In the aftermath of Abbottabad

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DURHAM -- Osama bin Laden has been killed by U.S. forces and his body buried at sea. What does it all mean?

First, this is a severe blow to al-Qaida and the entire jihadi movement. Although bin Laden was not able to actively plan attacks or engage in operations, he was the spiritual leader of the global jihad and the chief strategist for the al-Qaida network. There is no charismatic heir who can fill this void.

Bin Laden's death will accelerate the weakening of the al-Qaida network that has been occurring for many years. The central al-Qaida organization that executed the 9/11 attacks no longer exists. Affiliate and allied organization are active in Yemen, Somalia and elsewhere, but with bin Laden gone, they may no longer find it advantageous to use the al-Qaida brand or take direction from what remains of the al-Qaida leadership. These organizations may refocus their efforts on their own local circumstances rather than dedicating resources to the more abstract and difficult goal of attacking the United States.

Al-Qaida's jihadi ideology still exists, but its popularity has been eroding for a decade and will continue to do so with its chief proponent gone. Support for bin Laden, al-Qaida and the jihadi ideology have plummeted in Muslim world. Everywhere they have gained a foothold and implemented their totalitarian theocratic ways, people have turned against them - whether in Afghanistan, Iraq or Pakistan. Even radical clerics have turned against bin Laden for killing so many Muslim civilians in pursuit of his goals. There may not be celebrations in Muslim nations as there were in Washington and New York, but there is not a single government in the Muslim world, or many individual Muslims, who will bemoan bin Laden's passing.

Leaders such as Anwar al-Awaki and Ayman Zawahiri are at large (for now) and will continue to rally the jihadi cause to inspire more attacks. Warped individuals around the globe may still find inspiration from bin Laden's message or seek revenge for his killing. But lone wolf terrorists without institutional support can only inflict low-level harm - they are not a strategic threat capable of producing massive, 9/11-level damage.

Global counterterrorism efforts will need to continue. But with the core objective of killing bin Laden finally behind us, perhaps the United States and its allies will start to recalibrate - not necessarily in the amount of resources dedicated to the counterterrorism task, but in terms of ratcheting down our psychological preoccupation with terrorism that has disproportionately dominated our discourse, despite an erosion of the actual threat.

Challenges continue to abound in the Muslim world and bin Laden's death does not change most of them. The Taliban insurgency is still robust. We have an interest in preventing the rise of a new Taliban state that could host al-Qaida or similar groups. But even the Taliban has learned from its disastrous affiliation with bin Laden. If the Taliban cannot be militarily defeated at an acceptable cost, which by all accounts is probably the case, perhaps Taliban control in some Pashtun areas of Afghanistan is a result with which we can live. Bin Laden's death could open up broader policy options for us.

Nuclear-armed Pakistan continues to face multiple extremist insurgencies as well. One thorn in our relationship has been removed by bin Laden's death, but the location of bin Laden's hideout so close to the Pakistani capital, the weakness of the civilian government and the duplicity of at least elements of the Pakistani intelligence service will continue to infuse the relationship with tension and difficulties.
Our most important interest is managing the uprisings against regimes across the Middle East. It is more bad news for al-Qaeda that these revolts have been fueled by economic frustration and the people's desire for a voice in how they are governed, not a desire for Islamic theocracy. Yet, if lives of the citizenry do not improve as a result of the Arab Spring or there is widespread chaos and instability, there will be openings for the jihadi movement. The stakes for getting this right could not be higher.

Finally, bin Laden's death could have a domestic impact as well. Prior to last Sunday night, the American public was in a deep funk. There is a crisis in confidence in all of our institutions (perhaps other than the military) generated by a deep concern that we face intractable problems that none of them can solve. Bringing bin Laden to justice will boost our national spirits and provide an opening for President Barack Obama to unify the country behind some shared objectives. In our hyper-partisan age and times of economic distress, this window may be brief, but the president needs to take advantage of it.

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