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Osama's al-Qaeda ready for a fight

By Syed Saleem Shahzad
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ISLAMABAD - Command of al-Qaeda will be taken over by a select handful of leaders who had been chosen in advance of the death of Osama bin Laden, who was killed on Monday morning in a strike by Pakistani and American special forces on a compound in Abbottabad, about 65 kilometers north of the Pakistani capital Islamabad.

The death of the 54-year-old Bin Laden, who had a US\$50 million reward on his head, is also likely to mark the beginning of a shift of the war theater from

Afghanistan to Pakistan, al-Qaeda insiders tell Asia Times Online.

Asia Times Online contacts in the North Waziristan tribal area - a militant hotbed - confirmed that several meetings had already been convened in the town of Mir Ali to formulate strategies. They all confirmed an immediate and fierce retaliation against Pakistan and the breaking up of all ceasefire agreements with the Pakistan military.

The US had been on Bin Laden's trail ever since he fled Afghanistan when American forces invaded the country in 2001 to oust the Taliban in retaliation for the September 11, 2001, attacks on New York and Washington; Bin Laden and al-Qaeda planned the attacks while guests of the Taliban.

"I can report to the American people and to the world, that the US has conducted an operation that killed Osama bin Laden," President Barack Obama, also the US commander-in-chief, said from the White House. "After a firefight, they killed Osama bin Laden and took custody of his

body," Obama said. "The death of bin Laden marks the most significant achievement to date in our nation's efforts to defeat al-Qaeda."

It is believed one of his sons, two of his wives and many aides were killed in the raid, which included helicopter gunships.

Bin Laden's death was confirmed by Pakistani intelligence. Lieutenant General Ahmad Shuja Pasha, the director general of Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), said the ISI had been aware of the operation and was part of the whole process.

The US has put all its embassies on alert, warning Americans of al-Qaeda reprisal attacks. This corresponds with information obtained by Asia Times Online that Bin Laden's death is likely to revive international terror operations against Western capitals that had been frozen following the great Arab 2011 revolt.

Late last month, Bin Laden warned that al-Qaeda would unleash a "nuclear hellstorm" if he were captured, according to classified diplomatic documents released by WikiLeaks.

Obama said that the Central Intelligence Agency had been closer on Bin Laden's trail since October 2010 and that he had been visible on intelligence radars early this year, something that was exclusively reported by Asia Times Online:

After a prolonged lull, the United States Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) has launched a series of covert operations in the rugged Hindu Kush mountains of Pakistan and Afghanistan following strong tip-offs that al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden has been criss-crossing the area in the past few weeks for high-profile meetings in militant redoubts. ([Bin Laden sets alarm bells ringing](#) March 25.)

The next steps

Following the upheavals in the Middle East and North Africa, Bin Laden had been spurred into action to create unity within the Islamist cadre of Pakistan and Afghanistan in the Afghan battle against the Americans. For this reason, he recently traveled to Pakistan to meet with Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, the legendary Afghan mujahid and founder and leader of the Hezb-e-Islami Afghanistan political party and paramilitary group, and many other top jihadi leaders. He is believed to have shifted to Abbottabad about 10 days ago and was about to move again, sources told Asia Times Online.

They said that al-Qaeda's leadership *shura* (council), would run the organization and a new chief would be decided later. A new generation of commanders includes Sirajuddin Haqqani, Qari Ziaur Rahman, Nazir Ahmad and Ilyas Kashmiri, who have joined forces with al-Qaeda.

Over the past few years, Bin Laden had become more of a popular iconic figure than a nuts and bolts leader - most organizational policies were run by his deputy, Egyptian Dr Ayman al-Zawahiri, and other ideologues. Therefore, operational mechanisms can be expected to remain the same.

On the basis of interaction with top al-Qaeda leaders, this correspondent has no doubt in predicting that Operation Osama Bin Laden marks the beginning of a shift of the main war theater from Afghanistan to Pakistan and that all previous efforts for reconciliation between Pakistani militants and Pakistan will be sabotaged and all guns will turn towards the Pakistani military establishment.