

WHY DID US FORCES BURY OSAMA BIN LADEN'S BODY AT SEA ?
POLITICAL, RELIGIOUS AND PRACTICAL FACTOR ALL PLAYED A ROLE

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On May 2, 2011, the United States military killed and buried Osama bin Laden, the al Qaeda leader behind the 9/11 attacks. U.S. Special Forces took him out during a raid on the compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan where he and some of his family were hiding out. After identifying his body, the military brought him aboard the USS *Carl Vinson* and buried him in the northern Arabian Sea the same day.

The U.S. took political, religious and practical factors into consideration when deciding how to bury bin Laden's body. **There was concern that if he was buried on land, his grave could become a shrine for his followers.** There was a need to observe Islamic funeral practices, including the custom of burying a body within 24 hours of a person's death. And there was the question of whether the U.S. should take photos or provide some sort of visual proof that he was dead.

US OFFICIALS FEARED HIS GRAVE WOULD BECOME A SHRINE



President Barack Obama, Vice President Joe Biden, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and members of the national security team receive an update on the mission against Osama bin Laden in the Situation Room of the White House May 1, 2011 in Washington, D.C. Obama later announced that the United States had killed Bin Laden in an operation led by U.S. Special Forces at a compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan.

When U.S. forces killed Osama bin Laden, who was 54, the U.S. government's explanations for why it didn't bury him in the ground were a little inconsistent. News articles quoted American officials both on and off the record who said that the U.S. didn't want him to have a physical grave because it might become a shrine. **but also because an unnamed country had declined to accept his body.**

Articles speculated that the country was Saudi Arabia, where Bin Laden was born.

"I'm not sure where this rumor comes from, but I would not give it much credence," says Ambassador Akbar Ahmed, chair of Islamic Studies at American University and former Pakistani high commissioner to the U.K. and Ireland.

"The Saudis are inclined toward a form of Islam called Wahhabism," he says, which rejects shrines of prominent people. The fact that Saudi Arabia wouldn't want his grave to become a shrine in their country, combined with the fact that bin Laden was extremely critical of Saudi Arabia, makes Ahmed think that if U.S. officials asked the country to receive bin Laden's body, "they asked out of ignorance."

Burying bin Laden in northwest Pakistan, where Special Forces killed him, wouldn't be ideal from a U.S. perspective either, since shrines are considered powerful symbols in that region, Ahmed says. To avoid bin Laden's grave becoming an important symbol to his followers, the U.S. made the decision to bury him at sea. Although this deviates from the way most Muslim burials occur, **U.S. officials insisted it still took steps to bury him according to Islamic traditions.**

BIN LADEN'S BODY WAS CLEANED, WRAPPED AND BURIED IN A SMALL FUNERAL



The USS Carl Vinson aircraft carrier, the US Navy Nimitz class supercarrier from where Osama bin Laden was buried at sea, pictured in Hong Kong on May 22, 2011.

At the White House press briefing on Osama bin Laden's killing and burial, John Brennan—then the assistant to the president for homeland security and counterterrorism—said U.S. officials had "consulted the appropriate specialists and experts" so that "the burial of bin Laden's remains was done in strict conformance with Islamist precepts and practices." This involved washing bin Laden's body, wrapping him in white cloth, saying a ritual prayer with the aid of an Arabic translator and burying him within 24 hours of his death.

Muslim leaders and scholars had varying opinions on the appropriateness of burying him at sea. Some argued that sea burials should only happen when a person dies at sea; otherwise, the body should be buried in the ground with the head pointed toward Mecca, the birthplace of the Prophet Muhammad. Others argued that Islam is a practical religion that makes allowances for special circumstances, and that the sea burial was permissible given bin Laden's notoriety and the concerns about his grave becoming a shrine.



Although the funeral service for bin Laden took place aboard a large Navy aircraft carrier with thousands of crew members, only a small group of people were present.

Fewer than a dozen of the leaders on the *Carl Vinson* knew that the burial was even happening, according to military emails the Department of Defense released in 2012 in response to a Freedom of Information lawsuit.

OBAMA DECIDED NOT TO RELEASE PHOTOS



President Barack Obama edits his remarks in the Oval Office prior to making a televised statement detailing the mission against Osama bin Laden, May 1, 2011 in Washington, D.C.

When the U.S. announced bin Laden's death, there was a question of whether it should release photos of bin Laden's body—which officials claimed to have—in order to counter conspiracy theories that bin Laden was still alive. In an interview with *60 Minutes* on CBS, President Barack Obama explained why he wasn't releasing them.



"It's important for us to make sure that very graphic photos of somebody who was shot in the head are not floating around as an incitement to additional violence or as a propaganda tool," he said. "That's not who we are. We don't trot out this stuff as trophies."

The decision not to release images—as well as the attempt to give bin Laden an Islamic burial—was in stark contrast to the United States' handling of the deaths of Saddam Hussein's two sons in 2003. After U.S. forces killed Uday and Qusay Hussein, they released graphic photos of the men's bodies. They also embalmed the bodies, which goes against Islamic custom; left them unburied for over a week; and allowed news outlets to photograph them.

This was offensive to many Iraqis because it appeared that the U.S. was deliberately disrespecting the bodies of Muslims.

Even if a person is executed for crimes, Islamic scholars argue that the person should have a dignified burial.

U.S. officials say the burial of bin Laden, criticized though it was, reflected an attempt to honor that principle.



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