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Quinn, Seamus

Monterey, California. Naval Postgraduate School

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Why the Death of Osama bin Laden has made the United States Safer

Captain Seamus M. Quinn, US Marine Corps

The United States is safer after the death of Osama bin Laden for three reasons: 1) its effect on our enemies; 2) its effect on our relationship with Pakistan; 3) and its effect on the rising generation of young men—mostly Muslim and Arab—who might otherwise have been vulnerable to bin Laden’s ideology.

First, the skill with which the Abbottabad operation was carried out sent the strongest possible signal to our enemies that they can find no true sanctuary and that their lives can and will be ended at a time of our choosing. The success of our predator drone campaign in the Afghanistan/Pakistan border region, and elsewhere, over the last few years has sent a similar message, as have the many special operations missions which have eliminated other al Qaeda operatives. The death of Osama bin Laden, however, was the culmination of these efforts for a variety of reasons—not the least of which is his talismanic status as the United States’ great nemesis. The Abbottabad operation demonstrated that no matter the enemy’s resources, capabilities, or security measures; the United States will not tire of pursuit and will inevitably prevail. If other enemies of the United States ever doubted our strategic resolve or tactical ability, they cannot in the aftermath of Osama bin Laden’s death. The resources and efforts our enemies must spend on their own security going forward cannot but enhance our national security, if only because we have more time to discover and disrupt their schemes. An optimist might even say that the audacity and precision on display in the Abbottabad operation will, for some time, dissuade our most capable, and therefore most dangerous, enemies from even planning plots against the United States. The benefit to national security in that case is obvious and inestimable.

Likewise, the intelligence gathered as a result of the Abbottabad operation—computer hard drives describing and chronicling significant aspects of al Qaeda’s operations, by all accounts—is of terrific importance. The exact contents of bin Laden’s computers are highly classified and not widely known. But it seems certain “that bin Laden had remained far more involved in the operational activities of al Qaeda than many American officials had thought. He had been developing plans to assassinate Obama and Petraeus, to pull off an extravagant September 11th anniversary attack, and to attack American trains.”¹¹⁸ Obviously, disrupting high profile plots such as these is of tremendous value to our national security—as valuable as the idea that we now have crucial, top-level information about al Qaeda. No less than the example of resilience and expertise set by the Navy SEALs in Abbottabad, the idea that the United States may now know the most intimate details of al Qaeda’s operations significantly degrades the ability of terrorists to attack the United States. How can terrorists be sure we are not watching? How can they trust their own security measures? They cannot. More importantly, they must know they cannot. This situation, in which al Qaeda and enemies of the United States sympathetic to it cannot have confidence in the security of their operations, immeasurably enhances the safety of the United States.

The second reason the death of Osama bin Laden has made the United States safer relates to Pakistan. Our misalliance with Pakistan is murky and fraught, and the Abbottabad operation has

¹¹⁸ Nicholas Schmidle, “Getting Bin Laden”, *The New Yorker*, August 8, 2011: http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2011/08/08/110808fa_fact_schmidle (last accessed August 6, 2011)

brought a long overdue reckoning. The exact reason why elements within Pakistan's national security establishment allegedly protected and supported Osama bin Laden may not be widely known, but the overall strategic logic is not difficult to understand. Osama bin Laden's presence in Pakistan, under the control of some element of Pakistan's security establishment, was an insurance policy. If the United States ever completely abandoned Afghanistan or otherwise fundamentally reconsidered its relationship with Pakistan—both constant concerns in Islamabad—Osama bin Laden, alive and well, would have provided Pakistan with a range of strategic options.

Regarding Afghanistan, it is reasonable for Pakistan to assume that, in the event of yet another American abandonment of its neighbor to the west, the Taliban, or some other jihadist faction, would come to power. In that case, the hospitality Pakistan had shown to the Taliban's erstwhile guest, and jihadist hero, would undoubtedly have been rewarded, and would have allowed Pakistan to maintain its historical influence in Afghanistan.

Regarding India, Pakistan's original and seemingly eternal enemy, patronage of Osama bin Laden enhanced Pakistan's leverage. Much to Pakistan's chagrin, strategic cooperation between the United States and India has become ever more forthright over the last several years. Indeed, many experts contend that India is the United States' most natural and most capable ally in South Asia. "The ascent of China and the hedging this now produces across Asia helps focus the United States and India on their shared interest in an Asian balance of power. The values aspect, too, is real; a younger generation of Indian officials sees the world through less traditional eyes, and the government quite deliberately now refers to itself as the 'world's largest democracy.' There is bipartisan support on both sides for a close strategic relationship, and private sector support for better economic ties."¹¹⁹ Pakistan may go unmentioned in this analysis, but Pakistan cannot ignore deepening ties between the United States and India.

Given the bloody history of Pakistan and India, a strong Indo-American alliance is likely a terrifying prospect for the Pakistani national security establishment. Osama bin Laden in-residence just two hours' drive from Islamabad gave Pakistan two options—one stick, one carrot—to blunt the effects of ever closer United States-India cooperation. The stick: under suitable circumstances, bin Laden could have been operationalized in order to remind the United States of the costs of alienating Pakistan. Lashkar-e-Taiba's 2008 rampage in Mumbai at a minimum proves that spectacular terrorist attacks can emanate from Pakistan. The carrot: again under suitable circumstances, bin Laden could have been presented as a gift to the United States. "Capturing" bin Laden in this manner would have burnished Pakistan's anti-terror credentials, bought international goodwill, and put the United States in Pakistan's debt. In either case, harboring Osama bin Laden improved Pakistan's strategic position vis-à-vis the United States, Afghanistan, and India and was therefore perfectly understandable. From the United States' perspective, however, it was intolerable.

The United States is determined to remain on the best possible terms with Pakistan. The fight against terrorism, stability in South Asia and the Middle East, success in Afghanistan, and nuclear security demand no less. But such ties cannot depend on the judgment of the most cynical and reactionary elements of Pakistan's national security establishment. This description almost certainly fits those who harbored Osama bin Laden, as Pakistan's sullen and confused reaction to the Abbottabad operation attests. Eliminating bin Laden has enhanced our national security because it

¹¹⁹ Richard Fontaine, "The strategic relationship between the U.S. and India: Coming along nicely", *Foreign Policy*, July 20, 2011: http://ricks.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/07/20/the_strategic_relationship_between_the_us_and_india_coming_along_nicely (last accessed July 21, 2011)

has eliminated a great strategic vulnerability we had vis-à-vis Pakistan. Furthermore, there is every reason to suppose that the Abbottabad operation will discredit and marginalize Pakistani officials sympathetic with radicals like bin Laden, and who may have been responsible for his sanctuary. If their influence wanes and allows for less cynical and paranoid officials to lead Pakistan, our tense relations with Pakistan will undoubtedly improve. A stable relationship with Pakistan and deeper cooperation with India are crucial to United States interests in South Asia and to our broader strategic interests worldwide.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly in the long run, the effect bin Laden's death must have on a generation of young men now coming to maturity—many of whom have seen their fathers and cousins and brothers respond to bin Laden's summons in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere—cannot be overestimated. To the eyes of these men, Osama bin Laden's was no heroic death fitting of a martyr to the faith. Rather, bin Laden met a cowering end at the hands of a much more capable enemy. The one-time guru of anti-American jihadism had clearly been reduced to what journalist Christopher Hitchens describes as "the pathetic client of a ramshackle regime." Osama bin Laden was no Saladin. He was not even a Muhammad bin Qasim. He will be a footnote in Islamic military history, most likely as a cautionary tale, and certainly no hero. Young men in the Muslim world who have been intently assessing the wages of war against the United States since boyhood know this better than anyone else.

One of Osama bin Laden's observations is likely to last for generations to come however: people will follow the strong horse over the weak horse. Osama bin Laden's misspent life and squalid death revealed him as an Arabian plodder, not even a Sham.¹²⁰

About the Author

Captain Seamus Quinn is a judge advocate, currently assigned to the Defense Language Institute where he is studying Persian in the Foreign Area Officer Program. He served on I Marine Expeditionary Force Forward headquarters staff in al Anbar Province in 2006 and early 2007. From 2008 to 2010 he was a prosecution trial counsel for the military commissions at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

¹²⁰ Sham was an American thoroughbred race horse. Though he was one of the fastest race horses of his time, his career was overshadowed by Secretariat, an *exceptionally* fast race horse whose record breaking history is a statistical outlier.