



Volume 5, Number 13

July 10, 2011

Arab Reactions to Bin Ladin's Demise

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On June 16, 2011, Ayman al-Zawahiri was named Usama Bin Ladin's successor as *al-Qa'ida's* leader. The announcement concluded a six-week readjustment period for the organization, following Bin Ladin's death at the hands of US Special Operations forces in a compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan. Zawahiri, leader of the Egyptian Jihad group, had been his second in command since the establishment of the "World Islamic Front for Jihad against the Jews and the Crusaders," in February 1998. Yet his appointment was not taken for granted and had to be approved by *al-Qa'ida's* central command. His ascension compels one to raise a number of questions: What is the state of the organization he is supposed to lead after more than a decade of war against it? Will he be able to rally the various factions around his leadership and gain their trust and support? What will be the impact of Bin Ladin's death on the organization? Will it continue on the same jihadist ideological path? In the aftermath of the tumultuous events in the region known as the "Arab Spring," what are its prospects and those of other jihadist movements?

Reactions in the Arab world to Bin Ladin's death ranged from angry to joyous, from promising revenge to expressing hope for the end of terrorism, from opining that Bin Ladenism is still alive to believing that the culture of death that he championed is gone forever. These two poles reflect conflicting agendas, seeking change in opposite directions and by opposing means. One view

was propagated by Islamists, and the other by their opponents, who reject their worldview and methods and draw comfort from the recent developments in Arab countries.

For Islamists, Bin Ladin was a *mujahid*, a hero, and a martyr, who sacrificed his life following the path of God. His death was perceived as an aggression against every Muslim Arab. Islamists conducted prayer sermons in Yemen, Kuwait, Sudan, Somalia, Algeria, Mauritania, and even in Tahrir Square in Cairo. In Gaza, Hamas Prime Minister Isma'il Haniyya condemned the killing and eulogized Bin Ladin as a *mujahid*. Movements affiliated with *al-Qa'ida*, such as AQAP (*Al-Qa'ida* in the Arabian Peninsula), ISI (Islamic State in Iraq), AQIM (*Al-Qa'ida* in the Islamic Maghrib), and *al-Shabab al-Mujahidin* in Somalia, mourned Bin Ladin and vowed to avenge his death, urging their members to kill Americans and carry out one-man *jihad* operations. The death of the leader does not mean the death of the ideology of *jihad*, they claimed. On the contrary, it provides an incentive to accelerate the fight against the infidels, which is a personal duty incumbent on every Muslim until Judgment Day. According to Shaykh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, Usama Bin Ladin is "a phenomenon of resistance of the downtrodden on earth." Bin Ladin continues to represent "an idea of resistance against tyranny" that will persist, spread, and never die, as Fayiz Abu Shamala wrote in the Hamas daily *Filastin*.¹ Moreover, it will create thousands of Bin Ladins. "Every mother will want to give birth now to a Shaykh Usama Bin Ladin," declared Anjem Choudary, British spokesman for the Islamist group [Islam4UK](#) and former member of the now-defunct *al-Muhajiroun* group.

Despite the differences between him and the Muslim Brotherhood, the MB identified with him, calling upon the United States to withdraw from the region now that its chief foe had been eliminated. One MB leader, Shaykh 'Abbud al-Zumar, said in an interview with *al-Quds al-'Arabi* that his death will not solve the problem or end the conflict, which are rooted in the American occupation of Muslim lands and America's unqualified support for Israel and the occupation of Palestine. This view was shared by the Moroccan Islamist "Justice and Spirituality" (*al-'Adl wal-Ihsan*) movement.² Bin Ladin was a symbol not only for his supporters, wrote 'Umar 'Ayasra in the Jordanian Islamic weekly *al-Sabil*. We

¹ *Filastin*, May 3, 2011.

² *Al-Quds al-'Arabi*, May 2, 2011.

disagree with his methods and his perceptions of reality, he continued, but we disagree with American conduct as well. "The US and Israel are the epitome of terrorism"; this, combined with the oppression of Arab totalitarian regimes, led to Bin Ladin's radicalization and the creation of *al-Qa'ida*.³

Yet, despite these manifestations of sympathy, several commentators in Islamist publications criticized Bin Ladin's worldview, cast doubts on his achievements and admitted that he had lost popular support. Terrorism against innocent people harmed the perception of *jihad* in Islam and contradicted Islamic values, they contended. Moreover, they called upon salafi-jihadist movements to revisit their policies in view of the success of alternative peaceful and democratic means to bring about change.

Indeed, the popular, nonviolent revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt that toppled their long-serving rulers were seen by Islamists' opponents as the ultimate proof that the Arab publics had rejected their ideology and methods. A survey, taken by the Pew Research Center's Global Attitudes Project in six Arab and Muslim countries in 2011, clearly showed that support for Bin Laden and for *al-Qa'ida* has been largely eroded since 2003. The Egyptian analyst 'Abd al-Mun'im Sa'id wrote that *al-Qa'ida* "has long been structurally weak and moribund," and the rejection of its "ignorant fanaticism" by Muslim youths marks the group's death knell.⁴ "The movement for change that the region is witnessing has marginalized such narrow-minded groups," wrote another commentator, 'Ali Ibrahim, and his end was inevitable, one way or another. Bin Ladin's operations did not serve Islam and in fact most of his victims were Arabs and Muslims. His death, coming concomitantly with the collapse of the old Arab order of which he was a part, marked a victory over terrorism and extremism.⁵

Some analysts did not mince words in their criticism of the United States, and especially for the disposal of Bin Ladin's body in a burial at sea, which they said failed to adhere to Islamic custom, and reflected not only American disregard for the Muslim world, but also a violation of basic legal and humanistic values. Summarizing Arab grievances against the United States, they emphasized the numerous American military interventions in the

³ *Al-Sabil*, May 3, 2011.

⁴ *Al-Ahram Weekly*, May 19, 2011.

⁵ *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, May 4, 2011.

region, the US's support for Israel and treatment of Iraqi and Muslim captives. Bin Ladin's evil, they argued, was the natural outcome of the evil of the United States, which exploited him to realize its agenda, and now his killing has become a tool in Obama's bid for re-election.

The Palestinian journalist Daoud Kuttab boasted that "the Arab peoples' public break from Bin Ladin's brutal ideology, and the *al-Qa'ida* leader's death, should close a sad chapter in international relations and put an end to the stereotyping of an entire people, a religion and a region as a result of one's group's criminal acts."⁶ Other Arab commentators were more cautious in their assessments. Although they agreed that radical Islamic movements had been weakened in recent years and that *al-Qa'ida* had been dealt a blow, Bin Ladinism did not die, and they assumed the continuation of terrorism, at least in the foreseeable future. Several organizations affiliated with *al-Qa'ida* are still active in some of the most troubled areas of the Middle East, including Yemen, North Africa and Iraq. However, they hoped that his death and the yearning of the Arab masses for democracy and freedoms would provide the United States and Europe with a golden opportunity to reassess their policies and support the Arab world in its search for a new order.

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The Moshe Dayan Center publishes TEL AVIV NOTES, an analytical update on current affairs in the Middle East, on the 10th and 26th of every month, as well as occasional Special Editions.

TEL AVIV NOTES is published with the support of the V. Sorell Foundation

Previous editions of TEL AVIV NOTES can be accessed at www.dayan.org, under "Commentary."

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⁶ *Washington Post*, May 2, 2011.