

Breaking Views

Osama is dead. Does it matter? — Elina Noor

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MAY 4 — After nearly 10 years, an average military cost of US\$2 billion (RM6 billion) per week in Afghanistan, and thousands of lives lost (American and otherwise), in the end it took a few dozen elite US forces only 38 minutes and two bullets to end the life of arguably America's most wanted. Osama bin Laden is now dead, the US\$27 million bounty reward offer buried in the sea with him.

Osama will not be missed, at least not to the majority millions of individuals who reviled the violence that he and al Qaeda stood for. Yes, he spotlighted the grievances that motivated his ideology but even if you could empathise with those on an intellectual level, the manner in which he drew attention to them was beyond sanction. His methods were a disgrace to peaceful Muslims everywhere, his means an opportunistic subversion of the religion he claimed to honour.

His demise, therefore, must finally bring some measure of satisfaction and closure to those who lost in the carnage of September 11, 2001. Whether justice or retribution, for those in celebration, Osama's death represents an emotional victory of patience, fortitude and unrelenting persistence. It also underscores the message that however long it takes or however much it costs, the United States will ultimately avenge and honour its dead.

Beyond the jubilation of the end of Osama, however, is a much more sobering reality for strategic counter-terrorism efforts. In the dynamic and evolving al Qaeda narrative, there are two reasons why Osama's death figures little more profoundly than a footnote.

First, although a charismatic and inspiring leader, Osama's prominence gradually waned over time. Video and audio tapes purportedly released by him over recent years appear as contrived orchestrations to stay relevant by responding to a host of different issues.

These ranged from the fate of Khalid Sheikh Muhammad to the 2010 flooding in Pakistan and France's Nato participation in Afghanistan. Many of these tapes allegedly featured Osama's voice recording with older still photographs of him superimposed over other images.

On the run, in hiding, and enveloped by rumours of ill-health, the absence of updated video or picture streams of al Qaeda's leader was telling of his limited accessibility. Osama's influence and calls to violence only diminished further in the wake of the peaceful Arab Spring uprisings in March this year.

Second, despite organisation charts depicting hierarchical relationships, al Qaeda's structure does not mimic a military one. Osama may have been the head of al Qaeda but he was still ultimately a part of a global movement that drew and appealed to local affiliates with variant causes.

Al Qaeda's decentralised nature banks more on inspiring rather than ordering extremism top-down. It is what has made it notoriously adaptable and responsive to change. Facilitated by technology, al Qaeda and what it represents is now capable of sparking autonomous action by like-minded individuals and groups anywhere in the world.

In an era of start-up terrorism, leadership decapitation can only have a minimal strategic effect. If anything, Osama's killing only serves to validate the value of maintaining al Qaeda's decentralised order. So long as there are grievances to exploit, al Qaeda and its affiliates will continue to plot, scheme, and hatch regardless of whoever is at the top.

Beyond Osama, there are two immediate troubling aspects to Operation Geronimo that could complicate US counter-terrorism efforts in the long-run. One concerns the United States' unilateral raid in a foreign, sovereign nation and the other relates to its extrajudicial killing of the unarmed Osama.

The complexity of both issues requires a longer, separate consideration. Suffice to say for current purposes, however, that these issues threaten to undermine perceptions of the United States' democratic credibility and commitment to international law. More seriously, these issues risk exploitation by al Qaeda sympathisers to foment greater resentment towards the United States in the future.

Osama's death marks the closing of a chapter in the unfinished tome of counter-terrorism. As the legal controversies heat up over the next few

weeks, it is worth keeping in mind that the real value of Osama's death lies in the "mother lode of intelligence" seized in his hard drive.

What is extracted and how the information is used could rewrite the next few chapters on disrupting, preventing and pre-empting future terrorist strikes. At the end of the day, terrorism did not start with Osama bin Laden and will not end with his demise.

Tactical kills can only serve counter-terrorism more effectively when anchored by a parallel strategy of effectively addressing the grievances that drive terrorism in the first place.

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