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After bin Laden: End the Public Diplomacy Apology Tour

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The global reaction to the death of al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden must have taken the Obama Administration by surprise. While not 100 percent positive, the reaction to the terrorist mastermind's killing by U.S. Navy SEALs has been one of great international relief. The presidential decision not to release the photos of bin Laden's body—so as not to “spike the football,” as White House spokesman Jay Carney put it—grew out of a fear of a global popular backlash that has so far not materialized.

The President should take advantage of this opportunity by reasserting U.S. leadership on the world stage rather than, as is his wont, bowing to global sentiments about American decline.

Mixed Reactions. From the Arab world, reactions to bin Laden's death were mixed. Palestinian Authority spokesman Ghassan Khatib, for instance, saluted the action: “Getting rid of Bin Laden is good for the cause of peace worldwide.” Meanwhile, Ismail Haniyeh, head of Hamas administration in the Gaza Strip, “condemned the assassination and the killing of an Arab holy warrior. We regard this as a continuation of the American policy based on oppression and the shedding of Muslim and Arab blood.”¹

A column in the London daily *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat* expressed a bitterness about bin Laden that could hardly have been imagined before his death. Editor-in-chief Tariq Alhomayed wrote: “He who tricked our sons and cast them into hell did not die on the battlefield—but in the middle of his luxurious house hiding behind his wife.” He concluded, “Cer-

tainly, the world is a better place after the death of a terrorist who betrayed his religion, his family, and the world.”²

The world has been waiting for this kind of condemnation since September 11, 2001.

The lack of a popular backlash to bin Laden's death actually follows a clear trend: Over the past several years, Muslim public figures around the world have distanced themselves from al-Qaeda. According to a survey released on May 2 by the Pew Global Attitudes Project, bin Laden was already greatly discredited before his death.³

From 2003 to 2011, bin Laden's confidence ratings fell from 72 percent to 34 percent in the Palestinian territories, 59 percent to 26 percent in Indonesia, 56 percent to 13 percent in Jordan, 15 percent to 3 percent in Turkey, and 19 percent to 1 percent in Lebanon. Though data are not yet available for Pakistan in 2011, the decline was from 46 percent to 18 percent in 2010. The reason for this decline is not hard to understand. In the years since 9/11, al-Qaeda and its affiliates have killed and maimed far more of their fellow Muslims than Americans or any other Westerners. Jordan, for instance, saw the greatest drop of support for

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al-Qaeda in 2006, from 61 percent to 24 percent, following the atrocious suicide attacks on a wedding party in Amman, Jordan.

Cairo Redux? Having taken dramatic military action, President Obama is now planning to follow through with a public diplomacy push to the Muslim world. The President will soon address Muslims in the Middle East and beyond, encouraging them to reject Islamic militancy and embrace a new era of relations with the United States.⁴ Combined with the uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa, the Administration is hoping that a new era will emerge.

In tune with the White House's adopted strategic communications strategy, which synchronizes messaging on all levels of government where possible, the speech is already being promoted by U.S. officials on Arab radio and television. It could be delivered just ahead of President Obama's upcoming trip to Europe on May 23.

It will be the second time the President has attempted public diplomacy outreach to Muslims, the first being his 2009 Cairo speech, which was woefully short on policy follow-through. This time, the President ought to:

- Declare unequivocal support for the democratic evolution in the Arab countries as well as for the economic freedom that will advance critically needed growth and opportunity.

- Speak out on behalf of the dissidents and cyber dissidents who have been under government attacks throughout the region.
- Be unapologetic about exerting American leadership. Ridding the world of bin Laden—a man whose only contribution was the death and destruction of thousands upon thousands of innocent human beings—is something this country can rightly be proud of.
- Take the opportunity to promote his message on Voice of America (VOA). In the past, the President has spoken on Al Arabya, the BBC World Service, and South African television. This time, it has to be VOA's turn.

Not Another Apology. For all of the apologies that President Obama has issued on behalf of the United States since he took office, it turns out that acting assertively to rid the world of bin Laden—and acting unilaterally to do so—may be one of the most popular actions he has ever taken, as far as the broader international community is concerned. He should follow it up with a reassertion of American leadership on the global stage.

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1. BBC News, "Osama bin Laden's Death: Political Reaction in Quotes," May 3, 2011, at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-13256956> (May 12, 2011).
2. Middle East Media Research Institute, "'Al-Sharq Al-Awsat' Editor-in-Chief on bin Laden's Death," May 4, 2011, at <http://www.memri.org/report/en/0/0/0/0/0/5253.htm> (May 12, 2011).
3. Pew Research Center, "Osama bin Laden Largely Discredited Among Muslim Publics in Recent Years," May 2, 2011, at <http://pewglobal.org/2011/05/02/osama-bin-laden-largely-discredited-among-muslim-publics-in-recent-years/?src=pp-footer> (May 12, 2011).
4. Jay Solomon and Carol E. Lee, "President to Renew Muslim Outreach," *The Wall Street Journal*, May 11, 2011, at <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703864204576315680040526802.html> (May 12, 2011).