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Why the legacy of Osama bin Laden will live on

By Peter Baofu, Ph.D.

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The recent "gruesome" killing of Osama bin Laden by U.S. special forces in Abbottabad, Pakistan on May 02, 2011 was received with jubilation in the U.S. (and its allies), and there is even an euphoric talk in Western mainstream media about the coming end of al-Qaida and the emerging triumph for the war on terror.

Contrary to this current euphoria, the legacy of Osama bin Laden will live on, just as the wars in the world will continue. There can be many different reasons for this, of course; consider, for illustration, five of them below.

(1) The first reason is that, long before his "gruesome" murder by U.S. special forces, bin Laden, dead or alive, had already become an iconic symbol of Arab resistance against imperialism by outside powers in the Middle East (and, for that matter, for many others fighting for the same cause around the world). Al-Qaida, the organization that he founded, had already out-grown him and became a decentralized global network, with each cell making decisions on its own. Many people do not know that terrorist organizations have long existed in human history since antiquity, and one of their main characteristics is "high turnovers of leadership," with each leader to last only a few years on average, as Thomas Magstadt once aptly commented. In this sense,

bin Laden had already lived longer than the average. Old ones are gone, and new ones emerge to replace them, so the cycle continues, as it has since the dawn of civilization.

In this sense, whether or not the U.S. releases the photos of bin Laden's death has less to do with the issue of proving his death than its desperate effort to cover up a brutal killing of him and others in the compound - a brutality that the West has so often attributed to terrorists.

In addition, although many Arabs in the region do not necessarily share his violent tactics, they are sympathetic to his courage and vision to fight for a new Arab world free of imperialism by outside powers (which has killed so many innocent lives, destroyed so much the local infrastructures and properties, oppressed so many dissenters in the hands of Western-supported autocratic regimes, and exploited so much the local valuable resources in the past decades). And many Arabs also do not forget what Matthew Rothschild boldly pointed out in his article "Bin Laden's Crimes, and Ours" on May 03: "bin Laden killed far fewer innocent people than any of those U.S. Presidents" (like Bush in Iraq and Afghanistan as a good example).

In fact, many of those who participate in the current democratic movement in the Middle East, while not necessarily supporting his violent tactics, have much in common with the vision of bin Laden for Arab liberation from imperialism by outside powers. One main difference between those in the democratic movement and those in al-Qaida is that the former focuses on domestic freedom (from autocratic oppression), while the latter focuses on external freedom (from imperialism by outside powers). This is something that Western mainstream media do not want to report, out of conflicting interests; and this is also something that many ordinary Arabs do not want to openly acknowledge, out of fear of persecution by their own autocratic governments often supported by Western powers.

(2) The second reason is that, as long as many Arab regimes are weak and supported by Western powers for the latter's imperial interests (e.g., natural resources, strategic military bases, lucrative armed sales, a buffer zone for Israel, the war on the militants and insurgents, the spread of Western secular values in the region, and so on), the struggle against the West (and for that matter, against the corrupt Western allies in the region) will continue.

(3) The third reason is that, as long as Western governments continue to preach human rights while violating them in the Non-West with impunity time and again (like massive bombings, secret tortures, untold atrocities, covert operations, ruthless economic sanctions, Western-supported autocratic regimes, economic exploitation, and so on), this only perpetuates the subsequent countless casualties and widespread sufferings in the region, which are excellent breeding grounds for anti-Western sentiments among the natives.

It is important to note that, in regard to the "gruesome" murder of bin Laden, the Pakistani government officially criticized the American raid as an "unauthorized unilateral action," without informing the Pakistani government in advance nor asking for their permission, so this fuels the rising tide of anti-Americanism in Pakistan among many ordinary folks who think that the U.S. has no respect for their national sovereignty (despite the official American rhetoric to the contrary).

Besides, the continued use of military drones by the U.S. which has been intensified under the Obama administration as one of his favorite tools to continue the war on terror and which had killed so many innocent civilians and destroyed countless properties in the region in the last few years has only contributed to the common perception among many Pakistanis that the U.S. has no regard for their lives and properties, in spite of the official American rhetoric of human rights (to cover up their destructive deeds). Thus, Rothschild was right to point out when he wrote that "bin Laden killed far fewer innocent people than any of those U.S. Presidents" (like Bush in Iraq and Afghanistan - and now Obama in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Yemen, etc.).

(4) The fourth reason is that, as long as many ordinary folks in the West (like the U.S. and its allies) hold chauvinistic and racist attitudes towards the Arabs (and Muslims) in the region (while hypocritically preaching human rights) and subsequently support their governments for brutal killing and callous destruction in the Non-West, the struggle against the West will continue.

It is important to point out that, when the news of bin Laden's death was broadcasted on March 02, 2011, many ordinary folks in Washington, DC, New York City, and others went out to the streets until late night to celebrate the murder and chanted "USA, USA." So, the message that these folks sent to the rest of the world is that it is acceptable for the West to murder others, but it is unacceptable for the Non-West to do the same to Westerners. Rothschild was honest enough to say that "[w]e're only against it when violence is used against us....This understanding puts a creepy edge on the rah-rahs of today. Until we renounce violence as a convenient tool, until we stop sacrificing innocent lives, until we no longer excuse the mass murder that our own government commits, we're not in much of a position to celebrate."

So when President Obama said on that day, "Today is a great day for America"-that day was not a great day for many Muslims around the world. Indeed, it was a sad day for them, because they lost an iconic figure in the Middle East who dared to stand up to Western powers and to fight for their freedom from Western imperialism, even if they do not necessarily share his use of violent tactics. In fact, that day was a sad day for the world, because it helps to perpetuate the Western

policy of killing and destroying in the Non-West with impunity, while the Non-West is not allowed to fight back.

In addition, the way that the U.S. military threw the body of bin Laden at sea to prevent Muslims from having a grave for him also speaks volumes of how much many Westerners continue to offend the Muslim world. Muslims do not let strangers throw the bodies of their loved ones at sea (after shooting them in the head), which is as much barbaric and disrespectful to the dead.

The same can be said in regard to the incidents about the American burning of the Koran and the Danish publication of anti-Islamic cartoons. The more chauvinistic and racist many ordinary folks in the West are towards the Non-West, the more they continue to support their governments for killing and destroying in the rest of the world with impunity. And the danger here is that, when these ordinary folks celebrate on the streets for the murder and destruction that their governments did to the Non-West, this only emboldens Western military powers to further kill and destroy with impunity in the months and years to come.

(5) And the fifth reason is that, as long as Western mainstream media continues to publish reports often one-sidedly unfavorable to the Muslim world, the struggle against the West will continue. Edward Said's seminal work "Orientalism" has already provided a powerful critique of this Western cultural imperialism in the Middle East. In the current context about the death of bin Laden, the biased coverage in Western mainstream media continues, when TIME magazine just published the latest issue, with an X crossing the image of bin Laden on the front cover, which is to compare him with Adolf Hitler, because the magazine also did the same to the Nazi leader some decades ago.

In addition, the initial Western mainstream media coverage tried to demonize bin Laden by reporting that he was killed after he "resisted," "was armed," and used his wife as a "human shield." But this was later corrected after they were found to be lies, in that bin Laden "did not resist," "was not armed," and did not use his wife as "a human shield." In any event, this kind of coverage was well received in Western mainstream media for a cold-blooded murder (portrayed instead as a shooting in self-defense) but received a cold reception in the Muslim world.

Because of these five illustrative reasons, the legacy of bin Laden will live on. The fate of terrorism is comparable to the fate of prostitution. The enemies of prostitution have been fighting for its elimination ever since the dawn of civilization, but they have failed time and again because they refuse to accept the deep-rooted causes of prostitution. By the same (though incomplete) analogy, individual terrorism will continue, because their enemies refuse to accept the deep-rooted causes of its existence.

In the meantime, both sides in the war on terror continues to call each other derogatory names. On the one side, bin Laden and his followers regard themselves as freedom fighters, whereas their enemies (like the U.S. and its allies) call them individual terrorists. On the other side, the U.S. and its allies regard themselves as the defenders of freedom, whereas their enemies call them state terrorists (abroad) and state-sponsored terrorists (at home). Does anyone still remember President Bush being called "the world's most wanted terrorist" by anti-war protesters in the West?

When President Obama said in the aftermath of the successful murder of bin Laden, "Justice has been done"-this is far from the truth for those on the other side of the fence, because justice has not been done for what the West has done against the folks in the Middle East, with so many innocent deaths and so much destruction, for so long, and with so much impunity. The message that Obama sent to the world is that when Western powers commit killing and destruction abroad, the rest of the world should forgive and "move on" (as he refused to prosecute all those who committed war crimes under the Bush administration in Iraq and Afghanistan), but when the Non-West does the same to the West, the rest of the world should not forgive and should not "move on" until all those who are responsible are punished (that is, until "justice is done").

This barbarity of unreason guarantees that the wars in the world will continue, so will the legacy of bin Laden. In the meantime, as many ordinary folks in the West celebrate the "gruesome" murder of bin Laden, this only emboldens their governments to kill and destroy again in the months and years to come, with impunity - until the world shifts to a different global balance of power.