

Today we are all Osama: Jihadists' reaction to Bin Laden's death (guest blog)

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One of Al Qaeda's most potent tools is the Internet. It acts as a communication and recruitment platform for the loose network of 'jihadist' activists and their supporters around the world. Mina Al-Lami is a research fellow at the LSE who has been monitoring these sites over the last few years. Here is her fascinating account of the way they responded to the death of Osama Bin Laden.



'Today we are all Osama' has become a common statement in the writings and postings of jihadists on key jihadist forums in the days following Osama bin Laden's death. During the first five days, jihadists refused to believe the US narrative and even refrained from posting news stories on the incident on their websites, whilst they wait for 'credible' news from their trusted jihadi sources.

As an official statement from Al-Qaeda leadership confirming their leader's death was communicated on 7 May, jihadists, clearly overwhelmed and grieved by the news, struggled to show defiance. In their affiliated groups' official statements as well as members' postings they made sure that any expression of grief at their loss sat side by side with those of joy and celebration over Bin Laden's victory: winning martyrdom. In their statement of 7 May, titled, Condolences and Congratulations to our ummah, Al-

Qaeda in Maghreb (north Africa) stated that, "today is a day of mourning and celebration. A day in which happiness and sadness go hand in hand. A contradiction of satisfaction and rage.

Winning the battle discourse with jihadists is problematic as the end result is always a win-win situation for them, or so they wish to believe and claim. If the mujahideen are victorious on the ground, it shows their resolve, Allah's support, and defeat of their enemy. If they are killed in battle, or other, then they have won martyrdom, which is their ultimate goal in joining the jihad. As such, Bin Laden's death has been framed as a victory for him personally, for 'martyrdom' was what he always sought and is the honourable end of a mujahid, explained most jihadi commentators on the incident. However, an important part of this alleged "victory" relies on the coming phase of "jihad" and the successor of Bin Laden.

Who Is Next?

While speculations about Bin Laden's successor are rife in Western security and intelligence analysis and media, there has been no mention of any on these key jihadist forums. Despite the egalitarian nature of web 2.0 which jihadists rely upon in their communications, they adhere to a strict hierarchal system in which followers do not question their leaders or anticipate their messages. Hence, members of jihadist forums have not speculated who is likely to succeed Bin Laden nor have they questioned Al-Qaeda's delay in naming one. Any suggestion in this regard would be deemed disrespectful and unacceptable.

Western speculations, on the other hand, that 3rd in command in Al-Qaeda Sheikh Abu Yihya Al-Libi (a Libyan national) is likely to succeed Bin Laden, rather than the 'less charismatic' Dr. Aymen Al Zawahiri, have unwittingly sparked fresh conspiracy theories on Arabic mainstream media sites and forums that reported it. The majority who commented on this news story on Al-Arabiya website indicated that by naming Al-Libi, whom the majority of readers had not heard of before, as the likely next Al-Qaeda leader, the USA is trying to implicate Libya in Al-Qaeda terrorism, hence an excuse to occupy it. The fact that Al-Libi and his role in Al-Qaeda is not known to the average Arabic citizen given his relatively recent rise to fame in jihadi circles only, helped fuel such suspicions.

While jihadists make sure not to cross lines on their forums by speculating the next successor, members of Al-Jazeera talk, the most popular Arabic multimedia platform where jihadists are active, went ahead and gave their voices to second-in-command Dr. Aymen Al-Zawahiri, defying Western and Arabic media that have been portraying him as lacking in charisma and popularity. The nomination of either of these two figures, which seems to be the likely outcome, is bad news. They have both demonstrated their hard-line and aggressive attitudes in both the content and delivery of their messages, which had often made Bin Laden's seem mellow and reconciliatory.

Promised Attacks

Not surprisingly, nearly all statements, articles, and postings promised retaliatory attacks and a fiercer type of "jihad" in the days to come. Bin Laden's famous words in his 2001 message to the American people echoed across jihadist forums, with many members using it as a signature, and is still running in bright font at the top of some [forums]: 'By God, America and Americans won't enjoy peace until it is enjoyed in Palestine'. The infamous jihadist writer Hussein bin Mahmood warned that America and its allies will soon long for the sweet days of Bin Laden, compared to what is to come.

Despite unanimity on responding to the killing of Bin Laden, jihadists, both key figures and common members, are divided on how to go about this response. This is a debate of quality versus quantity and of carefully planned and coordinated attacks that may take time to orchestrate versus random individual ones with immediate effects. Hussein bin Mahmood, who is highly respected in jihadist circles, urged the mujahideen to avoid small, random and unorganised attacks and aim for big strategic ones of considerable impact, pointing that a successor must be named immediately to start the planning. Similarly, key writer Lion of Islam warned against 'small impulsive attacks through which America hopes to exhaust our energy and efforts'.

On the other hand, others called for immediate attacks through whatever means. The infamous and highly credible [in jihadi circles] Al-Fajr Media Centre, that allegedly has direct links to Al-Qaeda and is responsible for disseminating all their messages, in its multi-address message called upon all 'mujahid Muslims' to take any opportunity they find to attack Americans and their interests, without consulting any one. The message also recommends 'individual terrorism operations that do not require much preparation and coordination'. In the same line, in its newsletter Al-Ansar media group that disseminates news and material of the mujahideen incited 'the youth' to carry out attacks to avenge Bin Laden without hesitation or delay: 'Do not let this incident weaken you. Rise and fight the Americans, French and British without delay or consultation. Kill them wherever and through whatever means available to you'.

Hard-line Preaching

Recommendations and incitement of the latter group fly in the face of the recent instructions of 2nd in command in Al-Qaeda Dr. Aymen Al-Zawahiri and Al-Qaeda ideologue Sheikh Attiyatallah AbdulRahman. Both had strongly cautioned against random unauthorised attacks that haven't been endorsed by expert Sharia (to assert legitimate permissibility) and military jihadi committees, in messages they sent their followers in March, 2011. However, given the overall outrage at the attack in jihadi circles and the felt discontent among publics in Muslim countries, especially the way with which the USA managed its different narratives and refused to provide tangible evidence, it is very likely that Al-Qaeda leadership will go back to its hard-line preaching.

In any case, the execution of any big attack will require time to plan, resources and logistics, not to mention clear directions from the to-be-successor of Bin Laden. In the meantime, Al-Qaeda or affiliated groups are likely to make due with what they have. Each group will step up its attacks locally, and against softer targets, such as government personnel and infrastructure. This is already happening in Afghanistan and Iraq, where several attacks saw the killing of many people in the days following Bin Laden's death. Moreover, these groups will claim that such attacks are in response to Bin Laden's death, in their absence to reach their ultimate target: the USA and allies. This is the way they sought to water down anger at their absence during Gaza conflict in 2008/2009, despite their loud threats. In an attempt to save face, Al-Qaeda in Iraq, for example, had increased its operations locally against Iraqi security

personnel and Shias calling them all under the campaign, 'In Support of Gaza'.

Bin Laden Fanatics

Yet, random and impulsive attacks by Bin Laden fanatics, and there are many, are to be expected, including on Western soil.

Finally, while considering the death of Bin Laden and its implications, it is important to bear in mind that the man was not the leader of a conventional or central organisation, nor was he personally involved in the many terrorist attacks Al-Qaeda had inspired. Bin Laden was and is a symbol of "jihad" and selflessness to many of his supporters, and killing the man will not do away with the extremist Al-Qaeda ideology or fervour that fuels it.

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She blogged about her research [here](#)

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