



## Institute for Social Policy and Understanding

RESEARCH MAKING AN IMPACT



# LIFE AFTER DEATH: AL-QAEDA AND THE TERRORISM NARRATIVE

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It committed one of the most chilling and brutal attacks in the memory of a generation, transformed the landscape of international affairs, and inexorably changed the course of the world's sole superpower, which launched not one but two wars that have now lasted longer than the two great world wars of the twentieth century combined.

The radical politics of a small band of Muslim extremists became everyone's business, and their actions, particularly those of a single day now ten years ago, set into motion reactions and counter-reactions that continue to dominate headlines, guide foreign policy, and define domestic agendas.

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And yet like Osama bin Laden himself, al-Qaeda, the world's most feared and hated terrorist organization, indeed the very embodiment of what "terrorist organization" has come to mean in the minds of Americans and westerners alike, as well as the symbol of everything that is antithetical to western values, no longer exists. It has all but vanished, or at least dwindled to the palest shadow of its former self.

News of bin Laden's killing by American special forces

at a compound near the capital city of Islamabad, deep in the heart of Pakistan, has sunk in. News of al-Qaeda's demise, on the other hand, has not. A gulf has emerged between the perception of the threat posed by al-Qaeda and its actual capabilities ... a gulf that continues to widen.

Al-Qaeda still has a hold over the western imagination, in part because the West will not let it go. The organization remains shrouded in myth, lurking everywhere, ceaselessly plotting to kill innocent people en masse. While there is currently an extensive and ongoing analysis of bin Laden's compound in Abbottabad and what it contains, and whether or not the evidence suggests his active participation in al-Qaeda's operations up to the moment of his death, there remains little debate in the media about his organization and its viability. Commentators and analysts readily accept the narrative advanced by officials and so-called terrorism experts: al-Qaeda remains the West's greatest threat.

Yet even more than bin Laden's death, the "Arab spring" of 2011 in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Syria, and Bahrain has not only shaken the very foundation of the regional authoritarian order, but it also threatens to unravel the standard terrorism narrative. As the Arab revolutions gathered steam, al-Qaeda Central was notably absent. Neither jihadist slogans and rituals nor its violent tactics managed to find a receptive audience among the millions of protesting Arabs.

Al-Qaeda offers no economic blueprint, no political horizon, and no vision for the future. While millions of Arabs demand genuine elections and the separation of powers, al-Qaeda considers elections and democracy

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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“heresy” and an “evil principle.” Its leaders shun political participation and activism, preaching that only violence and terrorism will bring about political change. Yet the millions of Arabs who took to the streets have clearly shown that politics matter and that peaceful protests are more effective at delivering change. Constitutionalism, not militant Islamism, is their rallying cry, an utter rejection of al-Qaeda’s ideology. The Arab revolutions are post-Islamist in that while religion-based activists, such as the Muslim Brotherhood and independent Islamists, represent an important segment of the protesters, they are dwarfed by centrists, nationalists, liberals, and non-affiliated activists. Although Islamic-oriented groups like the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafis will be a force to reckon with in the post-autocratic order, they have little in common with al-Qaeda and will become just one of many competing forces.

Thus, the revolutions reinforced what many of us had already known: al-Qaeda’s core ideology is incompatible with the universal aspirations of the Arabs. Arabs and Muslims do not hate the United States and the West; rather, they admire their democratic institutions, including free elections, peaceful leadership transitions, and the separation of powers. The millions of Arabs involved have neither burned American and western flags nor blamed the West for their predicament. Bin Laden and his presumed successor Ayman al-Zawahiri neither speak for the *umma* (the global Muslim community) nor exercise any influence over Arab public opinion.

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Few in the West—Americans specifically—realize that their fear of terrorism is misplaced. Yet the threat they feel from al-Qaeda has acquired a life of its own. The mainstream media restricts the parameters of the debate and denies time and space to alternative voices. Every incident, no matter how amateurish, is blown out of proportion, thereby reinforcing anxiety and paranoia about terrorism generally and about al-Qaeda specifically. Moreover, western politicians—again, particularly American—embrace this distorted view of al-Qaeda’s threat capability because it justifies their careers and affords political opportunities to enhance their ability to shape foreign policy and national security strategy.

While the Bush administration catered to—and indeed promoted—this monolithic and mostly ideological perception of al-Qaeda’s omnipotence and invincibility, President Obama has walked a fine line between changing his predecessor’s language and terms on the

“war on terror” and adopting “a new strategic approach” that exemplifies the structural continuities in American foreign policy. This approach is designed to reassure Americans that when “faced with that persistent and evolving terrorist threat,” the president and his administration will be “unrelenting, unwavering, and unyielding in its efforts to defeat, disrupt, and dismantle al-Qaeda and its allies.”<sup>1</sup>

For example, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has said that “for most of us,” al-Qaeda and its affiliates—“trans-national non-state networks”—represent a more potent threat to American security than a nuclear-armed Iran or North Korea. Although by “most of us” she meant the American foreign policy and security establishment, she implied that the entire West faced a strategic threat.

A decade later there is a disconnect between the rhetoric of western politicians on the continuing nature of al-Qaeda’s threat and the reality of that threat. Al-Qaeda’s centralized command and control has been dismantled and its top leaders have gone deeper and deeper underground, choosing personal safety over operational efficacy—even according to American intelligence. While hiding in Abbottabad, Pakistan, for five years, bin Laden reportedly relied almost exclusively—and rather pathetically—on Sheikh Abu Ahmed, a Pakistani born in Kuwait (his nom de guerre was Abu Ahmed al-Kuwaiti), to communicate with the outside world.

Suicide bombers remain al-Qaeda’s weapon of choice; however, its ability to carry out complex suicide attacks along the lines of September 11 has degraded considerably. After reviewing computer files and documents seized at bin Laden’s compound, American officials say that the evidence suggests that until his death bin Laden encouraged his followers to strike inside the United States. American officials acknowledge, however, that his directions were “aspirational” rather than granular in their details.

Although the organization’s remnants are fixated on attacking western targets, they not only face more vigilant security, but they also lack the operational capabilities—a

functioning command and control, military and intelligence infrastructure; financial means; and rudimentary training—to carry out their ambitious schemes.

Moreover, al-Qaeda faces a leadership crisis that could further diminish its capabilities. Although al-Zawahiri has been selected as the new emir, he is divisive and prickly and certainly not a rallying figure. If he survives the American campaign to kill him, he still faces insurmountable problems connected with reviving a crippled organization. First and foremost, his sensibilities and character make him the wrong person to fill bin Laden’s shoes.

Nevertheless, al-Qaeda and similar factions might succeed in carrying out an attack in the short- to mid-term because of the escalating conflict in Afghanistan-Pakistan and the consequent wave of radicalization affecting tiny elements of those two communities now living in the West. (There is, moreover, the motive to avenge bin Laden’s killing, which they view as an assassination, namely, cold-blooded murder.) Most of the recent arrests have involved young Pakistani and Afghan men. But that likelihood, troubling as it is, must not blind us to the limited nature of the challenge posed by al-Qaeda and the gradual and steady dismantling of its military apparatus.

Similarly, local al-Qaeda branches in Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, the Maghreb, and elsewhere have exposed al-Qaeda Central’s loss of operational control and damaged its outreach efforts. Its indiscriminate targeting of civilians has turned Muslim opinion against al-Qaeda, its tactics, and its ideology. For most Muslims, al-Qaeda stands accused of bringing ruin to the *umma*. Some even insist that it is an American invention, a pretext to intervene in Muslim lands.

In other words, the bin Laden group—as we might term its remnants—has lost the struggle for Muslim hearts and minds. In many countries, information about al-Qaeda suspects now comes from citizens, including family members, friends, and neighbors, as opposed to surveillance and intelligence sources. This shift

demonstrates a hardening of Muslim public sentiment against bin Laden's men. Preaching a transnational jihad centered on violence no longer resonates with ordinary Muslims, and thus the organization is undergoing a grave crisis of legitimacy and authority.

Contrary to received wisdom in the West, there was never any real swell of Muslim public support for bin Laden and his transnational jihadi contingent. More of a fringe phenomenon than a popular social movement, transnational jihad never enjoyed a large constituency in Muslim societies. The majority of Arabs and Muslims were—and remain—highly critical of American and western foreign policies, particularly in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Nonetheless, only a small segment condones and sanctions a direct war with the West or the killing of noncombatants.

No prominent Muslim theorists or ideologues called for attacking the West. The struggle within—an intra-civilizational rift between secular nationalists and religious nationalists—overshadowed and eclipsed the struggle without a so-called clash of cultures and civilizations.

Nearly ten years later, the broadly based peaceful revolutions of this past spring have demolished al-Qaeda's claim that the Islamist vanguard will spearhead revolutionary change in Muslim societies. On the whole, the revolts have been peaceful, non-ideological, post-Islamist, and led by the embattled middle class, including a coalition of men and women of all ages and political colors: liberal-leaning centrists, democrats, leftists, nationalists, and Islamists. Clerics and mullahs are not the key drivers; there is no Ayatollah Khomeini waiting in the wings to hijack the revolution and seize power.

Even mainstream Islamists like the Muslim Brotherhood are only one tile in a social mosaic. The Arab revolutions have left bin Laden's vanguard behind. The terrorism narrative has suffered an equally hard blow. The question is not why the Arabs and Muslims hate the United States so much, as the conventional wisdom would have it after September 11, but why western pundits and policymakers underestimated the millions of Arabs and

Muslims yearning for such universal values as human rights, the rule of law, open and pluralistic societies, and individual freedom and liberty. Although Middle Easterners are critical of American foreign policy, the Arab revolts show that they admire democratic ideals.

Al-Qaeda would like to ride the Arab revolutions and take ownership of them. For example, in his eulogy of bin Laden, al-Zawahiri celebrated "the fall of corrupt and corrupting agents of America in Tunisia and Egypt, and the shaking of their thrones in Libya, Yemen and Syria." He affirmed his support for the uprisings in Yemen, Syria, and Libya and called upon the people not to be "tricked" by American and western support for them, particularly the NATO mission in Libya. But there are few Arab buyers for al-Qaeda's sales pitch. Even al-Zawahiri, who has spent a lifetime advocating the violent overthrow of existing Arab regimes, knows that the relatively peaceful revolutions represent a hard blow to al-Qaeda's ideology.

So what remains of al-Qaeda? Very little. Today it is comprised of roving bands limited to the mountains and valleys of Pakistan's tribal areas along the Afghan border (where bin Laden was assumed to be hiding), remote areas in Yemen along the Saudi border, and the wastes of the African Sahara and the Maghreb. Its actions show a consistent pattern of ineptitude. Its leadership relies, increasingly, on inexperienced freelancers or unskilled recruits.

Only a miracle will resuscitate a transnational jihad of the al-Qaeda variety.

## ENDNOTES

1 Remarks by John O. Brennan, "A New Approach to Safeguarding Americans", August 6, 2009.

# ISPU

## RESEARCH MAKING AN IMPACT

ISPU is an independent, nonpartisan think tank and research organization committed to conducting objective, empirical research and offering expert policy analysis on some of the most pressing issues facing our nation, with an emphasis on those issues related to Muslims in the United States and around the world. Our research aims to increase understanding of American Muslims while tackling the policy issues facing all Americans, and serves as a valuable source of information for various audiences. ISPU scholars, representing numerous disciplines, offer context-specific analysis and recommendations through our publications. The diverse views and opinions of ISPU scholars expressed herein do not necessarily state or reflect the views of ISPU, its staff, or trustees.



This policy brief is a part of the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding's series of publications, events, and conferences planned across the country to reflect on the tenth anniversary of September 11, 2001. "Navigating a Post 9/11 World: A Decade of Lessons Learned" will explore several of the most pressing policy issues facing the United States and the American Muslim community, and present forward thinking and inclusive policy recommendations for the future. The series will address the threat of terrorism, the policy shifts over the past decade, and the challenges and opportunities for the American Muslim community. This series is possible thanks to the generous support of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, Mohamed and Rania Elnabty, and the Khan Family Foundation.



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