. One of the most important unresolved issues remaining is the presence of al-Qaeda members inside Pakistan and Afghanistan following a potential peace deal being made. What happens to them? Nobody has an answer to this yet.

Conclusion

In summary, we will have to wait to hear a more considered message from the Afghan Taliban as to what bin Laden's death means for them, probably until Mullah Mohammad Omar's 'Eid statement later this summer. This statement will also be more reflective of the wider sentiment within Taliban leadership circles (since there will have been opportunity for proper consultation).

For the moment, though, it is business as usual in the field. The Taliban will continue their targeted assassination campaign, increase operations in the north and east of the country, while at the same time intensifying their political outreach to various parties. Foreign military forces will, in turn, continue their targeted capture-or-kill campaign and seek to solidify links and relationships with Afghans in their areas of operation. Civilian parts of the international presence inside Afghanistan will continue as well.

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Resources

1- There was an initial comment made by Zabiullah Mujahed on May 2: "We have not received any word from our leadership on Osama's death. I can't confirm that he is dead or alive. Because of some security problems, the Taliban has not had much contact with Osama bin Laden for the past 10 years." (<http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2069101,00.html> (accessed June 9, 2011)).

2- <http://www.alexstrick.com/2011/05/the-afghan-taliban-react-to-bin-ladens-death/> (accessed June 13, 2011).

3- http://shahamat-english.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=7078:statement-of-the-leadership-council-of-the-islamic-emirate-of-afghanistan-regarding-the-martyrdom&catid=4:statements&Itemid=4 (accessed June 13, 2011).

4- http://shahamat-english.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=7232:the-martyrdom-of-sheikh-osama-will-not-benefit-america&catid=2:comments&Itemid=3 (accessed June 13, 2011).

5- Gilles Kepel and Jean-Pierre Milelli, eds. (2008), *Al Qaeda in its own words*. (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press), part 2.

6- Sami Yousafzai (2011), "Exclusive: Taliban leader details final visit with bin Laden," *The Daily Beast* (Online), May 13. http://news.yahoo.com/s/dailybeast/20110513/ts_dailybeast/14074_talibancommanderosamabinladenwasnotisolated (accessed June 13, 2011).

7- Phone interview, Kandahar/Helmand, May 2, 2011.

8- For example, Abu Mus'ab al-Suri and Yusuf al-Uyayri (date unknown), *Are the Taliban from Ahl as-Sunnah?* (Online: At-Tibyan Publications).

9- Miles Amore, "Province in terror as Taliban return," The Sunday Times, June 12, 2011; Julius Cavendish, "First, Take Nuristan: The Taliban's New Afghan Plan," Time, June 1, 2011.

10- <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-13653324> (accessed June 13, 2011).

11- <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/may/22/barack-obama-pakistan-raid> (accessed June 13, 2011).

12- <http://blogs.reuters.com/pakistan/2010/12/07/pakistan-talks-up-al-qaedataliban-split/> (accessed June 13, 2011).

13- http://news.yahoo.com/s/ap/20110610/ap_on_re_as/as_pakistan (accessed June 13, 2011).

14- Alex Strick van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn (2011), Taliban and the potential for negotiations in Afghanistan. (Doha: Al-Jazeera Research Center). http://www.aljazeera.net/mritems/streams/2011/5/1/1_1057850_1_51.pdf (accessed June 13, 2011).

Appendix

May 7-8 - Taliban assault on Kandahar City

<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/09/world/asia/09afghanistan.html>

May 10 — Nuristan attack begins from Taliban and others

<http://www.tolonews.com/en/afghanistan/2641-400-taliban-militants-attack-nuristan>

May 13 — 2 NATO trainers killed in Helmand by policeman

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-13392328>

May 18 — Taliban attack construction company workers' convoy, killing at least 35

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-12859952>

May 21 — Taliban suicide bombers attack Kabul military hospital

<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/22/world/asia/22afghanistan.html>

May 22 — Taliban attacks storm a police compound in Khost, holding it for several hours

<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/23/world/asia/23afghan.html>

May 25 — More Nuristan attacks by Taliban and others

<http://www.armytimes.com/news/2011/05/ap-taliban-seize-half-of-east-afghan-district-052511/>

<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/26/world/asia/26afghan.html>

May 28 — Taliban kill General Daud in Taloqan, also injuring senior NATO officials

<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/29/world/asia/29afghan.html>

May 30 — Taliban attack Herat PRT in car-bombing and assault

<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/31/world/asia/31afghanistan.html>

May 30 — ANA soldier shoots his Australian trainer dead, then flees

http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/afghan-soldier-shoots-dead-australian-mentor-at-guard-house-then-flees-scene/2011/05/30/AGRMMzEH_print.html

June 6 — Bamiyan Provincial Council head killed (or beheaded corpse found; he was kidnapped 3 days earlier)

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-13692960>

June 10 — Bombing of funeral ceremony targeting Kunduz Police Chief

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-13723560>

Plus, as of June 9, 2011, 75 NATO/ISAF troops killed