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The Death of Osama bin Laden and what it means for the Afghan people

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By Jorrit Kamminga

The death of Osama bin Laden might be a big blow for the Al Qaeda network and its ideological affiliates around the world, but for ordinary Afghans it may convey a rather different message. His death may symbolically put an end to an era of international military presence in the country that was sparked by the 9/11 attacks in 2001. In lectures I give on Afghanistan I sometimes show a slide with photos of the 19 hijackers of the 9/11 planes and ask students how many of those actually were Afghan. Although some students know the answer, there are many that cannot believe that there were zero Afghans involved in the direct planning and carrying out of these terrorist attacks. Nevertheless, these non-Afghans provided the casus belli that toppled the Taliban regime and subsequently caused a decade of death and suffering for the Afghan people.

In the field research we conduct in Afghanistan with the [International Council on Security and Development \(ICOS\)](#), we ask the Afghan people whether they recognise a picture of the 9/11 planes entering the World Trade Centre. Most Afghans do recognise this picture. But when we then give them an explanation of these events and its consequences, [92 percent](#) of those interviewed do not know about it. That means that more than 9 years in the conflict, the international community still has not properly explained to the Afghan people why we came to their country in the first place and what we have been trying to do ever since. In one of our [recent reports](#), we call this a 'relationship gap' that needs to be urgently addressed, although there is little time to do so with foreign troops starting to leave Afghanistan from July onwards.

Time is running out because of the security transition calendar which is based more on the internal political realities within NATO Member States and their non-NATO partner countries than on the [security situation on the ground in Afghanistan](#). Simultaneously the international military is urgently looking for ways to leave the country in a better state than in 2002 before pulling out its troops. With little sustainable progress in the military struggle against the Taliban insurgency and limited results in the fields of development, reconstruction and good governance, the death of Osama bin Laden may actually provide the international community with an easy way out of this quagmire. At least the key military objective of removing part of Al Qaeda's leadership has been achieved, which can be used as an additional justification for pulling out the troops by 2014.

But Osama bin Laden was hiding in Pakistan and not in Afghanistan. That explains the Afghan official reactions which state that NATO has been fighting the wrong war or perhaps the right war but on the wrong battlefield. President Karzai stated that the discovery of Osama bin Laden in Pakistan shows the entire [military strategy was flawed](#). In any case, the death of Osama bin Laden in Pakistan cannot be used to close the chapter of the NATO-led ISAF coalition in Afghanistan. The reason for that does not lie in the origin of this war in 2001, but more in what the international community has been trying to do in Afghanistan ever since then. Next to the promise of ensuring that Afghanistan would never again be used as a safe haven for terrorist networks such as Al Qaeda, we have made a direct promise to the Afghan people that this time we would not let them down. That has increasingly become our mission. We would finally make sure that Afghanistan would not have yet another lost generation after three decades of war and civil strife. We would help to build a new Afghanistan that would bring peace to its people while building democratic institutions and promoting human rights.

And those promises are not miraculously fulfilled by killing Osama bin Laden through a successful American Special Forces operation in Abbottabad. In Afghanistan, the international military forces generally have been doing a good job under often very difficult circumstances. And in the past years they have been learning in theatre from their mistakes and have further fine-tuned their strategy and tactics, while increasingly improving the relationship with the Afghan people. But the troop withdrawal starting in July this year comes too early to fully benefit from these lessons learned and best practices developed. And without foreign forces to back up and indirectly support humanitarian, development and reconstruction efforts, it is highly uncertain that the international community can keep its promise of creating sustainable progress in the coming years.

That means military transition should not only be about pulling out our troops and handing over responsibilities to the Afghan security forces. It should equally be about finding effective ways to continue to help the Afghan people in the years to come, whether through development aid and reconstruction, or through supporting a political peace and reconciliation process with the Taliban insurgency that will undoubtedly remain undefeated in 2014. There are simply too many legitimate grievances in



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Afghanistan that cause people to support or even fight for the Taliban. The death of Osama bin Laden will not change these dynamics and provides no silver bullet solution to the many problems and challenges ordinary Afghans still face on a daily basis. His killing is far from a mission accomplished for the international community in Afghanistan.

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