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The Death of Bin Laden and the Future of al-Qaeda

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Since the assassination of Osama bin Laden, experts in intelligence, academia, and the media have labored to understand the operation's practical implications, both short term and for the more distant future. Although the global jihad movement comprises various components, without a doubt the element that dominates and sets the tone is the al-Qaeda organization. In contrast to its affiliates, in recent years a great deal of information has been received on al-Qaeda, including authentic documents on the organization's structure, modes of operation, decision making, and daily operational and logistical routines. These can help shed light on how al-Qaeda stands to function in the face of its leader's removal, as familiarity with al-Qaeda's organized structure and formal code is imperative for understanding the recent operation's implications for the organization's future activity.

Contrary to the popular view, al-Qaeda is an organized body with a structured hierarchy and clear lines of management and control that have been preserved through its years of activity (figure 1). This fact greatly assisted al-Qaeda in its struggle to survive following the terror attack in the US and the war on terrorism declared in its wake. It has enabled the organization to recover rapidly and fill its ranks after each blow and continue to constitute the number one terror threat in the international arena. Alongside its hierarchal structure, the organization has a code of regulations and protocol that define the various authorities of its offices, methods of appointment, and the personal characteristics required of each official. In principle, the organization has operated for years via a command and advisory council known as the Majlis al-Shura. The council has functioned as a quasi government or cabinet (proportional to the structure of a terror organization) under which various committees have operated to oversee military, administrative, financial, religious, propaganda, political, and security matters. The committees functioned as ministries and were responsible for managing al-Qaeda's daily routine. Al-Qaeda leader Osama Bin Laden and his deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri, were the senior figures of the command council.

One can anticipate developments in the organization on three levels: operational, organizational, and symbolic. On the operational level, the dominant force in al-Qaeda is the Special Operations Unit, which is subordinate to the Military Committee and responsible for executing al-Qaeda attacks in the international arena. Following the death of Bin Laden, the activity of this unit (reportedly headed by Adnan al-Shukrijumah, a.k.a. "Jafar the Pilot," due to his flight training) will likely not be affected, and the unit can be expected to continue to fulfill its original purpose. It is even likely to intensify its efforts to execute high profile attacks in the near future so as to prove that its capability was not harmed as a result of its leader's death. Naturally, revenge for his death is also a motivating factor.

Over the past year and a half this unit was responsible for attempting at least three thwarted attacks in the US, Britain, and Norway. In addition, amid the wealth of information recently publicized via WikiLeaks were documents related to the interrogation of the Military Committee's most senior activists. The documents reveal that al-Qaeda had prepared a concrete contingency plan for a dramatic attack in the US through the use of a nuclear bomb in the event Bin Laden would be caught or killed. According to this information, the bomb has been at the organization's disposal since 2004 and was placed in Europe, with vigorous efforts at that time to transfer it to the US. It is unclear whether this scenario is merely an effort by the organization's senior activists to deceive or deter the opposition or whether this information has some authenticity. In any event, the conventional assessment is that if al-Qaeda indeed possessed such a weapon, it would have already used it, or at the very least, publicly threatened to use it in certain scenarios.

As to organizational function, it appears that the effect of Bin Laden's assassination will be relatively minimal due al-Qaeda's structured hierarchy and clear division of functions. The code of regulations explicitly states that the deputy leader shall immediately replace the leader should he be apprehended or killed; this means the rapid appointment of Ayman al-Zawahiri as Bin Laden's replacement to prevent the disruption of continuous control over the organization and allow al-Qaeda to continue to manage its routine activity. It seems that the more burning question is who will be appointed as the new leader's deputy. The question is relevant mainly since the US and its allies also seek to remove Zawahiri himself. Among al-Qaeda's veteran activists are a number of leading candidates for the position of deputy. The most senior of them is Saif al-Adel who in recent years stayed in Iran and in the past year returned to the organization's ranks in Pakistan along with Bin Laden's son and protégé, Saad.

It is on a symbolic level, however, that the assassination of Bin Laden is likely to be extremely effective. The previous failure of the Americans to trap or kill him was a key element in al-Qaeda's propaganda and its efforts to persuade new activists to join the

organization, promoting the belief that the path to victory was assured by God. The information campaign of al-Qaeda propagandists more than once ascended into the mystical realm – similar to the organization's battle lore in the days of the war against the Russians in Afghanistan, which featured a sequence of miraculous actions. Thus the survival of Bin Laden in the face of a world manhunt was perceived as belonging to the supernatural. Activists in the organization attributed singular qualities to Bin Laden similar to those of the prophet Mohammad and thus believed he could not be captured. Therefore, the physical extermination of Bin Laden and his exposure in captured video footage as a solitary old man – without the makeup and background scenery that bestowed him in a resplendent and messianic aura in the eyes of his followers – is telling. It is likely to return the dimensions of the conflict, in al-Qaeda's version between the decadent and collapsing West and the insurgent global jihad camp, to the solid ground of reality. In this way, perhaps, it will be possible to neutralize the vibrancy and influence of al-Qaeda's messianic and murderous ideology on its supporters. If Bin Laden's removal is indeed exploited to expose the distorted face of his doctrine, it will be possible to view this as the beginning of the end of the global jihad movement – or at the very least, the waning of its influence on the young people of the Muslim world.

Figure 1. Al-Qaeda Organizational Structure

