

MISSION ACCOMPLISHED: THE WAR IS WON

Written by Harvey M. Sapolsky

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HARVEY M. SAPOLSKY, MAY 2 2011

I think that the death of Osama bin Laden marks the clear end of the war that began two decades ago and that came into global consciousness with the 9/11 attacks. For nearly a decade the fighting between al Qaeda and the United States has been intense with al Qaeda shrinking by constant attrition and being driven into hiding. Many of al Qaeda's leaders have been killed or captured. Their terrorist attacks have dwindled, and none have matched the horrific quality of the destruction of the World Trade Center in New York City. The death at US hands of bin Laden eliminates al Qaeda's most important and recognizable symbol of defiance. With diminished forces, a dead leader, and little relevance to the several struggles engaging Islam globally, al Qaeda has lost its war. We should declare "Mission Accomplished" and return home.

There was difficulty in naming the war provoked by al Qaeda's 9/11 attacks. No one wanted the war to be a war against Islam, militant or otherwise described. A war against al Qaeda would both seem to elevate the terrorist group to a status on a par with the United States and to limit the opportunity some saw to get at the root causes of the anger within Islam that lead to the 9/11 attacks. The Global War On Terrorism (GWOT) was the foolish and grandiose term selected by the George W. Bush administration, allowing for the invasion of Iraq and even dark hints about the potential fate of the regimes in Iran and North Korea. The GWOT seemingly had no bounds. The subsequent attempt at renaming it to the Long War seemed to confirm the fear that it was also endless.

The success achieved against al Qaeda should be acknowledged. It is no longer has an important presence in either Afghanistan or Iraq. Its ability to direct major operations appears non-existent. Its evolution to a network of regional affiliations has embroiled it in a number of regional conflicts dominated by local interests. Bigger events like the Arab Spring and the shifts in the global economy are pushing aside its obsessive focus on the United States. The terrorist volunteers it acquires in the West among immigrant populations or converts to Islam seem ineffectual and leaderless. Only America's large deployments in Afghanistan and the Gulf region give it much traction within the Muslim community. It is at most a spent, by-passed force.

It is time for America to leave Iraq and Afghanistan. Who rules in either place matters little to us once al Qaeda has collapsed. The burden of trying to sort out tribal and ethnic claims amid rampant corruption should be up to those who live in these countries. Our purpose in being there is vanishing and so should we. Osama's death marks the end of the war if we can recognize it. We need to be aware of terrorist threats, keeping our guard up but not being obsessed by them. Our mission is over.

About the author:

Harvey M. Sapolsky is Professor of Public Policy and Organization, Emeritus, at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and former Director of the MIT Security Studies Program. He has been a visiting professor at the University of Michigan and the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. In the defense field he has served as a consultant or panel member for a number of government commissions and study groups. His most recent books are *US Defense Politics* written with Eugene Gholz and Caitlin Talmadge and *US Military Innovation Since the Cold War*

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