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## Bin Laden's death may boost U.S-Arab relations

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Osama Bin Laden's death may be a key turning point in America's relationship with the Muslim world. For more than 15 years, Bin Laden has been one of the most recognizable figures in the world, and he and his organization, al-Qaida, have had a unique place in the collective imagination of America. The operation that eliminated Bin Laden and the reactions to it in America and in the Arab world provide key clues to how both have changed since 2001.

The operation that led to Bin Laden's death reflected months of careful planning and the application of lessons learned over more than a decade fighting him and al-Qaida. The Obama administration purposely chose to forgo precision-guided munitions or other advanced weapons and not to hire Afghani mercenaries, as had been done in past operations to eliminate Bin Laden. Instead, it chose to use U.S. Special Forces.

While this approach risked American casualties, it also reduced the possibility of civilian and/or "collateral" damage. That type of damage had enraged public opinion against the United States generally and against its military operations in Muslim nations. Equally importantly, President Obama, in his speech after the operation, addressed the sacrifices of the American people in the war on terrorism. But he also spoke directly to the Islamic world: He noted that al-Qaida had killed Muslims, and that America was not at war with Islam.

While Americans spontaneously gathered in large crowds to celebrate the operation, Arabs did not react publicly in large numbers. The latter's reaction reflected the fact that many had grown weary of Bin Laden's ideas. The recent success of peaceful demonstrators demanding democracy throughout the Arab world had also refuted al-Qaida's core arguments: that its vision of puritanical Islam and violence were the only way for Arabs to regain their dignity and freedom.

Although the Taliban has threatened to launch retaliatory terrorist attacks and could still kill, it is not clear that it or Bin Laden's followers will do so. It has been years since they have carried out major operations against Western targets on the scale of the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks. Any operation could fail, which would be a massive setback for an organization still reeling from the death of its charismatic leader.

As terrifying as a future al-Qaida terrorist attack may be, we would be wise to remember the response of the Arab world to Bin Laden's death. That reaction is symbolic of important cultural changes in the Arab world in recent years and of the fact that Bin Laden had lost much of his appeal, though it is possible that his death will transform him from a diminished actuality into a powerful emblem of resistance — a Muslim Che Guevara. All that remains to be seen.

In any case, current changes suggest the possibility that Americans in the future may no longer look at the Arab and Muslim worlds as the source of al-Qaida and other existential threats to their security. Instead, they will look at them as important partners in building a more democratic, peaceful and prosperous world.

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