

# Now Osama bin Laden is no more, is it time to reflect on the delinking of aid?

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So Osama bin Laden is now dead. After months of observing his hide-out in Abbottabad, 40 miles north of Islamabad, Pakistan, American Special Forces launched a clandestine operation to capture or kill Bin Laden. Within forty minutes it was all over and done with. His body was whisked swiftly away into the skies and ceremoniously dropped into the ocean. The last thing the Americans wanted was for his grave to become a shrine for al-Qaeda sympathisers. American politicians and the American public rejoiced; their number one enemy was now dealt with. Americans could feel safer. However, as President Obama cautioned, this was not the end of al-Qaeda, nor the end of international terrorism. In his words, "...his death does not mark the end of our effort. There's no doubt that al-Qaeda will continue to pursue attacks against us". There were still people out there who presented a threat to the American way of life. So the American people must continue to 'remain vigilant at home and abroad'.



After the initial euphoria had abated, questions began to be asked about the role of Pakistan in the sustenance of al-Qaeda's figurehead. How could he have hidden for apparently more than five years in a house near to Pakistan's prime military academy in a major garrison town? Surely he must have had a network of supporters within the Pakistani military, the ISI and/or government. Western allies have long harboured suspicions that Pakistan was not doing enough to track down Osama bin Laden or to curb the activities of al-Qaeda and its supporters. Yet, since 2001 Pakistan has received more than US\$ 20 billion in aid from America, most of this benefiting the military. In an effort to 'win hearts and minds' and also stabilise the allocation of development aid to Pakistan, Senators Kerry and Lugar pushed through legislation in 2009 that promised to 'promote an enhanced strategic partnership with Pakistan'. The US government then allocated \$7.5 billion over 5 years in non-military aid for purposes such as democratic governance, economic freedom and education. The ambiguous role of Pakistan in dealing with al-Qaeda and the Taliban has now prompted calls for a withdrawal of aid from Pakistan and for a more speedy withdrawal of troops from the region. Opinions in the US Congress are sharply divided on this issue, some favouring an immediate suspension of aid, and others emphasising more careful deliberation of any cuts.

In the months ahead we can expect an ongoing debate about the merits of continuing or reducing aid to Pakistan, and indeed to Afghanistan. However, this debate misses the point. A more important issue that politicians should give their attention to is the increasing securitisation of aid that has occurred over the past two decades, and especially since 2001. By the securitisation of aid we mean the increasing absorption of development assistance into security strategies and objectives. This is manifested in several ways. First, we can see this in the discursive justifications of development aid that are made by political leaders at the global and national levels. Usually, such statements assume causal links between poverty, alienation and terrorism. Poor nations are cast in this frame as fertile ground for radicalisation and extremism, posing a serious threat to global stability. To better protect themselves, according to this logic, developed states do well to reduce this poverty by providing development assistance. Similarly, we can see this in the mission statements of bilateral development agencies, which increasingly emphasise the strategic importance of aid as a 'soft instrument' in achieving security objectives. Second, the increasing securitisation of aid has led to closer relations between aid officials and their counterparts in

defence and foreign policy. In this way the national goal of security is kept at the forefront of policy attention and departmental resource allocation. The third way this is manifested is in the increased flows of aid to front-line states, Afghanistan, Iraq, Ethiopia and Pakistan all being key cases in point. To illustrate, in 2010 Afghanistan and Pakistan were the two top recipients of USAID. Israel took fourth position, hardly the poorest country in the world. Fourth, the increasing securitisation of aid can be seen in the emergence of development projects that have as their goal the prevention of extremism and radicalisation, especially among young populations. Fifth, it is also visible in the way development agencies engage with civil societies. Noteworthy here are the increasingly stringent and intrusive requirements placed on development NGOs, the US Anti-Terrorism Certificate and the Partner Vetting System piloted in the West Bank being prime examples here. Apart from these more restrictive measures, we also see development agencies 'discovering' Muslim groups and communities, breaking out of their otherwise narrow interpretation of civil society as primarily development NGOs and rights groups. Finally, we can see this most vividly in the often tense and uncomfortable intersection of military and development activity in conflict situations. In particular, 'hearts and minds' work by the military causes particular concern to humanitarian workers, who struggle to maintain principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence.

It might be countered that aid has always been linked to foreign policy objectives. This is not disputed. Rather, it is argued here that there has been a creeping securitisation of aid that goes beyond an implicit, understood link between aid and 'our' national political and economic interests to a much deeper and more complex engagement that alters the very fabric of aid – its institutions, its practices, its processes and its discourses. This matters, not just because military forays into development work put at risk the lives of humanitarian workers, but also because the moral and humanitarian purposes of aid become subsumed to national strategic interests, with consequences for the direction of aid flows. With the death of Osama bin Laden, it is an opportune moment to stop and reflect on how the aid-security nexus can be dissolved. Should aid still be used as an instrument in the West's 'war' against terrorism, or should it be deployed as a means to reduce global poverty?

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[www.lse.ac.uk/collections/GWOT](http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/GWOT) and "Counter-terrorism, Aid and Civil Society: Before and After the War on Terror" 2009, by Jude Howell and Jeremy Lind, Palgrave Press and "Civil Society Under Strain", 2010, edited by Jude Howell and Jeremy Lind, Kumarian Press.