

Chapter 15

The Death of bin Laden, and the Future of Al-Qaeda

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On May 2nd, 2011, an elite team of U.S. Navy SEALs operating under CIA command, attacked a residential compound in Abbotabad, Pakistan and in an operation lasting a matter of minutes killed Osama bin Laden, the creator, initial financier, and active chief of al Qaeda. The man who had masterminded the first instance of “four-digit” terrorism in history was unceremoniously buried at sea; no monument would mark his grave.

The targeted killing of bin Laden did not end the life of al Qaeda, as the above chapters concede. But the events of 2011 may have signaled that al Qaeda, measured as a terrorist organization, was, if nothing else, degraded to the extent that it could only exist in a half-life; an example of violent extremism on terminal care. Arguably, perhaps, this sort of systemic degradation should have been anticipated.

The United States, enjoying unprecedented global military power, struck back at its al Qaeda adversaries in a display of patient efficiency and political will. The drone strikes that had decimated the al Qaeda leadership ranks had started years before the Abbotabad raid, and continued thereafter. By the time of the Abbotabad incursion, al Qaeda, by most accounts, was in disarray. As of the time of this publication, al Qaeda has simply not recovered. There has, as some measure, been no successful attack upon the United States since 9/11, and there have been only a handful of significant terrorist strikes elsewhere in the Western world, such as London and Madrid. More importantly, both bin Laden and al Qaeda failed to serve as a match which would set aflame the Muslim world to do battle with the forces of modernity, which was translated as the infidel West and its allies (the so-called “Near Enemy”) in the Middle East. While seething resentment and conspiracy-theory-fueled suspicion of the West is commonplace, the vast majority of Muslims did not take the bait. The Arab Spring has had a real impact on some of the rulers in the Middle East, and is importantly and perhaps disturbingly Islamist, but it is not al Qaeda.

To be sure, Al-Qaeda is not a monolithic organization. Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb is something of a franchise, having adopted the Al-Qaeda name to cover a number of defeats they had suffered as the Salafist Group for

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Preaching and Combat. Approximately the same thing can be said of two quasi-insurgent groups with mixed fortunes, Boko Haram and al Shabaab. The al Qaeda name has resonance, but it continues to lack popular support. And events that from time to time get enormous press coverage, such as the murder of the U.S. Ambassador to Libya in 2012, are events, and hardly represent a lasting “defeat” of the United States.

What does the future bring? Perhaps a world in which Al-Qaeda resides, ebbing and flowing from time to time, but not dominating either the news or international politics. Jihadism and radicalization are problems, perhaps growing problems, but represent a clash between modernity and the middle ages. Robert R. Reilly, in *The Closing of the Muslim Mind*, has done much to document this phenomenon, as have many others. But if jihadism remains while Al-Qaeda declines, this does not represent terrorist success. As in the past, if on a larger scale, al Qaeda goes down to gradual, incremental defeat. The RAF and the Brigada Rosa were defeated. The Sendero Luminoso and the FARC were defeated too, at any rate they are not the threat to national security that they once were. Once terrorist organizations of breathtaking brutality, they have basically disappeared or became criminal organizations. Al-Qaeda moves from the front page to the back pages and other terrorist organizations, jihadist or not, take its place. Democracies, through application of the variety of tools outlined in this volume, are resilient and abide. Democratic states as a general principle survive the test of time.