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- Stimson Experts React to Death of Osama bin Laden

## Spotlight

### Stimson Experts React to Death of Osama bin Laden

May 02, 2011



*Osama bin Laden was killed early Monday (Sunday afternoon in Washington), in a raid by U.S. Navy SEALs on his compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan. Lincoln Bloomfield, Jr., Ellen Laipson, and Michael Krepon comment on this historic event.*

#### **Lincoln Bloomfield, Jr., Chairman of the Board**

The United States' successful military action to eliminate Osama Bin Ladin was a justified act of retribution and self-defense. On several levels this action affected America's national interests. Families victimized by the 9/11 attacks gained some solace from the knowledge that their country did not give up its pursuit of the chief perpetrator. The nation's military and intelligence professionals accomplished the one deed without which the decade-long response to Al Qaeda would forever have been incomplete. The outpouring of emotion among Americans when the news broke showed that there is a powerful unity in this country that transcends politics. Above all, the reputation of the United States was reinforced as a superpower not to be aggressed upon with impunity.

Analysts will assess the tactical impact of Bin Ladin's removal on the Al Qaeda threat; very likely the loosely linked extremist elements will lower their profile but seek to demonstrate their continued relevance by attacking Western interests. Beyond the specific capabilities and activities by these groups, the greater impact of this event is psychological.

While the Obama Administration correctly guards against reprisal attacks on the homeland and interests abroad, it could also seize the moment and leverage the psychological impact of this seminal event. Muammar Qadhafi in Libya must be wondering today if his inner circle has been compromised; now is the time to try and force his exit. Bashar al Asad in Syria faces diminishing options as his Alawi-led security forces create a mounting death toll among the majority Sunnis; could the U.S. throw him a lifeline where he jettisons his Iranian, Hizballah and Hamas allies and negotiates a full peace with Israel? Egypt and Iraq have a reasonable chance to become participatory, rights-based democracies; to defeat Al Qaeda, the U.S. should intensify its efforts to ensure they achieve it.

### **Ellen Laipson, President**

The death of Bin Laden is a major milestone in the war on terrorism, and its timing, while long overdue in some respects, is helpful. It allows the tenth anniversary of the September 11 attacks to create some closure on the experience for the survivors and for American society as a whole, and it converges well with President Obama's plans to scale back US involvement in Afghanistan. It is a powerful symbol of "mission accomplished" for the fight against Al-Qaeda, even if bringing lasting stability to Afghanistan still eludes us.

The successful attack will be hailed as a great military and intelligence achievement, and it entailed highly skilled and courageous work to identify and develop intelligence leads in a hostile environment, and to execute a military operation, apparently without full support of the local government. It culminates more than a decade of work by the intelligence community on the al-Qaeda threat, after several near misses and policy-intelligence disconnects that prevented past attempts to conduct similar operations.

But the spirit of celebration needs to be tempered with careful consideration of the actual cost and the opportunity costs of the intense focus on this man and his organization. It is time now to revisit the investment made in the counter-terrorism business, inside government and outside, and to calibrate fresh what is a reasonable level of attention and resources to dedicate to this threat, as compared to other transnational threats of the 21<sup>st</sup> century security landscape.

There are immediate and legitimate fears of new terrorist acts in response to the death of Al-Qaeda's leader, and we have not yet felt the full brunt of emotion and political backlash from the Muslim world, but one can hope that we can soon move on to a more positive agenda in relations with the Muslim world, and work to get US-Pakistani relations in a more productive mode.

### **Michael Krepon, Co-Founder and Director of South Asia program**

Abbottabad is a quiet, lovely city. The Stimson Center convened a Track II workshop there for rising Pakistani strategic analysts. The city's most prominent feature remains Kakul, the Pakistani military academy where outstanding recruits begin their studies and service careers. On April 23<sup>rd</sup>, the Pakistani Chief of Army Staff, General Ashfaq Kayani, visited Kakul to congratulate recent graduates. According to press accounts of the Army Chief's remarks, Kayani claimed that Pakistani security forces "have broken the back of terrorists and the nation will soon prevail over the menace." Kayani also asserted that the Pakistan Army "was completely aware of internal and external threats to the country." Osama bin Laden's compound was a mile away from the parade ground where Kayani spoke.

Pakistani authorities must be feeling acute embarrassment and resentment at this juncture: embarrassment at Osama's presence within Pakistan, despite numerous official denials of this possibility, and resentment at a severe breach of Pakistani sovereignty in a settled area. Had U.S. special forces and intelligence failed in this effort, the repercussions on U.S.-Pakistan relations would have been horrific. Having succeeded in bringing Osama bin Laden to justice, the