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(U) What Does the Death of Usama bin Laden Mean?

FROM: the SIDtoday Editor

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(U//FOUO) SIDtoday recently met with **Jon Darby** (pictured), SID's Associate Deputy Director for Counterterrorism, to find out what impact the recent killing of Usama bin Laden is likely to have.

1. Q: (U) In recent years, was Usama bin Laden actually directing al-Qa'ida operations? ...or was he just a symbolic or inspirational figure who had no real control over what al-Qa'ida affiliates around the world were doing?

A: (S//REL) What we're finding from the media seized from his residence is that he was more involved in directing al-Qa'ida operations than we realized. He was definitely more than a symbolic figure. Despite the fact that he was isolated and had to conduct all of his business by courier -- in order to avoid detection -- he was effective as a leader and managed to exert influence. His strategic guidance

to al-Qa'ida was to focus on attacking the US.

2. (U) After 9/11, did NSA ever see reflections of UBL himself or members of his inner circle in SIGINT or did that access shut down completely?

(TS//SI//REL) Our loss of SIGINT access to bin Laden actually occurred prior to 9/11 -- it happened in 1998. After the Embassy bombings in Africa, it was reported in the press that bin Laden was using INMARSAT and we never again saw him in communications. The one possible exception was in late 2001 when we may have gotten intercept of him on the radio in Tora Bora [in Afghanistan]. His #2, Zawahiri, has *never* been seen in SIGINT. However, people in the al-Qa'ida hierarchy at the level just below that -- the #3 leader and below -- who are responsible for coordinating operations abroad have no choice but to communicate electronically, either personally (sporadically) or via communications cut-outs (preferred), and we have seen reflections of them in SIGINT.

3. (U) In NSA's assessment, how important is bin Laden's death in terms of weakening al-Qa'ida and terrorism in general?

(U//FOUO) We believe this was a very significant blow to al-Qa'ida -- the single biggest blow the US has ever dealt them. Bin Laden was the one-and-only leader of al-Qa'ida, a symbolic and unifying figure. He provided operational guidance to affiliates all over the world.

(U//FOUO) It is unclear who will take over that role now that he's gone. Zawahiri comes with baggage -- some members of al-Qa'ida don't like him, and he doesn't have bin Laden's fighter credentials. [Note: Usama bin Laden fought the Soviets in Afghanistan during the 1980's.] Who will step up? -- it's not clear. There is an opportunity now for us to be assertive in pressing them; they may get careless and leave themselves open for capture.

(S//REL) We are now mining the media captured during the raid on his residence, looking for lead information. It consists of nearly 3 terabits of data. It will take weeks and months to go through it all. An interagency task force has been put together to analyze the data. NSA is participating on that task force. Here at NSA, the SIGINT Forensics Center and many Product Line analysts both here at Fort Meade and in the extended enterprise are also examining the seized media. There's a lot to go around!

(U) Is it possible that al-Qa'ida leaders will compete with each other in a struggle for the top leadership spot?

(U//FOUO) It is possible. There may be personal animosities between members of the organization that we could possibly exploit to create fissures.

4. (U) Has the recent success against UBL given us any lessons learned that we can apply in future to other terrorist targets? ... Any revelations?

(U) There haven't been any major revelations. It was not a surprise that he was living in a populated area -- other al-Qa'ida leaders have been captured in cities in the past. They don't all live in the FATA [Federally Administered Tribal Areas along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border].

(U) I think the biggest lesson from this success is to highlight what we already knew: the power of cooperation across the Intelligence Community. No single source of intelligence alone could have

provided enough pieces of the puzzle; it was only through our cooperative efforts that we achieved what we did. SIGINT, HUMINT and IMINT all contributed bits and pieces. When SIGINT would run out of leads, HUMINT would provide a clue, and then IMINT would add another key piece of information, and back to SIGINT again. They all played off each other.

(U) At right: The compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan, where bin Laden was found.

(U) Then, once the IC had put together a complete picture, we worked seamlessly with the military to bring about the successful raid. We saw the power of a true team effort across the US government. Nowadays we cooperate like this all the time, but for people who didn't understand how far the IC has come since 9/11 in terms of working together, this success was a real eye-opener.

(U) Besides the value of teamwork, another lesson learned is the need to be patient. This was a long and difficult problem and we had to stay focused on it, even though there was no tangible reward for our efforts right away.

5. (U) Are there any other thoughts you have for the readers?

(U//FOUO) We're under no illusions that the death of bin Laden will mean the end of al-Qa'ida... this struggle against violent jihadists could go on for decades. But this was a major blow to al-Qa'ida and it's important for all employees to know that NSA was in the middle of the operation right from the very beginning.

(S//SI//REL) For example, we played a key role in identifying the compound where bin Laden was found, and during the raid itself we provided force-protection support for the SEALs. In the aftermath of the raid, we have produced SIGINT on the reactions by governments, intelligence services, and terrorists to the operation. We played a critical role... it simply could not have come off without NSA. I am incredibly proud of all the NSAers, past and present, who contributed to this incredible success.

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