



FIGHTING A LOST BATTLE: BIN LADEN'S SHOES ARE TOO BIG TO FILL

BY JAMES M. DORSEY

These are tough times for Al-Qa'ida.

This weekend's successful hunting down of Al-Qa'ida's inspirational leader, Osama Bin Laden, by US special forces serves primarily to accentuate the challenges the group faces.

Once celebrated as the world's most lethal and wanted leader, Bin Laden died a figure marginalized in life and death by the course of history. Bin Laden dreamt of turning Al-Qa'ida into the core of an Islamist movement with broad appeal, but left behind a fractured organization struggling to redefine its relevance and with waning control of its far-flung affiliates.

Bin Laden's diminished legacy and Al-Qa'ida's existential problems add value to the timing of his death. While he may have died in a hail of bullets, much the way he envisioned, his death is proving to be with few exceptions far less of a jihadist rallying call and an inspiration for a new generation of jihadists than he probably expected.

Bin Laden's public appeal had begun to wane long before the anti-government protests sweeping the Middle East and North Africa erupted in December of last year. The toppling of authoritarian leaders like Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and Tunisian President Zine Abedine Ben Ali provided an alternative to jihad and radical interpretations of Islam as the only way to throw off the region's yoke of dictatorship. Bin Laden proved in recent months incapable of turning the protests to his advantage by adapting to a popular movement that opted for peaceful rather than violent resistance and did not embrace religion as key driver of its strategy. In doing so, he further narrowed the already diminishing public empathy militant groups like his need to succeed, expand and achieve a modicum of success.

Ironically, Bin Laden may have succeeded in death where he failed while alive. His killing and the problems it causes for the group calls into question claims by embattled Arab leaders such as Libyan leader Col. Moammar Qadhafi that foreign forces, including Al-Qa'ida, instigated the protests in their countries.

That claim is likely to be further undermined by expected factional infighting within Al-Qa'ida in the wake of Bin Laden's death. Ayman Zhawahiri, a 59-year old physician who traces his roots as a militant jihadist to his teenage years and is widely seen as Bin Laden's deputy and the group's chief ideologue, is the primary contender to inherit the Al-Qa'ida leader's mantle. Bin Laden stopped, however, short of endorsing Zhawahiri. On the contrary, he promoted several figures within the organization as part of his failed strategy to position Al-Qa'ida as the driver of an Islamist movement capable of achieving broad appeal.

These include fighters with far more combat experience than Zhawahiri such as Saiif Al-Adel, a member of Al-Qa'ida's military committee and a former colonel in the Egyptian special forces who was held under house arrest in Iran for nine years, and Abu Yahya al-Libi, a Libyan national who gained battle experience with the Libyan

Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG). Charismatic Yemeni-American scholar Anwar al-Awlaki, is the likely joker in the struggle for Bin Laden's mantle. Awlaki is a successful recruiter for Al-Qa'ida's affiliate in the Gulf, Al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), and not a member of the core group's inner leadership. He is however an accomplished orator with a considerable Internet following in the United States and Europe.

Bin Laden's marginalization is evident across the greater Middle East's major battlefields. In Afghanistan, it is the Taliban rather than Al-Qa'ida that constitutes the core of the resistance to the US-led foreign presence in the country.

Elsewhere, Al-Qa'ida's affiliates have been largely sidelined by the tectonic shifts reshaping the region's politics. AQAP has largely been inactive with the exception of a few attacks on military targets since protests demanding the resignation of Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh erupted three months ago. Saleh could attempt to create an opening for AQAP in a bid to argue his importance in the struggle against terrorism – a tactic he has employed in the past. Saleh's ability to do so, however, is likely to be limited by his increased international isolation and the deep divisions in Yemen brought to the surface by the protests. AQAP could also benefit if Yemen were to descend into chaos in the wake of Saleh's refusal to sign on to a Gulf Cooperation Council-negotiated deal that would have eased him out of office within 30 days.

Al-Qa'ida's North African affiliate, Al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), has been similarly quiet in recent months. Despite Mr. Qaddafi's assertions that Al-Qa'ida instigated the protests against his regime, the group has failed to capitalize on the escalating fighting between his forces and allied-backed rebels. It has staged only one major operation in the last seven months, an attack in April on an Algerian military post in the eastern town of Azaga, 140 kilometers from the capital Algiers, killing 14 Algerian soldiers and wounding 10 others. AQIM is meanwhile seeking to secure a ransom for four remaining French hostages kidnapped last September in a brazen raid on Niger's uranium-mining town of Arlit.

Finally, last week's bombing of a café in Morocco on Marrakech's popular Djemaa al-Fna square that killed 16 people, including 11 foreigners, illustrates Al-Qa'ida's marginalization as well as Bin Laden's significantly reduced impact on events in the region.

Moroccan authorities have not ruled AQIM out as a possible culprit. In what is little more than circumstantial evidence, they point out that the bomb included TATP and PETN compounds used by Al-Qa'ida and its affiliates in earlier attacks and had to have been built by a skilled, professional bomb maker. Privately, Moroccan officials concede that the perpetrators are more likely to be jihadists unaffiliated or at best with only weak links to Al-Qa'ida.

If so, the bombing would indicate Al-Qa'ida's increasingly tenuous grip on the global jihadist movement and highlight AQIM's failure to make inroads into Morocco. It also together with Al-Qa'ida's absence from Libya throws into sharp relief AQIM's inability to incorporate the remnants of two groups it gave birth to in the 1990s who opted to chart an independent, national rather than globally-focused course: the Moroccan Islamic Fighting Group (MIFG) and the LIFG.

AQIM's failure coupled with expected infighting within Al-Qa'ida's core group could prompt its other affiliates as well as independent jihadists to go their own way in a development that would underline Bin Laden's increasingly marginal legacy. Much of that legacy will be determined by whoever emerges as the group's new leader. To salvage that legacy, the new leader will have to understand the challenge he faces and confront it head on. That is a tall order.

To be fair, history will judge the importance of Bin Laden's legacy in fundamentally altering relations between the Western and the Muslim world's, reigniting historic rivalry between Christianity and Islam, altering the relationship of European nations to their Muslim minorities and reshaping debate about the balance between personal freedom and national security.

However, on a more immediate level, the chances of Bin Laden's successor achieving the Al-Qa'ida leader's dream of an Islamist movement with broad appeal appears to have been overtaken by events. It would mean in today's world recreating Al-Qa'ida in a mold diagonally opposed to what it is today: a softer, gentler organization that employs violence only in coordination with popular opposition forces and only when brutal crackdowns leave no other option. With the exception of Libya, that situation is one that has yet to arise and may not develop at all. To live down its history of extremism and random killing it would have to embrace pluralism and peaceful resistance as its preferred strategy. In other words, Al-

Qa'ida would have to do what Yasser Arafat's Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) did in the late 1980s when it renounced violence and recognized the State of Israel.

Charting such a course would in the short term aggravate internal divisions. None of Bin Laden's potential successors is cut from the kind of cloth needed to achieve such a turnaround. They are more than likely to become even more marginalized than the Al-Qa'ida founder himself: men who are continuously on the run with few troops under their command, diminishing resources and an increasingly smaller pool of sympathizers willing to provide the support and infrastructure they need. In other words, theirs is a battle that has already been lost.

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