

The Death of Osama Bin Laden: Islamophobia Goes to America¹

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It was a bullet that killed a terrorist and revived a presidency. On the morning of May the second 2011, the world woke up to the breaking news of Osama Bin Laden's (OBL) death. He was murdered in a top-secret operation by the elite US Navy Seal Team Six with two shots - a 'double tap' maneuver - once in the torso and then in the head to ensure the enemy's death [2]. "We got him!", President Barak Obama added as he heard what he had long wanted to hear: 'Geronimo EKIA' ('Enemy Killed in Action'). The enemy was, of course, OBL, America's Public Enemy Number One and, since 9/11, the personified embodiment of 'Islamic terrorism'. The US Special Forces captured him in a fortified compound locally known as 'Waziristan Mansion', in the military garrison town of Abbottabad, in North-West Pakistan. Curiously, he was not hiding in a 'cave' in the mountainous area of Tora Bora in Eastern Afghanistan, as the world had been led to believe. Indeed, 'Waziristan Mansion' was located just one kilometre away from the Pakistani Military Academy and about 100km (62 miles) from the capital Islamabad [3]. Pentagon officials and the US media claimed that OBL's body was 'buried at sea' following the Muslim practice of

burial within 24 hours and to prevent his grave becoming a shrine, while Obama hailed the operation as "the most significant achievement to date in our nation's effort to defeat al-Qaeda" [4]. Although there is no question that OBL's death has brought to an end an 11-year-old man hunt and is the beginning of the end for the so-called War on Terror (WOT), the defeat of al-Qaeda is far from being any closer. Achieving the latter is far more complicated than killing Bin Laden and requires a new set of strategies. Four of them will be discussed here:

The first strategy consists in ending the 'war on terror' rhetoric and policy. Since the Bush administration launched the WOT in order to combat al-Qaeda's the terrorist activities, the exhausted and age-old discourse of a 'clash of civilisations' between the West and the Rest resurfaced with specific reference to Islam. Yet for many of us in the Muslim world, the ideologies and terrorist activities of al-Qaeda under the leadership of OBL did not at all reflect how true Muslims should act and live. A faith of peace and love for the overwhelming majority of Muslims, Islam is nevertheless all too often portrayed as 'uncivilised', 'traditional', 'irrational',



'violent', and 'alien' by Orientalist and essentialist understandings that are deep-seated and centuries-old [5]. Influenced by these assumptions, much of the current literature and debate continues to adopt a rather simplistic and stereotypical view of Islam as a violent, irrational, and backward religion that has the potential to turn its believers into potential terrorists (such as OBL himself). Hence, the US-led WOT can be identified as the continuation of such orientalist, ethnocentric and cultural biases that characterize the relationship between the West and the East - or the 'Orient' or 'Islamic world' - in the form of violent conflicts between 'us and them'. Such simplistic views impede the understanding of WOT by creating a 'false-consciousness' for non-Muslims - 'us' - as rational, non-violent, and peaceful beings in the West, while alienating the dedicated (and diverse) followers of Islam worldwide - them - as irrational and violent. Although it seems that the Obama administration stopped using the 'War on Terror' expression at the level of policy and rhetoric, the idea of being 'at war with Al-Qaeda' has never been abandoned and indeed it has recently been used to justify the killing of OBL [6]. Reactions to his death varied from the celebrations and chanting of Americans, to the condemnations for the way he was killed and 'buried at sea' by his followers and ordinary Muslims. There were also some critical voices in the West. Hence, the US Special Forces' operation has raised many questions about the legality of the killing and the handling of his burial among Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

The second strategy requires a comparative and critical approach to understanding 'religious terrorism' in the contemporary world. In the post 9/11 era, it has become fashionable to attribute terrorism to 'religion' or 'religious extremism' (Islam especially) while the majority of a burgeoning literature on 'religious terrorism' contains almost nothing about 'Christian terrorism', 'Jewish terrorism', or 'Hindu terrorism'. By singling out Islam as a 'violent' religion, mainstream understandings of terrorism and counter-terrorism do more harm than good in ex-

plaining the new set of challenges of global affairs. A critical study of terrorism must therefore contextualise the particular historical, political, social, and ideological power structures that lead an individual or a group to use force and violent tactics (See Critical Terrorism Studies, 2009) [7]. Without engaging with contextual dimensions, any study is bound to fail to understand the complex realities of international terrorism and, particularly, so-called 'Islamic terrorism'[8].

A careful student of Middle Eastern politics and 'Islamic terrorism' can easily identify historical, social and political connections between key regional events and Super-Power involvement during the Cold War - links that led precisely to the rise of the monstrous OBL phenomenon.

The first chain of regional events unfolded in 1979 with the rise of Islam as a revolutionary and political force in Iran. Afterwards, the unprecedented impact of the Iranian Revolution of 1979 on the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan led to the rise of *mujahedeen* in the 1980s as well as the *Taliban* in the 1990s. "The first time Bin Laden had seen the Tora Bora caves, he had been a young *mujahedeen* fighter and a recent university graduate with a degree in civil engineering. It had been some 20 years before, during Washington's first Afghan war - the decade-long, C.I.A.-financed jihad of the 1980's against the Soviet occupation" [9]. For

those who had heeded these warnings, the 'West's road to 9/11' was paved with the consequences of short-term planned policies to gain wider geopolitical interests [10].

However, those who ignored these warnings found an easy answer: Islam was, for them, the primary referent in the theory and praxis of political violence and terrorism. This is not only based on an implicit assumption that Islam - in all its complexities, contradictions and cultural differences, as well as in its different political trajectories - is monolithic and homogenous, but also obscures a better understanding of the diversities and complexities of religiously-motivated terrorist acts. From Afghanistan



Osama
Bin Laden

to Turkey via Pakistan, Muslim societies are neither unique in terms of religious beliefs, nor homogeneous in terms of a mythical 'Islamic identity' that would transcend the cultural, national, and regional differences of Asia, the Middle East and North Africa.

The third strategy, I suggest, questions the implications of the OBL's killing in the long term. The US's supposed 'Islamic burial' of OBL at sea raises an interesting question: why was the Obama administration afraid of his body? How can a dead person be a threat? Washington's explanations that such a burial was meant to prevent OBL's grave from becoming a shrine for his followers actually exposes a considerable level of ignorance about Islam and Muslim traditions. As a Saudi, Osama bin Laden belonged to the Wahabi tradition of Islam, the followers of which do not actually build or visit shrines (the practice of visiting shrines is more common in the Sufi branch of Islam). Moreover, according to Muslim scholars, Bin Laden's burial was completely unjustified because while "sea burials are permissible for Muslims in extraordinary circumstances", OBL's death was not one of them [11]. Moreover, according to Islamic belief, "the land and the sea belong to God, who is able to protect and raise the dead at the end of times for Judgment Day", therefore it would not be a significant concern to his followers where exactly his body was buried [12]. Islamic scholar Montasser el-Zayat stated that although the reason behind American fears of creating a shrine to OBL is understandable, they made a 'strategic mistake'. Put it simply, "they don't want to see him become a symbol, but he is already a symbol in people's hearts" [13]. Furthermore, the killing of OBL might serve to incite new fervour and "may further provoke militant calls for revenge attacks against American targets" in the long term [14]. Therefore, Bin Laden is likely to be regarded as a martyr in the hearts and minds of his followers [15].

The last but not the least significant strategy focuses on the implications of OBL's death in the long term relations between the West and the Islamic world. In fact, the handling of OBL's body and US fears of creating a shrine for his followers reflect widespread Islamophobic anxieties in American

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society and administration. Unlike other phobias such as the fear of spiders (Arachnophobia) the fear of heights (Acrophobia) and the fear of England or English culture (Anglophobia), the fear of Islam (Islamophobia) is a special form of 'social anxiety' that is "increasingly used to refer to religiously-motivated hostility directed at Muslims" [16]. While Europeans historically had a longer and closer engagement with Muslims as immigrants and minorities of the colonial and post-colonial period the American engagement with Muslims is relatively new.

In contemporary politics, 'Islamophobia' was introduced to Britain by the publication of the Runnymede Trust's report in 1997 [17]. It highlighted eight main 'closed views' of Islam that characterised Islamophobia in Britain as follow:

- i. *Monolithic*: Islam is seen as a 'monolithic bloc, static and unresponsive to change'.
- ii. *Separate*: Islam seen as separate and other – (a) not having any aims or values in common with other cultures; (b) not affected by them; and (c) not influencing them.
- iii. *Inferior*: Islam seen as inferior to the West – barbaric, irrational, primitive, sexist.
- iv. *Enemy*: Islam seen as violent, aggressive, threatening, supportive of terrorism, engaged in 'a clash of civilisations'.
- v. *Manipulation*: Islam seen as a political ideology, used for political or military advantage.
- vi. *Criticism of West rejected*: Criticisms made by Islam of 'the West' rejected out of hand.
- vii. *Discrimination defended*: Hostility towards Islam used to justify discriminatory practices towards Muslims and exclusion of Muslims from mainstream society.
- viii. *Islamophobia seen as natural*: Anti-Muslim hostility accepted as natural and 'normal' [18].

The overall intention of the report was twofold. First, it challenged 'Islamophobic assumptions that Islam is a single monolithic system without internal development, diversity and dialogue'. Second, it drew 'attention to the principal dangers which Islamophobia creates or exacerbates for Muslim communities, and therefore for the well-being of society as a whole' [19]. Similar views have become more widely accepted in Europe as a whole after the publication of the EUMC (European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia) Islamophobia reports of 2001, 2003 and 2005 [20]. Until 2001, American



society was not engaged in similar concerns about Islam and Muslims. Within the last decade, especially after the 9/11 and 7/7 terrorist attacks, European and American political discourses and anxieties about Islamophobia converged in the perception of Islam as a new and existential threat to Western interests, and have found a common response in the 'war on terror'. However, it is important to note that these contemporary Islamophobic assumptions are historically embedded within Orientalist discourses [21]. Therefore, a miscalculated short term policy (such as killing the enemy in action) might have stronger implications in the long

term and might even backfire on America, something which has already been seen in Bin Laden's curious transition from young mujahedeen involved in a CIA-supported war, to US Public Enemy Number One. While Washington's mission to kill OBL may have been successfully accomplished, its objective of defeating Al-Qaeda has only just begun. Unless the US tackles the 'real threat' – those Orientalist and Islamophobic assumptions that reproduce and exacerbate the Muslim/Western divide – it will be a difficult mission to accomplish. This is much more challenging, unfortunately, than firing a single bullet at an unarmed man. **PR**

Notes:

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- 1) Some parts of this extract are taken from, "the Editor's Introduction: Views from the 'Others' of the War on Terror", Special Issue, *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, Vol.3, No.1, April 2010, pp. 1-5; and Ayla Göl, 'The War on Terror and the Rise of Neo-Orientalism in the 21st Century', *e-IR* <<http://www.e-ir.info/?p=3505>.
- 2) <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-13257330>
- 3) <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-13332623>
- 4) <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-13256676>
- 5) E. Said, *Orientalism: Western conceptions of the Orient*. New York, NY: Random House, 1978; *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993; *Covering Islam: How the media and the experts determine how we see the rest of the world*. London: Vintage, 1997.
- 6) <http://richardjacksonterrorismblog.wordpress.com/> See, 'Interview: The War on Terror after bin Laden', 10 May 2011
- 7) R. Jackson, M. Breen-Smyth, and J. Gunning, *Critical terrorism studies: A new research agenda*. London: Routledge, 2009.
- 8) Amir Taheri, 1987. *Holy terror: The Inside story of Islamic terrorism*. London: Sphere books.
- 9) <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/09/11/magazine/11TORABORA.html>
- 10) D. Carlton, 2005. *The West's road to 9/11: Resisting, appeasing and encouraging terrorism since 1970*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- 11) <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/pakistan/8488906/Osama-bin-Laden-dead-Islamic-scholars-criticise-bin-Ladens-sea-burial.html>
- 12) http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/05/02/osama-bin-laden-sea-burial-muslim-scholars_n_856315.html
- 13) *Ibid.*
- 14) *Ibid.*
- 15) <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/pakistan/8488906/Osama-bin-Laden-dead-Islamic-scholars-criticise-bin-Ladens-sea-burial.html>
- 16) K. Zebiri, 'The Redeployment of Orientalist Themes in Contemporary Islamophobia,' *Studies in Contemporary Islam*, 2008:10, 4-44.
- 17) *Islamophobia: A Challenge For Us All*, <http://www.runnymedetrust.org/uploads/publications/pdfs/islamophobia.pdf>
- 18) *Ibid.*
- 19) *Ibid.*
- 20) Zebiri, *op. cit.*, p.13. Based on the EUMC's expertise, the Fundamental Rights Agency has been set up on 1 March 2007. See http://www.fra.europa.eu/fraWebsite/about_fra/who_we_are/origins/origins_en.htm; http://www.youth-against-racism.net/files/youth/EUMC_Fight_against_Antisemitism_and_Islamophobia.pdf
- 21) Zebiri, *op. cit.*