

## Al-Qaeda: Alive and Qicking

Written by Kirthi Jayakumar

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KIRTHI JAYAKUMAR, JUL 7 2011

Ten years ago, when two planes deliberately crashed into the twin towers, the world watched, some in anger, some in shock, some in fear. The common vein of being overwhelmed by the scale and magnitude of events united the microcosm. On the other end of the spectrum, a cornucopia of sadistic elements celebrated the carnage, pumping fists in the air, congratulating themselves for the massive hit that America had taken.

Nearly a decade later, the world watched as the mastermind behind those attacks was slain, in a slew of quick and candid operations held at the behest of the United States, planned and overseen by the CIA and carried out by some of the most talented and strongest officers of the Navy SEALs. Osama bin Laden was finally killed. While the world was jubilant, celebrating the death of a terrorist who felt not a scintilla of compunction for the terrible destruction he had caused, the group he headed, Al-Qaeda, felt nothing more than a mere damp spot on its morale. A mere nail was clipped off, while the rest of the terrorist outfit remained without too much of a dent on its existential realm.

Nevertheless, as was expected, with Bin Laden's fall, violence was unleashed in abundance. Al-Qaeda had fallen prey to the ugly throes of violence that it had wielded as its weapon of choice and tool of strategy for several years. Plenty of leaders were tossed off the cliff and its fighting capabilities dropped to a near nought, its financial infrastructural abilities were shattered. Meanwhile, Al-Qaeda also took blows from the winds blowing from the Middle East and North Africa, where a slew of uprisings and revolts have driven nails in the coffin for dictatorship and tyranny. Having called for some very liberal ideals, differing greatly from the rigid Islamist and extremist aims of Al-Qaeda, these revolts channelized the disgruntled energy towards protesting oppression. Al-Qaeda once enjoyed a rather appreciable stronghold over the youth, as it encouraged the anger stemming from oppression to be directed towards the West- a unit it deemed an enemy. Disgruntled young boys found themselves an opportunity to vent their angst through the use of violence, a phenomenon that was impossible in their own countries where things like the freedom of speech and expression were virtually taboo. In truth, with the membership dwindling, as the youth in places like Egypt and Tunisia are focussing on rehabilitating their country in its recovery period following despotic political regimes, and in places like Libya and Syria where they are fighting the virulent oppression still quite rampant in many ways than explicable, the killing of bin Laden was, in many ways, a death knell.

But, caution had better colour the world's approach, for the monster may have more heads than we could slay, spawning by the dozen immediately after each is chopped off. Ayman al-Zawahiri has now stepped into the shoes of bin Laden, hoping to pick up where his predecessor left off, and perhaps even spew more attacks in pursuit of a quest for revenge. Though the general consensus is that Zawahiri has barely enough charisma, resources or ability to help the al-Qaeda rise from the ashes, the goal of pursuing what they believe to be a form of *jihad* is as real as it always was. Proof enough of this fact is that Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb battled Niger's military near the uranium mines of Arlit, where it had kidnapped several French and African nationals. Also, in Indonesia, the Al-Qaeda-linked Jemaah Islamiyya plotted to poison police personnel. This is not all. Plenty of Islamist insurgents with links and affiliations to Al-Qaeda in the Middle East have showed face in Yemen, burgeoned in numbers in Pakistan, while they have had a rather massive role to play in sinking the Somali state into oblivion.

A rather interesting development, however, is a small peg in the fast-spinning wheel of Al-Qaeda. A posthumous video of the slain master-mind, bin Laden, shows him pledging his support for the Arab revolts, while also suggesting that Muslims must not forget the role of Al-Qaeda, in the course of their efforts. While this seems to hint at Al-Qaeda's

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possible attachment to the protest movements in the Arab world, there is perhaps, a deeper connotation. The likely fall in recruits that may ensue from the change in the gubernatorial realm in many an Arab state is virtually a threat to Al-Qaeda, which, apart from its network of weapons and money, also relies heavily on manpower. If Al-Qaeda did come across as supportive of the Arab spring, it could still find some recruits, willing to accept and endorse its cause. The West could still be made to appear as the enemy, for their prior policies involving the siphoning of funds to the erstwhile Egyptian regime under Mubarak, the Tunisian regime under Ben Ali, and even Libya, under Muammar Gaddafi. This could prove to be definitive for the interests of Al-Qaeda. The purported symbiosis it aspires to build with the rebels could be a basis to demand a repayment in the form of their compulsory participation in Al-Qaeda's activities.

The emergence of the canker sore that al-Qaeda is was not the product of the intellectual acumen or vendetta of one man, or a small group. A confluence of factors, including among plenty, the idealistic insurgency infused by Sayyid Qutb, a leading member of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood in the 1950s and 1960s, the financial influx from the Saudi kingdom and the United States' war against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, proved to catalyze the emergence of the Al-Qaeda. Sayyid Qutb's influence on Al-Qaeda was felt through his writing. His student, Ayman Zawahiri, who turned out to be Osama bin Laden's mentor, was also a member of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad. His execution in 1966 invariably proved to be a massive one for Zawahiri, who looked up to Qutb and revered him.

The Taliban was at one time, supported by the United States in the war against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. And when the United States withdrew when the state needed all the help it could get to repatriate its condition from the denuded remnants to the once glorious state it was. For the most part, the Soviet War in Afghanistan had a clear role to play in moulding the big names that turned out to be the key players in what evolved as 'Al-Qaeda', the faction that chose to turn on the state that was once its patron. Truth be told, there isn't quite so much a challenge to the ideological tide that the terror outfit rode. The spate of US sanctions on Iraq was instrumental in catalyzing the antagonism from the pocket of the Taliban society that housed Al-Qaeda. Bin Laden denounced the sanctions through *fatwas* in 1996 (The Declaration of War against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places, complaining of American activities in different countries) and 1998 (complaining of American military presence in the Arabian Peninsula and denouncing America's support for Israel, and purportedly providing religious authorization for indiscriminate killings of Americans and Jews in the world). At a time when he was hardly known, being a wanted criminal only in Saudi Arabia- his native state, the fatwas received virtually frugal attention, until the 1998 US Embassy bombings, incidents for which Bin Laden was indicted.

Invariably, one can logically surmise that the turn of events are the logical consequence of the West's proactive practice of being the face that props up plenty of authoritarian regimes in different regions where Al-Qaeda affiliates have prospered. With the strong backing, these authorities began pursuing oppressive policies, and stamping out any attempt to pursue values of democracy or human rights. Now, of course, with the turn of events, there is no doubt that these very ideals of these regimes are under the scanner, as they remain weighed down by a complicated welter of political, economic and social conflicts, that aren't quite easily capable of resolution at the behest of the militia. It didn't help things either, that the United States had military bases installed in Mecca and Medina, two of the most holiest sites for a person of Islamic faith.

For Al-Qaeda, the stream of events unfolding in the Arabic world is a win-win situation. If there are signs of success at the end of the tunnel for the Arab Spring, Al-Qaeda may just fall back on its slain leader's posthumous video-recording, suggesting support for the revolutions, thereby proffering more support from the youth, ensuring no stop-gap whatsoever on the influx of recruits. If the protests fail, there is no doubt that Al-Qaeda would derive manifold, in proving to the youngsters in the Muslim brotherhood that peace as a chosen *modus operandi* is virtually of no use, and instead, radical action involving violence would be the best bet to overthrow autocracy. This would again bring in the much coveted stream of recruits it most needs.

So here's the final deal. Al-Qaeda is knocked down for now, and may be grovelling in the dust for the present, relying on the deployment of children as suicide bombers. But there's absolutely no room to dismiss the existence of the drive to pursue the campaign of *jihad* altogether, because the *jihadist* movement, and the thirst to pursue a hegemonic campaign of *jihad* is nowhere near its end. Osama bin Laden's mentor, Abdullah Azzam wrote,

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*History, does not write its lines except with blood. Glory does not build its lofty edifice except with skulls; honour and respect cannot be established except on a foundation of cripples and corpses.*

And thereby hangs a tale – on tenterhooks.

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