

The killing of bin Laden and the “war on terror”

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Washington and the corporate media have used the killing of Osama bin Laden to launch a strident celebration of US militarism. Missing from both official speeches and media commentary, however, is any assessment of the decade-old “global war on terror,” in which bin Laden’s summary execution in Pakistan is proclaimed a landmark victory.

By the time of his death on Sunday, however, Osama bin Laden had become largely irrelevant, a sick old man who by all evidence lived under effective house arrest as a ward of Pakistan’s military intelligence. The strategic importance of his demise is generally acknowledged as nil.

He was, without question, a deeply reactionary figure, whose outlook was steeped in anticommunism and religious fanaticism. It was this ideology that made bin Laden a valuable asset of the US Central Intelligence Agency in the catastrophic war that Washington instigated against the Soviet-backed government in Afghanistan beginning in 1979.

In announcing bin Laden’s death, President Barack Obama affirmed that “justice has been done.” Secretary of State Hillary Clinton similarly declared that “justice has been served.”

His execution by a Navy Seal team had nothing to do with justice. It had been decided in advance that he was to be killed under circumstances in which he could have been captured and brought before a court of law on charges related to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

Behind this decision lay a determination to prevent the long history of bin Laden’s relations with US government agencies from being opened up to public review. This relationship began with the CIA’s arming and funding of the so-called mujahideen—Islamist guerrillas fighting Soviet troops in Afghanistan—whom President Ronald Reagan described as “the moral equivalent of our founding fathers.”

Osama, the son of a wealthy businessman in Saudi Arabia, played a key role in recruiting and training Arab volunteers for the CIA-backed mujahideen, who ultimately gave rise to the Taliban. Al Qaeda, Arabic for “the base,” was established in that period, with aid and arms from the CIA.

This collaboration did not end with the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, or with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War. Bin Laden and Al Qaeda once again served as assets of the US military intelligence complex in the wars that tore apart Yugoslavia, first in Bosnia and then, at the end of the 1990s, in Kosovo.

As so often happens in US foreign policy, today’s ally turns into tomorrow’s enemy. The Islamist insurgency sponsored by Washington as a means of undermining the Soviet Union ultimately became hostile to the growing US presence in the Middle East, in particular in Saudi Arabia.

The history of this long and intimate relationship between an individual portrayed as America’s deadliest enemy and the US intelligence agencies is systematically covered up by the media.

The events of 9/11, which to this day have yet to be seriously investigated and explained, provided the pretext for launching the “global war on terror.”

What is striking about Washington’s responses to the tragic events of September 11, 2001 is that they never could be deduced logically from the events themselves. Fifteen of the 19 accused 9/11 hijackers—like the supposed mastermind Osama bin Laden—were citizens of Saudi Arabia, which has remained immune from any retribution. None of them came from either Afghanistan or Iraq, both of which would shortly be engulfed in violence and death.

While bin Laden was based in Afghanistan, the relations between Al Qaeda and the Taliban government were always tenuous. In October 2001, Taliban ministers first indicated that they would be prepared to surrender bin Laden if Washington would provide evidence of his involvement in the 9/11 attacks. The request was rejected. The Taliban then said it was prepared to discuss turning bin Laden over to a neutral country if the US ceased its bombing of Afghanistan. Again, the Bush administration said it wasn’t interested. It wanted regime change.

After invading Afghanistan on the pretense of capturing bin Laden, the Bush administration allowed him to escape in the battle of Tora Bora in December 2001, with the US military essentially ordered to stand down as the Al Qaeda leader made his way across the border into Pakistan.

Bush soon indicated that he had no particular interest in capturing bin Laden. He acknowledged that the Al Qaeda leader played no particularly important role in terms of the opposition to the US occupation of Afghanistan. Indeed, he was useful alive as a symbol for the “war on terror” in general, and, in particular, for his release of threatening videotapes at politically opportune moments, such as on the eve of the 2004 election.

According to the Obama administration’s account, US intelligence located the compound occupied by bin Laden in August 2010. Why it took nine months to mount a raid cannot be

explained merely by technical preparations. Clearly, there were political issues involving bin Laden's ties not only to Pakistani intelligence but to elements within the US intelligence apparatus itself.

Nearly a decade after the launching of the "war on terror," 100,000 American troops are fighting a growing armed resistance movement, fueled in large measure by the killing and wounding of hundreds of thousands of Afghans in the US colonial war.

At the same time, the so-called global war on terror took a sharp turn a year-and-a-half after 9/11 with the launching of the "shock and awe" assault on Iraq. Again, the aim was regime change—justified with lies about "weapons of mass destruction"—although the target, Saddam Hussein, was an avowed enemy of bin Laden and the Islamist terrorists. Over a million Iraqi lives have been lost as a result of the US war of aggression against Iraq, and 47,000 American soldiers continue to occupy that country.

Now the Obama administration has joined in another military intervention, this one aimed at overthrowing Libya's Muammar Gaddafi—an erstwhile ally in the struggle against Al Qaeda—and installing a puppet regime more subservient to Washington and the Western energy conglomerates. In this conflict, the US and its European allies are providing close air support, advisers and arms to a "rebel" force that includes Islamist elements who trained at bin Laden's camps in Afghanistan.

This record makes clear that Washington never saw the supposed "global war on terror" as anything more than a useful pretext—and Osama bin Laden as a convenient boogeyman—for marketing what the US military has come to refer to as the "long war" in Central and South Asia and the Persian Gulf.

What were the real aims of this war? Zbigniew Brzezinski, the Carter administration national security advisor who engineered the CIA intervention in Afghanistan in the 1980s, provided clear insight into US imperialism's strategic concerns.

In his 1997 book *The Grand Chessboard*, Brzezinski described Eurasia as "the chessboard on which the struggle for global primacy continues to be played." He stressed that with the end of Soviet power in the region, the challenge facing US imperialism was to prevent "the emergence of a dominant antagonistic Eurasian power."

Of central importance were the energy resources of the Caspian basin, second only to the Persian Gulf in their global importance. Afghanistan provided the main pipeline routes for funneling these strategic resources to the West and lay in close proximity to the three powers seen as the most likely to be antagonistic to US dominance of the region: China, Russia and Iran.

In his book, Brzezinski lamented that America was "too democratic at home to be autocratic abroad," with popular sentiments limiting Washington's ability to use "military intimidation" to achieve its ends. This could be overcome only, he suggested, "in conditions of a sudden threat or challenge to the public's sense of domestic well-being."

The attacks of 9/11 provided just such a "sudden threat" and were immediately exploited by the Bush administration to implement previously worked-out plans for US military interventions in Central Asia and the Persian Gulf. America's

ruling elite sought to counter the crisis of US capitalism through the military seizure of strategic positions in these two regions, both centers of vast energy reserves. To what extent elements within the US state and its intelligence agencies knew that such a "sudden threat" was imminent and allowed it to unfold remains a subject for serious investigation.

The wars of aggression of the past decade have been accompanied by terrible crimes against democratic rights at home and abroad. The systematic use of assassination, torture, indefinite detention and extraordinary rendition against terror suspects has been accompanied by the erection of the scaffolding of a police state in the US itself.

In their speeches, both Obama and Clinton made clear that the death of bin Laden would not stem the global eruption of American militarism. Obama insisted that "securing our country is not complete," while Clinton vowed, "The fight continues, and we will never waver."

Just as the supposed hunt for bin Laden served as the pretext for the invasion of Afghanistan, so his death may be utilized to effect certain tactical changes in what has become a deepening debacle for the US military in that country. In her remarks, Clinton suggested that there could be a negotiated settlement with the Taliban.

Yet, in the Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia, US imperialism confronts a far more potent enemy than it could ever make Al Qaeda and bin Laden out to be. The uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Bahrain and elsewhere have been driven by the stirrings of a working class determined to struggle against the mass unemployment, poverty and social inequality imposed by global capital and the national ruling elites.

In the US itself, a decade into the "war on terror" the crisis of US capitalism has grown far deeper, while the American working class has suffered a profound deterioration in its living standards and social conditions, even as politicians of both major parties demand massive new cutbacks.

The momentary, media-manufactured euphoria over the killing of Osama bin Laden will soon be eclipsed by the inexorable growth of the class struggle and revolutionary confrontations between US imperialism and the working class, both at home and abroad.

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