

AFTER OSAMA: WHAT LONDONERS THINK

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SUMMARY

This short paper presents the findings of a survey Demos carried out in London in the wake of Osama Bin Laden's death. Over a period of two days (May 4th and 5th), we interviewed a broadly representative sample of over a hundred Londoners to determine their views about the impact of Bin Laden's death.

The survey revealed:

- High levels of scepticism amongst Londoners about the official reports of his killing. Approximately 2 out of 5 respondents either denied he was actually dead or expressed scepticism and uncertainty over whether he was in fact dead.¹
- Londoners felt the death of Bin Laden will have a negative effect on their short-term safety. Approximately 1 out of 3 respondents reported feeling less safe using public transport following his death, while 54 per cent expressed concern that there would be an increased risk of terrorism in the next 6 months. In the longer term, just less than half of those surveyed did not think that the risk of terrorism would increase in the long term.
- Londoners were also split over the morality and legitimacy of the US killing, with only 2 in 5 (39 per cent) supporting American actions. Men were more likely than women to think killing Osama Bin Laden was the right thing to do.

We draw two broad policy implications from these survey findings.

First, the security services and police must do more to communicate to the public their capacity to prevent revenge and future attacks. The security services should give consideration to making more frequent public pronouncements that ought to include the broad number of people they are monitoring, the current threat level, and details of successful counter-terror operations. Care should also be taken to place such pronouncements in the historical context of the state's counter terrorism efforts so as to provide reassurance that progress is being made against extremist elements.

Second, the American government must consider how it can enhance overseas perceptions of its credibility and honesty. A first

step could be a limited release of a photograph of Bin Laden's body, or sharing DNA samples with independent medical experts.

BACKGROUND

Osama Bin Laden has been the public face of Islamic terrorism for almost a decade. The failure of coalition forces to apprehend him has long been a source of embarrassment for the US and her allies; in finding and executing him, President Obama has exorcised a powerful demon from the US psyche.

There are significant and well-founded reasons for the US pursuit of Bin Laden, not least because of his declaration of war against the US and his direct involvement in a range of atrocious attacks from the 1998 US African Embassy bombings to 9/11. Nevertheless, it remains unclear what the significance of his death will be in the broader context of the War on Terror.

Previous analysis had suggested that Bin Laden's isolation reduced his involvement in the operations of Al-Qaeda, relegating his role to that of 'brand ambassador' for the international Jihad²; if this were the case then the significance of his execution would lie in its symbolism, making it a victory which may psychologically affect those allied with him, but would not necessarily limit the operational effectiveness of the various Al-Qaeda affiliates. More recent reports have painted a different picture, suggesting that he was active in decision-making and planning.³ If this is the case his death may prove a significant structural blow for Al-Qaeda.

The killing of Bin Laden is clearly a major success for the US intelligence services, which may enjoy an increase in confidence in its abilities as a result. Public trust and confidence is vital to intelligence work, yet the CIA, MI5 and other Western intelligence agencies are subject to significant levels of distrust due to historical mistakes and the inevitable secrecy of their work. The poor handling of the event's aftermath by the Obama administration, including inconsistencies in both official and media accounts of the circumstances, governmental reluctance to release a picture of his body, and his hasty burial at sea, have lent some support to the views of sceptics and conspiracy theorists. While a recent communiqué from Al Qaeda confirming his death may do much to

quash the cynicism of all but the most hard-core sceptics, the distrust of the US Government is in itself a deeply troubling issue.⁴

In terms of public perception, a recent USA Today/Gallup poll found that 54 per cent of Americans now feel safer than before Bin Laden's death.⁵ At the time of our survey last week there was no quantifiable evidence about how his death was viewed by Londoners as the population of the UK city considered most likely to face a terrorist attack. To help see how Londoners viewed the issues surrounding Bin Laden's death, Demos conducted a survey across five different areas of London: Whitechapel, Moorgate / the City, Bloomsbury, Covent Garden / Leicester Square, and Elephant & Castle. In each area we interviewed between 20 and 25 people, taking care to ensure that our sample was broadly reflective of Greater London in terms of gender and ethnicity. We found differences of opinions between men and women, but there were no statistically significant differences across ethnic groups. Our findings are detailed below.

FINDINGS

Doing the right thing: killing Osama Bin Laden

It's not the end of it, it's going to cause more [terrorism]. I mean the people that he worked with and his views on terrorism [pause] he wasn't the only one.

Black woman, early 20s

It's a good step, much appreciated.

Asian man, mid-30s

The most divisive issue for those surveyed was the morality and legitimacy of the US decision to kill Bin Laden. Contrary to President Obama's statement that 'his demise should be welcomed by all who believe in peace and human dignity,' only 39 per cent of Londoners supported his killing, with 35 per cent against and 25 per cent undecided.

Those who supported the killing felt that it was a legitimate response to the man who had declared war against the US and was responsible for the deaths of many:

It affected a lot of people. You know, people want...to see what these collective governments could do about it after the severity of the atrocities committed in America... If he was caught, he shouldn't expect to have a very good ending.

Black man, mid-30s

In contrast, those who opposed the killing often expressed that Bin Laden ought to have been taken alive and tried in court as a criminal:

It's not right to kill him. We can't say on the one hand don't be brutal and then, like, you know, kill him in cold blood. It's not right. It should have gone to court.

White man, early 20s

The responses of those interviewed may reflect the shifting understanding of war in the 21st century, a problem that continues to complicate Anglo-American efforts to combat terrorism. The question of whether terrorists should be tried in a court of law as criminals, or executed in the field as enemy combatants, will doubtless remain contentious. The apparent emphasis on killing, as opposed to capturing Bin Laden arguably highlights a continuation of the US policy of treating terrorists as combatants, suggesting that the difficulties of trying and detaining terrorists continue to influence the US Presidency's handling of the war against al-Qaeda.

Public Safety: The Risk of Terrorism

It's pretty hard to predict I'd say. It could go either way. Make it worse, make it better....it's hard to say.

White woman, mid-20s

It's going to encourage Al-Qaeda to retaliate back at the US and England...we could have another 9/11.

Black woman, mid-20s

Significant numbers of Londoners expressed concern about the increased risk of terrorism following Bin Laden's death.

Of those surveyed, almost 1 in 3 felt less safe using public transport following his death. A majority of people surveyed (54 per cent) thought that Bin Laden's killing would increase the likelihood of attack in London over the next 6 months, while 60 per cent were either worried about or unsure of the long-term risk. Only 40 per cent felt that his death would not increase the chance of terrorism in the long term.

Distrust: Conspiracy and the US Government Reports

It could all be one big conspiracy...it's about money, and that's it.

White man, early 20s

I think it's all just media hype, very convenient that it happened the day after Gaddafi's son was killed.

South Asian woman, mid-20s

I can't really see the American Government really staging this kind of thing. If it were the case then Bin Laden could, you know, reveal himself to the public and then, you know, be a huge blow for the US and so there would be no reason for them to do that.

White man, early 20s

[The] Americans wouldn't have gone there and made up media coverage to fool the world.

Black man, late 40s

Data from the survey evidenced a low level of belief among those surveyed in official US reports of Bin Laden's death. As the survey was undertaken prior to the official Al-Qaeda acknowledgement of the death, these results may no longer accurately reflect the feelings of those surveyed.

Nevertheless, the level of popular belief in the accuracy of the American reports of his death was remarkably low, with 2 out of 5 Londoners (40 per cent) unconvinced by reports of his death. City workers were the least sceptical with 82 per cent accepting the official US reports as true. Of those unconvinced by reports of the death, concerns were commonly expressed about the absence of a body or external validation of DNA by independent experts. A range of possible conspiracy theories were advanced to explain why the reports of his death could not be deemed reliable, though interestingly, no single theory was particularly common. The distrust of American institutional honesty was the only clear and consistent theme.

IMPLICATIONS

The issues of terrorism and public perception are hugely complex, and subject to variance on the basis of many factors for which a small study cannot control. Our recommendations based on this survey should not be read as a catch-all solution, but rather, as a ‘nudge in the right direction’ toward increasing governmental transparency in an effort to build public trust and mitigate fear and uncertainty. They are supplemented by previous Demos research into conspiracy theories and trust in government as presented in *The Power of Unreason*.

It is clear from our findings that a significant percentage of the London population feel a great degree of uncertainty about the risk of terrorism in both the short and long-term. On one hand, this fear and uncertainty is characteristic of 21st century terrorist attacks including 9/11, the Madrid bombings, and the 7/7 bombings among a range of other successful and failed attacks. The perpetrators of these attacks walk among us unnoticed, and deliberately target the day-to-day aspects of our lives, such as public transport. A unique feature of modern terrorism is the fact that a very small number of people (even just one person) can cause a huge amount of death and destruction, making the task of the security services and the police incredibly difficult. No matter how good the security services are and how much is invested in counter-terrorism, there will inevitably be another successful attack at some point – such is the nature of the threat.

The security and intelligence services in the UK and in other countries have significantly improved their capabilities over the past ten years to identify and dismantle potential terrorist plots. While it is impossible to prevent every attack, the counter-terror effort in this country has been amongst the most successful in the world, with no civilians killed in Al-Qaeda inspired terrorist attacks against targets on the mainland since 2005.

This success stands in stark contrast to the relative silence of the security services in discussing successful operations, perhaps

reflecting a fear of being seen as complacent, particularly if such a pronouncement were to be followed by a successful attack. The government and security services are clearly good at highlighting the existence of a threat, yet fail to communicate to the public their assessment about how well they are doing in their efforts to protect us.

With this in mind, the security services should also focus on combating what many have identified as the principal risk of terrorism – its ability to induce fear in the broader population. Merely doing a good job of countering the terrorist threat is not enough – the security services must be seen to do a good job by the public at large.

The dominant public message from the security and intelligence services highlights the severity of the risk we face without providing any greater insight into how the threat and our ability to handle it have evolved.

The most recent pronouncement by the security services pertaining to the number of people under surveillance in this country came in 2007 when MI5 confirmed that it was monitoring over 2,000 individuals and 300 potential plots.⁶ Following this announcement there has been no public acknowledgement as to whether this number has increased or decreased.

The fact that the work of the security services necessarily takes place in secret means that they will always be subject to operational constraints regarding what information can be shared, and will likely remain a subject of public distrust. However, the security services could do well to combat this by giving more frequent and forthcoming status reports about the threat from terrorist groups as do, for example, the Dutch security services, who publish more detailed assessments of the evolution of the threat in the Netherlands.⁷ The UK security services should consider producing something similar. We recommend that an annual counter-terrorism threat report should be published, which should include information on the number of individuals that the security services

are monitoring and analysis as to whether the threat appears to be increasing or decreasing.

Regarding the distrust of official US Government reports, our research indicates that, far from being the exclusive preserve of a lunatic fringe, distrust of the American Government is widespread. The USA is subject to a negative perception by a significant proportion of Londoners, with large percentages distrusting their official reports of Bin Laden's death and disagreeing with their decision to execute him in Pakistan. While it is hard to believe that any short-term measures could eradicate this scepticism, the release of additional evidence into the public domain – including limited release photos of his body and providing DNA samples to independent examiners – could help to reduce the uncertainty that many feel regarding his death. In the long term, the US Government must give greater consideration to building trust and enhancing governmental transparency in order to portray a more favourable international image.

METHOD

A weighted quota sample of 108 participants was recruited from five sites across central London on the 4th and 5th May 2011. Participants were recruited according to tight quotas for ethnicity and gender derived from 2007 London population estimates produced by the Office for National Statistics.⁸

All participants completed a semi-structured interview comprising 5 closed and 2 open questions. These were clustered around two broad research ‘themes’ – the presentation of Bin Laden’s death and its impact on the risk of terrorism. Questions were selected following discussion between academic experts and members of the Demos team, and were validated and revised following a brief pilot run prior to the main study.

Participant responses were recorded using a paper report form and full-length audio recording. Following completion of the data collection all audio recordings were transcribed verbatim and cross referenced against the paper report forms to reduce the risk of human error in data recording.

Quantitative analysis was conducted using simple descriptive statistics, while qualitative data analysis employed a reflexive coding process. Participants were coded against both a priori and emergent themes, before consideration was made of the interrelationships between these themes and the quantitative data. Additional qualitative data outside of the answers to specific questions were considered in the analysis stage as indicative of broader participant ‘sentiment’, and have been used to provide further illumination of the quantitative results.

Ethical considerations around participant confidentiality and data security were observed; no data capable of identifying participants were recorded and all participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the research.

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NOTES

¹ The survey was undertaken prior to the official Al Qaeda acknowledgement of Osama Bin Laden's death. As such, the level of popular belief in the accuracy of the reports of his death may differ if re-examined.

² BBC News, 'Bin Laden 'alive' warns spy chief', 13 Jul 2002, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/2127119.stm>

³ BBC News, 'Osama Bin Laden's Abbottabad house 'was Al-Qaeda hub'', 8 May 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-13325595>

⁴ BBC News, "'Al-Qaeda statement' confirms Osama Bin Laden's Death', 6 May 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-13313201>

⁵ Gallup, 'Majority in US say Osama Bin Laden's death makes America safer', 4 May 2011, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/147413/Majority-Say-Bin-Laden-Death-Makes-America-Safer.aspx>

⁶ BBC News, 'MI5 watch 2000 terror suspects', 2 May 2007, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/6613963.stm>

⁷ See annual reports for AIVD downloadable from their website:

<https://www.aivd.nl/english/publications-press/>. In particular see reports, "Violent Jihad in the Netherlands", "The Radical Dawa in Transition: the rise of Islamic neo-radicalism", and "Salafism growth stagnates", all downloadable at the website address above.

⁸ Office of National Statistics, Resident Population Estimates by Population Group, available at: <http://neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk/dissemination/LeadTableView.do?a=3&b=276743&c=London&d=13&e=13&g=325264&i=1001x1003x1004&m=0&r=1&s=1201351285750&enc=1&dsFamilyId=1812>