

Opinion

After Osama bin Laden's death, time for a new poster child for Islam

We cannot kill every single Osama bin Laden. We need to expand our approach and empower Muslims around the world to counter radicalism.

By [Hedieh Mirahmadi and Mehreen Farooq](#) / May 3, 2011

Washington

Osama bin Laden, 54, unofficial poster-child for the Taliban, Al Qaeda, and radical Islamist movements around the world [died Sunday May 1, 2011](#). He will be remembered as a leader of anti-Americanism, a formidable mastermind of terrorist plots, and an unmistakable symbol of intolerance, hatred, and violence. From a young age, he dedicated his life to tarnishing the image of peaceful, law-abiding Muslims across the world and promoting radical, anti-social interpretations of Islam. He lived by the sword and died by the sword.

If this were an obituary, it would be appropriate to note that Mr. bin Laden is survived by a minority of fringe extremists who are dedicated to continuing his cult of jihad.

Although his death is a [significant victory](#) in countering violent extremism, it is important not to overestimate the effect of his death. [Muslim community organizers](#) with whom we work in America and throughout the world acknowledge that the struggle is far from over.

Historically, global jihad movements have continued to operate even after senior leaders are captured or killed. In most instances, they are glorified as martyrs and become larger posthumous cult heroes. When Abdullah Azzam, the influential Afghan mujahideen cleric, was killed in 1989, his disciple, bin Laden, rose to power. Likewise, we can expect that despite his death, bin Laden's ideology will live on for some. As one contributor on [a jihadi Internet forum wrote](#) yesterday, "A million new bin Ladens will be born!"

Empower Muslims to counter radicalism

An effective strategy cannot rely on killing every single bin Laden. We need to expand our approach and [empower Muslims around the world to counter radicalism](#). In the US, Muslim organizations such as our nongovernmental organization (NGO), the World Organization for Resource Development and Education (WORDE), have published books, pamphlets, and websites denouncing terrorism in an authentic religious paradigm that is palatable to at-risk youth and mainstream Muslims.

Similar efforts exist worldwide. In the Britain, the Sufi Muslim Council organizes anti-extremism public awareness campaigns for the general public to [challenge the extremist narrative](#) through TV documentaries, lectures, and community radio programs. In Washington, DC, the student-led Project Nur hosts a Muslim film festival every year to challenge stereotypes about mainstream Islamic cultures and practices. In Indonesia, Lib for All, a community education NGO, teamed up with Indonesian rock star Ahmad Dhani to produce songs against intolerance and radicalism. Their album, “Warriors of Love” sold 7 million copies.

An opportunity for a new poster child for Islam

Today, we have a great window of opportunity for Muslim Americans [who uphold fundamental norms of freedom, democracy, equality](#), and pluralism to rise and join up with Muslims worldwide to create a new poster child of Islam. By raising the public profile of Muslims who support these values, we can effectively marginalize extremist voices that have dominated the media for too long.

This victory would not be complete without also considering what healing still needs to be done. As a nation, we should recognize that bin Laden was a figure who victimized and terrorized Muslims and non-Muslims alike. About 3,000 innocent people – including Muslim Americans – died in the horrific attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. Yet, 10 years later, one in three Americans has a negative perception of Islam.

In [the spirit of the Arab Spring](#) and the removal of dictators and terrorists, it is the perfect time for Americans to come together and speak out against all forms of hate, intolerance, and injustice. This could usher a new era of relations between Muslims and non-Muslims based on mutual trust and understanding. Many Muslim Americans are optimistic that the reign of terror and cruel dictators is coming to an end, and believe an age of hope and freedom is yet to come.

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