

Osama bin Laden's death and its implications for global terrorism

Faiz Sobhan

Nearly ten years after the horrific events of September 11, 2001, Osama bin Laden or the Sheikh, to many of his followers, was killed with two shots. Since disappearing almost ten years ago, the question of whether Bin Laden was still alive or dead would regularly be discussed around the world.

Osama bin Laden managed to transform himself into an iconic figure and a spiritual leader for thousands of extremist religious militants. Those who shared his belief that Western countries, in particular, the United States had to answer for their actions in the Islamic world, such as their lack of sympathy for the plight of the Palestinians in their unwavering support for Israel. For many of his followers, Bin Laden epitomised a warrior leader who could stand up to the United States and the West. Ironically, bin Laden was in no way charismatic or a force of personality. On the contrary, he was said to be very calm, soft-spoken and mild-mannered. His oratory highlighted the so-called evil acts being committed by the United States and others in Afghanistan and Iraq. However, his chilling public fatwa against the United States in early 1998 became the prelude to a series of deadly terrorist attacks that followed.

One of the most important questions would be the possible backlash from extremist groups. Bin Laden's death is likely to be a serious blow for terrorist outfits around the world, including Bangladesh, since now there will now be a power vacuum. However, it has to be considered that locally-based extremist militant groups have, since their establishment, reportedly operated on their own without any instructions or guidance from al-Qaeda. In this context, Bangladesh's ongoing efforts at countering terrorism should remain much the same. The law enforcement and intelligence services are already doing an effective job of putting pressure and arresting members of extremist groups. This was very recently highlighted with the arrest of the acting head of Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami in Bangladesh (HuJI-B). In the short and medium term, the concerned authorities need to continue being vigilant on the movements of the extremist groups, especially if there is a perceived threat to Western interests, such as embassies and foreign organisations.

It is still unclear what the long-term impact will be on global terrorism from Bin Laden's death. Acts of terrorism are certain to go on as they had while Bin Laden had been



hiding. Since 9/11, there have been a series of devastating attacks worldwide that has shaken the lives of everyday people going about their daily business. However, countries like Bangladesh probably do not need to be too concerned at what effect Bin Laden's death may have in terms of motivating new extremist forces. Extremist groups in Bangladesh may have been influenced to a certain extent by Bin Laden and al-Qaeda, but these groups were never directly associated with al-Qaeda. Since their inception, they have been guided by their own motivations in turning the country into an Islamic state with Sharia laws.

As mentioned earlier, Bin Laden for the last ten years had been viewed mainly as the spiritual figurehead for al-Qaeda. While he was in hiding, a new set of individuals have gradually taken over Bin Laden's mantle and espoused their own version of Islam.

Anwar Al-Awlaki, an extremely shrewd operator and a master orator, was born in New Mexico and spent many years in the United States as an imam. Al-Awlaki has influenced a number of individuals who have acted as 'lone wolves', such as Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, who tried to detonate a bomb during a mid-air flight from Holland to the United States on Christmas Day in 2009. Al-Awlaki, dubbed the 'Bin Laden of the internet', has become a spiritual mentor for many of these 'lone wolves', including also Faisal Shezad, who planted a bomb in New York's Times Square, and Major Nidal Malik Hasan, who killed 13 of his fellow soldiers at Fort Hood, Texas.

Al-Awlaki is not the new Osama bin Laden but his rhetoric has become part of the fabric of 'Bin Ladenism', along with several hundred groups and individuals who subscribe to Bin Laden's particular brand of Islamic ideology of violent jihad. Although in the post 9/11 era, Bin Laden was incapable of masterminding terrorist attacks, al-Qaeda franchises or affiliates made it a point to carry out a string of deadly attacks from Casablanca to London. Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan all became the centres of the worst kinds of terrorist attacks. Bin Ladenism will probably go on for several years and thus force many countries to continue their counter terrorism efforts to try and keep their citizens safe. ■

Faiz Sobhan is Research Director at the Bangladesh Enterprise Institute