



Calhoun: The NPS Institutional Archive
DSpace Repository

Faculty and Researchers

Faculty and Researchers' Publications

2011

The Legacy of bin Laden and National
Security; Strategic Insights v.10, issue 2
(Summer 2011)

Reeves, Jeremy

Monterey, California. Naval Postgraduate School

<http://hdl.handle.net/10945/25454>

This publication is a work of the U.S. Government as defined in Title 17, United States Code, Section 101. Copyright protection is not available for this work in the United States.

Downloaded from NPS Archive: Calhoun



Calhoun is the Naval Postgraduate School's public access digital repository for research materials and institutional publications created by the NPS community. Calhoun is named for Professor of Mathematics Guy K. Calhoun, NPS's first appointed -- and published -- scholarly author.

Dudley Knox Library / Naval Postgraduate School
411 Dyer Road / 1 University Circle
Monterey, California USA 93943

<http://www.nps.edu/library>

The Legacy of bin Laden and National Security

Major Jeremy Reeves

The daring raid on the compound in Abbottabad by our country's most elite servicemen has been widely touted as a tremendous success both here and abroad. However, to believe the United States is more secure after the death of Osama bin Laden (OBL) is a naive notion. Osama the man is dead, but his legacy lives on.

Al Qaeda was never about one man. While OBL played an important role in the attacks of September 11th, scores of others were involved, including OBL's recently named successor, Ayman al-Zawahiri. Furthermore, there is essentially no evidence linking OBL to the most notorious attacks since, the Madrid railway bombings in 2004 and the London bombings in 2005. His death may have come as a blow to AQ's leadership, but there are others both willing and able to pick up his mantle of Islamic extremism and continue to terrorize the West.

Indeed, bin Laden's greatest achievement is not the 9/11 attacks, but rather the establishment of the al Qaeda "brand." Jason Burke, in his well-written book, *Al Qaeda: The True Story of Radical Islam*, describes how OBL created AQ from three elements: a hardcore of devoted followers who stayed with him since the 1980s, a network of co-opted terrorist organizations, and an innovative ideology.¹⁰⁸ This ideology, described by Michael Scheuer, former head of the CIA's bin Laden unit, chiefly consists of the "defensive jihad." He goes on to say, "Bin Laden's genius lies...in constructing and articulating a consistent, convincing case that an attack on Islam is under way and is being led and directed by America."¹⁰⁹ As such, it is every Muslims duty to join in the defensive jihad by attacking Americans.

Burke explains how this ideology continues to resonate with millions of Muslims even though the AQ hardcore were scattered or killed in the invasion of Afghanistan and the ongoing war on terror. Today, the co-opted groups continue to operate and attack US interests around the world, taking on names such as al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), and al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). As Burke says, their members continue to "look up to bin Laden as a symbolic leader...acting in the style of al Qaeda, along the agenda of al Qaeda," though they were never directly controlled by OBL.¹¹⁰ Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, popularly known as the "Underwear Bomber," provides the premier example. Intelligence sources offer ample evidence of his connections to AQAP, specifically Anwar al-Awlaki, the organization's senior recruiter. However, there are no ties between Abdulmutallab and OBL. The attempted attack was carried without the assistance of AQ's leader.

The security threat this country now faces goes beyond proclaimed members of al Qaeda-affiliated organizations. In February, the Director of National Intelligence, James Clapper, testified before Congress that terrorism is still the greatest threat to the U.S, and he noted "disturbing instances of self-radicalization among our own citizens."¹¹¹ In an op-ed piece for CNN.com, former CIA Director Michael Hayden recently asserted that since American forces have severely weakened al

¹⁰⁸ Jason Burke, *Al-Qaeda: The True Story of Radical Islam* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2004), 8-9.

¹⁰⁹ Michael Scheuer, *Imperial Hubris: Why the West Is Losing the War on Terror* (Washington, D.C.: Brassey's, 2004), 7.

¹¹⁰ Burke, *Al-Qaeda*, 14.

¹¹¹ James Clapper, "Open Hearing on the Worldwide Threat Assessment - House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence," (2011).

Qaeda's structure, the organization is turning to "less complex, less well-organized...but more frequent" actions that are "more domestic in [their] origin."¹¹² Recent attacks and attempted attacks executed by US citizens have supported these notions: the attempt on Times Square, the New York City subway plot, and the Ft. Hood shootings, to name a few.

The perpetrators of these events were not radicalized by OBL directly. Bin Laden did not order the attacks nor did he provide material assistance. Rather the attackers and would-be attackers were radicalized, received some if not all of their training, and planned their operations with the help of the internet. Scheuer notes that bin Laden and al Qaeda became increasingly more adept at utilizing the World Wide Web since 9/11, not only for communication, but also as a means of sharing training, educational, and attack planning materials as well as standardizing curriculum.¹¹³ The State Department's 2009 *Country Reports on Terrorism* cited al Qaeda's continued use of "both the Internet as a means to distribute propaganda and telecommunications infrastructure to plan attacks and coordinate movements."¹¹⁴ Despite our government's efforts, these online sources still exist and allow bin Laden to continue to recruit, train, and motivate despite his demise.

Finally, while the raid may have killed America's "Most Wanted," it may have also helped kill an extremely important relationship in our global fight against terror. On May 2nd, American military forces flew into a sovereign country with a known nuclear weapon capability for the express purpose of a targeted killing. Pakistani officials were not informed of the operation until after the fact. This calls into question America's sincerity when our government asserts the need for "building security partnerships" as stated in the most recent *National Strategy for Counterterrorism*.¹¹⁵ The already strained relationship between the US and Pakistan was further weakened by this action. While never the model ally, Pakistani government officials have made significant strides in capturing al Qaeda operatives, provided key intelligence, and to some degree demonstrated a willingness to assist in our country's war on terror. However, a recent Pew poll now shows that the majority of Pakistanis view the US as more of an enemy than an ally.¹¹⁶ Their government officials, already incensed by continued Predator incursions into Pakistani airspace, now have further impetus to look to burgeoning superpowers such as China for strategic alliances.

In no way am I insinuating bin Laden's death was a bad thing. While the legality of the raid may be called into question and the political implications continue to be resolved, OBL's death provided a tremendous boost to a war-weary country and struck a critical blow to AQ. He undoubtedly continued to play some sort of role in the organization's operations despite being severely constrained. In addition, the computers, notes, and other information seized in the raid will aid in future operations against the Islamic extremists. However, these victories represent battles in what continues to be the long war against international terrorism. OBL's legacy continues to threaten our national security.

¹¹² Michael V. Hayden, "Are We Ready for New Form of Terror," CNN.com, <http://www.cnn.com/2010/OPINION/10/21/hayden.security.terrorism/index.html?iref=allsearch> (accessed August 22, 2011).

¹¹³ Scheuer, *Imperial Hubris*, 78-85.

¹¹⁴ US State Department, "Country Reports on Terrorism," Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism, <http://www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/crt/2009/index.htm> (accessed August 5, 2011).

¹¹⁵ Executive Office of the President of the United States, "National Strategy for Counterterrorism," http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/counterterrorism_strategy.pdf (accessed August 22, 2011).

¹¹⁶ Pew Research Center, "U.S. Image in Pakistan Falls No Further Following Bin Laden Killing," <http://pewglobal.org/2011/06/21/u-s-image-in-pakistan-falls-no-further-following-bin-laden-killing/> (accessed August 22, 2011).

The notion that his death has made our country more secure is unreasonable. The ideas he convincingly espoused for decades are now doctrine to a myriad of al Qaeda brand organizations, millions of eager jihadists, thousands of potential martyrs, and a host of sympathizers all over the world. This is reflected in his very own words when he stated, “Regardless if Osama is killed or survives, the awakening has started, praise be to God.”¹¹⁷ It is this awakening that America must continue to deal with if we are ever going to become more secure.

About the Author

Major Jeremy Reeves is a graduate student earning a degree in Homeland Security and Defense at the Naval Postgraduate School. He is an Air Force pilot with over 2,000 hours of flying in the KC-10 Extender and C-21 Learjet. He has served in multiple positions at the squadron and wing level and deployed as CENTCOM staff. His last assignment was as a branch chief at Headquarters, Air Mobility Command, Scott Air Force Base, Illinois.

¹¹⁷ As quoted in Burke.