

THE NEWS & OBSERVER

newsobserver.com

Published: Sep 09, 2007 12:00 AM

Modified: Sep 09, 2007 06:40 AM

Capture won't snuff al-Qaeda

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There are valid moral and strategic reasons to continue pursuing Osama bin Laden, but removing him would not significantly diminish the long-term threat we face from radical Islamist terrorism.

As desirable as it would be for bin Laden to be captured and prosecuted by a Muslim nation, neither Afghanistan nor Pakistan wants the political burden of detaining and trying him. The U.S. and its allies do not want to expose our soldiers to the heightened risk of a capture operation, and bin Laden's bodyguards have orders to shoot him if capture is imminent.

So, unless he dies of natural causes first, bin Laden will achieve his martyrdom. (If death is as virtuous as bin Laden proclaims, why has he taken such extreme measures to avoid it?)

We should not expect bin Laden's removal to cause al-Qaeda to collapse as the Peruvian terrorist group, Shining Path, did when its leader, Abimael Guzman, was arrested.

A "decapitation" strategy can succeed when an organization is built around the charismatic leadership of an individual who dominates every aspect of its existence: strategy, tactics, communication, recruitment and ideology.

As terrorism expert Bruce Hoffman has described, however, today's al-Qaeda is a flat, networked organization consisting of the remnants of its core leadership, associated groups around the world, individuals with a past affiliation and home-grown radicals inspired by but not formally linked to al-Qaeda. This organization is flexible and dynamic enough to survive the loss of its leader.

The need for resolution

Nonetheless, there are a variety of reasons to take out bin Laden.

First, to state the obvious, bin Laden is a mass murderer, a war criminal and an instigator of widespread sectarian violence in Iraq. We are authorized under international and domestic law to use lethal force to defend ourselves against him. It is in our national security interest to do so.

Second, bin Laden's death would strike a blow to al-Qaeda's morale that might diminish at least its short-term effectiveness. Having evaded capture for six years, bin Laden has an aura of invincibility that inspires potential recruits, adherents and admirers. Much of his appeal is his willingness to stand up to the United States and make us look impotent. We need to erase this image by demonstrating that mass murderers of innocents will be held accountable -- no matter how long it takes.

Third, bin Laden's departure may adversely affect the internal dynamics of al-Qaeda. Although bin Laden's deputy, Ayman al Zawahiri, would be the clear successor, he would not necessarily provide the unchallengeable leadership within al-Qaeda that bin Laden clearly does.

Although it is unlikely bin Laden plays a serious day-to-day tactical role while on the run, he can make decisions and issue orders that will stick. If Zawahiri cannot command that level of respect, al-Qaeda could experience infighting, division and competition -- factors that have sapped the effectiveness of many other terrorist groups.

These counterterrorism benefits need to be weighed against the potential negative impact of a U.S. operation in Pakistan targeting bin Laden and other al-Qaeda leaders. With a nuclear-armed Pakistan experiencing an increase in extremist violence and its president, Pervez Musharraf, losing his grip on power, a U.S. encroachment on Pakistan's sovereignty could strengthen radical elements and discourage any government that emerges from continuing to cooperate with U.S. counterterrorism efforts.

Newsweek reported last week that in late 2005 then-Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld scrapped a proposed raid to seize Zawahiri and other high-value targets based on information the CIA deemed 80 percent reliable. To Rumsfeld, it looked too much like an "invasion of Pakistan."

Despite tough campaign rhetoric about getting bin Laden, the decision to issue a "go" order will be difficult for whatever president gets to make it.

Even if we eliminate bin Laden, we should harbor no illusions that his departure would dramatically reduce the long-term threat to the U.S. and the West. To counter this threat, we must understand that its genesis is a deep-seated, long-standing movement -- one Hoffman calls a global insurgency -- that is fueled by a toxic mix of historical grievance, a sense of decline and humiliation, ideology, religion and politics.

Bin Laden has brilliantly given voice to and harmonized this movement, but its strength and longevity do not depend on one man alone. Regrettably, radical Islamist extremism will continue to be a serious concern long after Osama bin Laden has left the scene.

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