

The killing of Osama bin Laden

Events: On 2 May 2011, Osama bin Laden was killed in a US special forces operation in Abbottabad in north-western Pakistan. This brought to an end a more than fifteen-year campaign by the USA to capture or kill bin Laden, dating back to the establishment in 1996 of a CIA unit to plan operations against the Saudi Islamist leader. These efforts were radically intensified after 9/11, with President George W. Bush declaring that bin Laden was 'wanted dead or alive'. Bin Laden survived the massive bombing campaign against al-Qaeda bases in Afghanistan in October 2001, retreating to the Tora Bora mountains in eastern Afghanistan, and then over the border into Pakistan. Bin Laden is believed to have lived mainly in the north-western region of Waziristan, moving frequently and accompanied by a small group of bodyguards. He had possibly lived in the large, custom-built walled compound in Abbottabad from as early as 2005.

Significance: The USA justified the attack squarely on the basis of the right to national self-defence, a position that assumed that, almost ten years after 9/11, bin Laden continued to pose a threat to the USA (either through his leadership of al-Qaeda or his symbolic capacity to inspire *jihad* militancy). The notion that bin Laden was a 'lawful military target' was based both on Article 51 of the UN Charter, which establishes the 'inherent right of individual or collective self-defence', and Resolutions 1368 and 1373, adopted by the UN Security Council in the aftermath of 9/11. These recognized the attack as a threat to international peace and security. Critics have, nevertheless, portrayed the death of bin Laden as an extra-judicial killing, part of a global assassination policy that the USA was using to remove those perceived to be causing it trouble. The fact that bin Laden was shot dead (rather than captured) and his body allegedly thrown into the sea contributed to this perception. The raid was, without doubt, a violation of Pakistan's national sovereignty (Pakistan had not been given prior warning of the attack), and, arguably, an opportunity was missed to arrest bin Laden and hand him over to an international court.

How did the killing of bin Laden affect al-Qaeda and the wider campaign against Islamist militancy? The belief that



bin Laden's death would deal a major blow to al-Qaeda is based on the assumption that, aside from his continuing operational significance, bin Laden was a uniquely charismatic leader and the chief symbol of Islamist resistance to the USA and the West in general. Such an analysis may, however, misunderstand the nature of the al-Qaeda movement. If al-Qaeda consists, as many argue, of an essentially leaderless network, then bin Laden's importance was always largely symbolic, and there is no reason why his mythic influence should end with his death. It has therefore been argued that the killing was primarily of significance in helping to restore a sense of national honour in the USA and boosting President Obama's chances of winning re-election. However, bin Laden's death also raised questions about the value of 'decapitation' (the removal by capture or killing of senior figures) as a counter-terrorism strategy. The aim of 'decapitation' is both to undermine the cohesion and operational effectiveness of an organization and to deliver a moral blow to its members and supporters. The fact that it can be achieved at a relatively low human and economic cost (relying, as it does, on intelligence operations and the use of drones or special forces, rather than large-scale armies) also adds to its appeal. On the other hand, in line with other force-based counter-terrorism strategies, the record of 'decapitations' is that they are generally ineffective at best and counterproductive at worst. This is because they may either precipitate a violent backlash or generate deep local resentment, especially when they also result in civilian casualties.