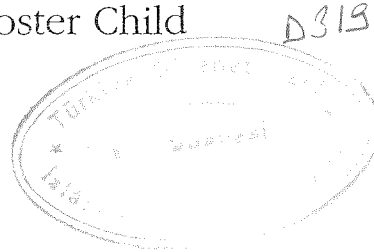


The Late Shaikh Osama bin Laden: A Religious Profile of al-Qaeda's Deceased Poster Child

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“Al-Qaeda,” wrote British insider Paul Grieve back in 2006, “is now an all-consuming idea, a Salafi rallying cry across the Muslim world that will never be suppressed. Al-Qaeda is a franchise, and not the worldwide organization sought by the American government as an ideological opponent to replace communism . . . Global events, especially the running sore of Iraq, and the daunting challenge of Afghanistan, have demonstrated that this phantom will never be destroyed, even if the personal inspiration of Osama bin Laden or OBL were to be eliminated.”¹

As of 2 May 2011 OBL has been eliminated but arguably his legacy continues to loom large in Summer 2011 because he remains the poster child of al-Qaeda, its most virulent face of defiance to the ambitions of every American president, from Clinton to Bush to Obama. Despite the best hopes and the most stealth practices of American warriors, OBL may persist as a jihadi irridentist for future generations of Muslim warriors, even though may he no longer be an active agent of terror in our lifetime.

The high profile of OBL is the stuff of legends. From his birth in 1957 into a wealthy Yemeni-Saudi family to his mediocre career as an engineering student during the 70s to his early adventures with Muslim radicals in the 80s, Osama Bin Laden was not an exceptional figure. During the late '70s and early '80s he did embrace the Afghan resistance, framed as a defensive struggle, or jihad, against Soviet invaders. Several Saudis, and the American government, supported him at this time but only as one of numerous surrogates to combat the then dreaded Communist enemy. In a 2005 interview, Prince Turki al-Faisal, who had just become the Saudi ambassador to the USA, admitted that he had met OBL no less than five times. Was he impressed? Not really. To Prince Turki, OBL appeared as “a very shy person, very self-effacing, extremely sparse in his words and generally a do-gooder, someone who brought financial and medical and other support to the Afghan mujahidin.”²

¹ Paul Grieve, *ISLAM — History, Faith & Politics* (London: Robinson, 2006):314.

² “New Saud in the House”, interview with Deborah Solomon, *The New York Times Magazine*, August 28, 2005, p. 11.

What changed OBL was the rebuff he experienced after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990. He expected to play a role in the official Saudi response to Saddam's invasion yet neither he nor his Arab Afghans were welcomed into the military maneuvers that eventually defeated Saddam. So loudly did OBL protest at the presence of an infidel (US army on Saudi soil that he was evicted from his homeland (and eventually, in 1994, denied citizenship)). He moved to Sudan, where he spent nearly five years before returning to Afghanistan in 1996. In that year, through a juridical decree known as the Ladinese Epistle, he became a more widely regarded public figure. Though some Saudis welcomed his attack on the continuing American presence in the peninsula, few paid much attention to the subsequent decree issued as a joint statement under the World Islamic Front. Then in 1998 came the African bombings in Kenya and Tanzania. These bombings actually gave him a negative image, since many of those killed were Muslims. Yet because they were followed by retaliatory American bombings, OBL was spared further criticism. Indeed, he turned the American bombings to his advantage, claiming, as did many other Muslims, that the attacks had been indiscriminate. Neither his critics nor his supporters believed that he would be able to execute a ‘counter-attack’ on the magnitude of 9/11. Once again, many in the Muslim world did not approve of the NYC-DC aerial suicide bombings, but in the aftermath of further American military strikes, this time against Afghanistan and Iraq, OBL's stature as the symbol of resistance to American hegemony and Arab perfidy grew, and it has since been enhanced by media coverage of his every word.

Even after his death by a brilliantly coordinated Navy Seal attack in Pakistani territory on 2 May 2011, OBL remains a complex, even wily character. Like a sphinx or a riddle, he defies easy description, and eludes procrustean labels. The more written about him, it seems, the less he is understood. He circulates beneath the radar screen of even the most dogged researcher and the most adroit analyst. A leading British journalist once depicted him as “the standard bearer for the radical extremist fringe of the broad movement that is modern Islamic militancy.” In other words, Bin Laden the man was inseparable from Bin Laden the ideologue, and the ideology he projected, according to this same journalist, was “a debased, violent, nihilistic and anti-rational millenarianism.”³

For the general public two labels seem to stick: fundamentalist and terrorist. Each locates OBL in a generic profile with identifiable antecedents and cohorts. As a fundamentalist, he elides with other text-riveted Islamic activists, from the Pakistani Mawdudi to the Egyptian Qutb to the Sudanese Turabi. As a terrorist, he joins other kill-and-destroy ideologues, religious and secular, whether from the Middle East (Palestine, Israel and Lebanon) or from Europe (Ireland, France, Italy, Germany and Russia).

The two labels conflate in the persona of OBL. Even after his physical death, he is still viewed as a Qur'an quoting, gun toting warrior defending a violated sacred domain, the super-nation of Islam, against both vile infidels (with the US at the head of the list)

³ Jason Burke. *Al-Qaeda: The True Story of Radical Islam* (London: Penguin, 2004): xxiii–xxiv.