

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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PERSPECTIVE NUMBER ONE

The Death of Osama Bin Laden

As I am writing this, the President of the United States just announced that Navy SEALs had killed Osama bin Laden, the head of al Qaeda. It will take some time before we know the ramifications of this momentous event but permit me a few preliminary observations:

1. The death of Bin Laden ends an era in Islamic terrorism. Terrorism before Bin Laden was often state-sponsored terrorism but he was a terrorist who had sponsored a state – Afghanistan. For five years (1996-2001) he paid for the protection of the Taliban. This bought him time and the freedom to make al Qaeda (“the base”) a multinational enterprise to export terror around the globe. In doing so, he waged his terrorist war using modern technology and methodology. His fatwas were emailed around the world, for example. In the 1980s, his involvement in fighting against the Soviets after they had invaded Afghanistan changed his life and his worldview. He saw the retreat of the Soviets from Afghanistan in 1989 as an affirmation of Islamic political power, which used jihad to topple superpowers! This caused him to then turn on the United States: He declared, “I am confident that Muslims will be able to end the legend of the so-called superpower that is America.” Michael T. Kaufman of the *New York Times* writes that “he built his own legend, modeling himself after the Prophet Muhammad, who in the 7th century led the Muslim people to rout the infidels, or nonbelievers, from North Africa and the Middle East. As the Koran had been revealed to Muhammad amid intense persecution, Bin Laden saw his own expulsions during the 1990s—from Saudi Arabia and then Sudan—an affirmation of himself as a ‘chosen one.’ In his vision, he would be the ‘emir,’ or prince, in a restoration of the khalifa, a political empire extending from Afghanistan across the globe.” Al Qaeda was the infrastructure of his dream. Through the 1990s, it evolved into a far-flung and loosely connected network of symbiotic relationships: Bin Laden gave affiliated terrorist groups money, training and expertise; they gave him operational cover and a furthering of his cause.
2. Does his death mean the end of al Qaeda? As Eric Schmidt of the *Times* confirms, probably not: “[his death] will not end the threat from an increasingly potent and self-reliant string of regional Qaeda affiliates in North Africa and Yemen or from a self-radicalized vanguard here at home.” As former President George Bush has argued, “[His death] deprives al Qaeda of its core leader and the ideological cohesion that Bin Laden maintains.” But the al Qaeda that Bin Laden created is today a much different organization than the one he created [in the 1980s] and the one that he presided over on 9/11[2001]. It is much less hierarchical and more diffuse. But this appeared to be his plan from the start—a group of terrorist subsidiaries that could request ideological guidance or material support but were largely self-sustaining. In short, it is difficult to believe the al Qaeda will not remain a formidable terrorist threat—at least in the near future.

3. That his luxurious compound was in Pakistan is revealing. In fact, his compound was not that far from Pakistan's capital, Islamabad, and very near a facility closely linked to the Pakistani military. It defies credulity to believe that the Pakistani military was not aware of his presence.
4. The reaction to his death across the Arab and Muslim world was predictable. But most telling to me was the reaction of Hamas. The top leader of Hamas in Gaza mourned Bin Laden as an "Arab holy warrior—we condemn the assassination and the killing of an Arab holy warrior. . . We ask God to offer him mercy with the true believers and the martyrs." This is the movement with which Israel is supposed to negotiate? This is the movement that Abbas of Fatah is supposed to accept as a partner for peace?
5. One final comment: As a Christian, I believe it is appropriate to see Bin Laden's death as justice. The fundamental principle of justice articulated in Scripture is talionic justice—the law of retribution. This principle of justice holds people accountable for their actions. What Osama Bin Laden ordered and funded on 9/11 was a dastardly act of mass murder. He was accountable for this barbaric act! Hence, whatever else may be said about his death, it was a just act. Finally, as a Christian I believe that I can declare that the moment Osama Bin Laden died, he knew that everything he believed, everything he had lived for, was a lie. He now knows that Islam is not true. He had lived his murderous life, constructing his horrific vision, for an ideal that was not true! He now knows that his life was an utter waste. What a tragedy! What in the world will he say when he stands before Almighty God at the Great White Throne? It will be too late for God's grace and mercy.

See Michael Kaufman's detailed obituary (aided by Kate Zernike) in the *New York Times* (2 May 2011) and Eric Schmidt in the *Times* of the same date.

PERSPECTIVE NUMBER TWO

A Middle East Update

I have a very dear friend who lives near Jerusalem. His name is Ronny Simon, a retired Lieutenant Colonel in the Israeli Defense Force, who serves as my guide when I lead my annual tours of Israel. He recently sent me a detailed email on his perspective about what is occurring in the Middle East today. He is a published author and has valuable insights to offer. Therefore, in this *Perspective* I am sharing with you an edited version of his comments.

The Middle East is experiencing unrest and turmoil like never before. The last wave of unrest in the Arab world had taken place during the 1950s and 1960s. That was a wave of revolutions initiated usually by army personnel, who led a coup to overthrow corrupt regimes. The new regimes in Egypt and Syria that emerged during that period were more about Arab nationalism than Islam. In both cases, the corruption of the old regime was part of the reason for the coup. Both sought to restore Arab national pride, which was affected by the creation of Israel and the defeat in subsequent 1948 war. Anti-Israeli sentiments played a major role in the new regimes' agenda. Hatred of Israel was the common thread of these movements.

“From a strictly Israeli standpoint, we are watching carefully the dynamic in our two closest geographical neighbors, Egypt and Syria.”

1. Egypt

In Egypt, the military had seized power, seemingly only for a while until a new constitution will be formed. Then, it is promised, the army will declare free elections and pass power peacefully to an elected government. In Egypt, the military is highly respected by the people and the fact that the Egyptian army refused to open fire on the demonstrators worked in their favor. The tone “from the Egyptian street” is very anti-Israeli. “Every potential candidate for president tries to score points by bashing Israel at every opportunity. The logic behind those tones is simple – since the former ruler was a dictator, he did not represent the will of the people.” Therefore, the peace treaty with Israel contradicts the will of the Egyptian people and should be cancelled. The Israeli - Egyptian peace treaty is indeed in danger. The situation in Egypt also affects the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. With the unrest in Egypt, the authorities have no will or energy to patrol and watch what happens in the Sinai. Through the Sinai, weapons are smuggled into the Gaza Strip and, without Egyptian presence in the area, access to Gaza is much easier. The joint effort that Israel and Egypt had invested in stopping the arms smuggling was bearing fruit, but no longer. In addition, the pipeline that carries gas from Egypt to Israel has been sabotaged several times over the last months. Meanwhile, demonstrators outside the Israeli embassy in Cairo are calling “Death to Israel.”

The most disturbing issue, however, is the growing involvement of the “Muslim Brotherhood” in the events unfolding in Egypt. At first the Brotherhood had kept a very low profile. They did not want to take the front line “knowing that unrest based on Muslim radical demands will not be supported by the other demonstrators. The revolution had its popularity because it was representing the Egyptian nation as a whole and was not serving only one agenda. However now, with increased confusion and unrest, the Muslim Brotherhood is gaining more power.” With no organized opposition, the winner in the upcoming election will not necessarily be someone who represents the majority of the people, but the one who is better organized. The Muslim Brotherhood is well-organized, well-prepared and well-motivated. They may not represent the majority of the Egyptian people but as for now they are the only group ready to govern the country. The Brotherhood speaks about the bond between Egypt and Hamas in Gaza and about Egypt’s commitment to side with Hamas in its war against Israel.

From the Israeli viewpoint, the Muslim Brotherhood in power would be a worst case scenario. Would the Egyptian people support the Brotherhood? Among Egyptian liberals and intellectuals, the hatred of Israel is growing. Many circles of the Egyptian society are united around their hatred Israel more than around any other cause.

In an odd way, the military domination of Egypt, as long as it is controlled by the present military hierarchy, will guarantee, at least for the short term, the Israeli-Egyptian peace. But for the long term in Israel, the rise of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood is our greatest fear.

2. Syria

The situation in Syria is different. The Syrian administration is based on a small group in Syrian society - the Alawites. This group rules Syria with an iron fist. The Assad family, who are Alawites, came to power through a revolution in the 1960s. The Alawites only make up about 12 percent of the population, although they hold all the important positions in the country. The

Assad regime, first Hafez and now Bashar, because they are a small minority, can only rule with brutal force. Therefore, the unrest in Syria has in it elements that do not resemble Egypt. For example, there are several groups that cannot be ignored—the Kurds, the Druze, opposing segments of the Muslim faith, primarily Sunni, all add to the confusion in Syria. Each of these groups is further divided into clans and tribes that are also in constant conflict with each other. [Egypt is a more homogeneous society; it is one nation and one Arab ethnic group.] How has Syria dealt with this diversity? In 1982, in the Syrian city of Hama, the Syrian army butchered some 20,000 of its citizens that dared to demonstrate against the regime. That event is still vivid in the minds of Syrians. Chaos in Syria also means the deeper involvement of Iran. Iran has a lot to lose from a regime change in Syria. Chaos in Syria also means more weapons flowing into Lebanon for Hezbollah. Therefore, Iran will do whatever needs to be done to maintain Assad in power. “So, from an Israeli stand point, stability in Syria under the present regime seems to be the preferred situation.”

Ronny’s conclusion: “The voices that are coming from Egypt carry the same message – the hatred of Israel overpowers everything else. The West refuses to understand how deep this hatred of Israel is. Changes in the Arab world may lead to regime change but they will not decrease the deep hatred of Islam towards the Israel and for the West in general. It looks like the era of Arab nationalism is over. The main question is what will replace these nationalist regimes? A more radical Muslim caliphate or a true democracy? Time will only tell!”

PERSPECTIVE NUMBER THREE

Mother’s Day 2011

This weekend (8 May) we celebrate Mother’s Day in the United States. A recent article details the changing face of motherhood in the US. A summary of the findings:

1. In 2008, 82% of women between the ages of 40-44 have given birth. In 1976, that figure was 90%.
2. In 2010, the number of single mothers living with children younger than 18 is 9.9 million. That figure was 3.4 million in 1970.
3. In 2007, the number of custodial mothers who were due child support was 5.6 million.
4. Of the 4 million women 15 to 44 years of age who had a birth in the last year, 1.5 million (38%) were to women who were not married, separated, or married but with an absent spouse. Of those 1.5 million mothers, 425,000 were living with a cohabiting partner.
5. In 2008, there were 32.6 twin births per 1,000 births—the highest rate on record.
6. Women with a graduate or professional degree have a higher fertility rate than any other level of education among women.

As we celebrate this very special holiday, the nature of the American mother is changing. And the effect these changes will have on children is not really known. It is doubtful that all of these statistics mean something positive for children. In fact, over time, these effects will probably be more negative than positive. The nature of motherhood is changing—and these statistics summarize the extent of that change.

See *World* (7 May 2011), p. 10.