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The HotSeat Videocast

Professor John Sidel discussing what next for Al Qaeda after the death of Osama bin Laden. Recorded 20/5/2011.

Alex Page: With the recent dramatic events in Pakistan, what next for Al Qaeda? Hi, I'm Alex Page and welcome to the Government Department HotSeat. Today with us to talk about the future of Al Qaeda is Professor John Sidel, Sir Patrick Gillam Chair of International and Comparative Politics. Hi John, thanks for being with us today.

John Sidel: Thank you.

Alex Page: Following the killing of Osama Bin Laden by American forces, what next for Al Qaeda?

John Sidel: Well, perhaps, not much. If we look back over the past several years, or even over the past decade since the September 11, 2001 attacks on New York and Washington, DC, in large measure what you see after 2001 represents little in the way of a trajectory of growth, diversification, of expanding recruitment, appeal, innovation, in what remain a narrow set of terrorist repertoires and a relatively small and arguably declining body of terrorist recruits. And in recent years, analysts who study trends in Islamist terrorism have argued in favour of both the emergence of what they call leaderless jihad in which the small scale occasional terrorist attacks in the name of Islam that you've seen in different parts in the world have been carried out in large measure by small numbers of individuals lacking in large scale organisation and initiative and instead, perhaps, enjoying some sort of inspiration from figures like Osama Bin Laden. And alongside that, a decentralisation of Al Qaeda's effective operations so that you have groups in various parts of the world claiming affiliation with Al Qaeda, so Al Qaeda in the land of two rivers or Mesopotamia, what we would call Iraq, or Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, Saudi Arabia, and more recently remnants in Yemen, or in the Islamic Maghreb. But, these sorts of groups, the extent to which they've been effectively directed, funded, operationally led and controlled by Bin Laden is really rather attenuated. And, to that extent, Bin Laden's departure from this world at the hands of American Navy Seals represents the disappearance of a symbolic figure who's used a certain kind of language and occupied a certain kind of place in the social imaginary for Islamists, maybe for Muslims and non-Muslims in different ways but in real terms, this is a small, marginal, fragmented, hemmed-in organisation, insofar as it remains an organisation. Many people are anticipating some efforts at retribution, either of a nature that's organised by those who were close to Bin Laden or those who would like to be associated with him. So one should not be surprised to see some sort of mobilisation along those lines, of small scale terrorist activities. But the fact that a few weeks have now gone by and we've seen nothing is presumably revealing of something. The response to his death has not been large scale mobilisation, unsurprisingly given the limits of his support and popularity, but also we haven't seen, as of yet, any successful terrorist response of any size to my knowledge. So that is revealing of how Al Qaeda has really already proved to be a failure.

Alex Page: So does this mean the end of the so called war on terror.

John Sidel: Well, it's hard to imagine that the entire apparatus of surveillance and funding and counter-terrorism will simply be folded up and removed from various police, intelligence, security agency budgets and bureaucracies. And it's hard to imagine that the full spectrum of

Islamist activists will entirely forego violence in the name of Islam or terrorist violence in particular. But certainly it should do a couple things in terms of the global war on terrorism. It should give people a chance to take stock and to remind themselves that actually there's not that much of this out there and certainly politicians and governments may feel responsible to their citizenry in terms of anticipating, preventing, pre-empting these sorts of possible attacks but the extent of resources devoted to this cause compared to other, more worthy sort of needs of societies might be worth re-evaluating at this juncture. The second thing would have to do with Afghanistan. Here you have an elaborate and expensive set of American, British and broader NATO commitments in Afghanistan whose origin lay in the September 11, 2001 attacks as opposed to any necessary antagonism vis-à-vis the Taliban and with Al Qaeda removed from the equation, if Al Qaeda is a paper tiger, if Osama Bin Laden is gone, if you can tick the box of, if not justice, then retribution and revenge, then it makes it easier politically in Washington, presumably, to pack up and leave, to draw down those sorts of commitments that supposedly are going to be reduced by 2014. And to allow or encourage some kind of deal between the Karzai government in Kabul and the Taliban, why not? And just call it quits in that regard, so politically it might give more space for a movement that was already proceeding in that direction but for which there is a larger, regional context in terms of Pakistan and India as well as Afghanistan.

Alex Page: What does this mean for the relationship between governments and Islamist groups around the world?

John Sidel: Well, what you can see in the Pakistan case most glaringly but which is true in perhaps less obvious ways elsewhere, say in Indonesia or Yemen or perhaps parts of West Africa, North Africa, is that a variety of governments have, through their intelligence agencies and security agencies, played a much complicated game in terms of their relationships with not Islamist movements but clandestine armed Islamist groups in ways that involved covert sponsorship protection, deployment, if not the creation of false threats and the manipulation of that to extract resources and gain leverage vis-à-vis the United States. In the case of Indonesia, those sorts of relationships and that sort of game, which was very evident in 2001-2002, has already largely been played out and eliminated from the repertoire of games played by security agencies and the government in Indonesia. In Yemen, it remains a card in the hands of the Saleh government that has yet to fall, amazingly, and in the case of Pakistan, I think it is something that will continue indefinitely. If we look at what we're likely to see in weeks ahead in terms of evidence of direct Pakistani sponsorship and involvement in the Mumbai attacks of, I believe, 2008, that we'll see more of in an upcoming trial in weeks ahead; I think it's clear that for Pakistan deploying these sort of subcontracted, armed Islamist groups is part of it's long-term sense of embattlement vis-à-vis India, it's part of a foreign policy in which it perceives itself to be in a weakened position vis-à-vis India, it's part of Pakistan's domestic politics in which the military and also civilian governments find Islamist groups, armed and non-armed, useful vis-à-vis autonomous, sort of pro-autonomy and secessionist movements and it's also part of the Pakistani relationship with the United States that has come in the wake of the end of the Cold War. It is easy to forget that in South Asia, a sort of tectonic shift did unfold with the end of the Cold War in which the United States, after years of allying with Pakistan and against India, leapt at the opportunity, from the 1990's forward, to seal a new kind of alliance with India that had been prevented by the alliance politics of the Cold War era. And in terms of India as a market, in terms of India as a wedge against China, it is a very attractive relationship that the United States has actively, assiduously cultivated. And from the Pakistani perspective, their main game, their real asset, their leverage lies in this Islamist card and that's how they can prove themselves to be useful. It's not just a bunch of crazies or a bunch of rogue elements in military intelligence. It is structurally part of a larger logic in which Islam is a weapon of the weak, of weak states in various regional contexts. You can see it also in terms of the unfulfilled promise of Iranian

influence in the Middle East in which Iran compensates for the way in which it is hemmed in by American, Saudi, Israeli and other policies by funding various groups like Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas and otherwise. That kind of role for Islam in international relations that has to do with states and their instrumentalisation of Islamist politics will live on even as the idea of transnational Islamist mobilisation in the name of something grand like global jihad is clearly fading from view and we can kiss that goodbye with the death of Osama Bin Laden.

Alex Page: Thank you very much. Professor John Sidel, you are now off the HotSeat. And thank you for joining us; stay tuned for the next edition of the HotSeat.