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Osama bin Laden: Dead or Alive?

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On the 10th of January 2010, the BBC 2 aired a program dealing with the question of whether or not Osama bin Laden is dead or alive.

During an hour long program many views were aired, all of which failed to answer the question conclusively.

This should surprise no one, because, as in any murder investigation, the only conclusive proof that someone is dead is the discovery of the person's body. If Osama bin Laden is dead, it is most unlikely that his body will ever be found and, until it is, we can only argue on the basis of probabilities. And the balance of probabilities strongly favours the hypothesis that he is dead and has been dead for a very long time, probably since December 2001

I shall not discuss here all the arguments for and against his probable death. These are discussed lucidly and with cautious honesty by David Ray Griffin in his book Osama bin Laden–Dead or Alive?

I shall concern myself here with only one argument which, so far, no one seems to have considered.

US intelligence officials base the claim that Bin Laden was at the caves of Tora Bora in December 2001 on intercepted mobile phone conversations emanating from that region. Ever since the bombing of the Tora Bora caves, Osama bin Laden's voice has never again been heard from a source that can be trusted. According to Robert Baer, an ex-member of the CIA, at least half of the US intelligence community concerned with this issue believe Osama was killed during the bombing at Tora Bora. I suspect the percentage is higher. My argument is simple: if he was in the Tora Bora complex when it was bombed in December 2001, then he certainly died during that bombing, because nothing living could have survived it. Here are my reasons.

The weapon of choice when bombing a cave and mountain tunnel complex like that at Tora Bora is what is called a thermobaric bomb. Thermobaric bombs come in different sizes, but the largest are described as the most destructive non-nuclear bombs in existence. They are also known as air burst bombs, because they usually explode just above ground level. The British and Americans have them and have used them in Afghanistan. Here is Wikipedia's account of how they work. I have quoted each statement accurately, but have edited the text to make it more concise.

"Thermobaric explosives represent the deliberate application of the principle underlying the vapour cloud explosions and dust explosions that occasionally occur by accident in a variety of industries. Such explosions are the consequence of the rapid burning of a finely dispersed

fuel suspended in air in a confined space. Like all explosives, a chemical reaction is utilized to produce a huge amount of superheated gas, which almost instantaneously superheats the surrounding air and thus produces a rapidly-expanding high-temperature pressure wave (called a "blast wave") which does damage. A typical thermobaric weapon consists of a container packed with a fuel substance, in the centre of which is a small conventional-explosive "scatter charge". When a typical thermobaric weapon is detonated, the explosive charge (or some other dispersal mechanism) bursts the container and disperses the fuel in a cloud, the fuel mixes with the air, and the resultant mixture is ignited. Some weapons use separate charges to disperse the fuel and to ignite the fuel. Other designs use a stronger casing, which contains the dispersal explosion long enough to heat the fuel above its auto-ignition temperature. The dispersing fuel particles ignite spontaneously when they thereafter come into contact with oxygen in the air. In either case, the more thoroughly dispersed the fuel is, the faster the fuel can burn and the more rapid (and thus powerful) the explosion will be. In confined spaces, the availability of oxygen is limited, which further extends the pulse of the detonation. Furthermore the confined explosion generates a series of reflective shock waves, which maintain the hot environment (fireball) and permit extended combustion. This further-delayed combustion process produces the pressure wave over a significantly longer time duration (10–50 msec), which is generally referred to as after-burning or late-time impulse. Furthermore, when the super-heated gas inside the fireball cools the pressure drops sharply. This causes a partial vacuum, which can be powerful enough to cause physical damage to people and structures. A thermobaric explosion in a confined area such as a tunnel often creates an asphyxiation effect, when the fireball consumes all available oxygen and prevents fresh oxygen from reaching interior spaces for a time. If the walls of the confinement are strong, such as with defensive bunkers and tunnel systems, the over-pressure is contained and the blast effect is prolonged and channelled rather than dispersing evenly through the atmosphere. This can create a piston-type afterburn reaction in enclosed structures, with the flame-front progressing rapidly through the system "seeking" fresh oxygen."

So thermobaric bombs are especially effective in mountain caves and tunnels systems. They will work if dropped outside the entrances to tunnels and can also be launched into tunnel structures. They destroy living creatures (and inert structures) through their incredibly rapid and powerful high pressure shockwaves (travelling 2 miles a second), their high temperature wave fronts (reaching over 2482-2982 degrees centigrade), the vacuum they create (which itself destroys living creatures and structures) and by asphyxiation (because the explosion has consumed all the oxygen in the air). Their destructive effect is so great that they can, depending upon their size, destroy all life within a 600 metre radius of their use. The airplanes that drop the larger versions must remain at least 6000 metres away from the blast, lest they be damaged by the blast. Before December 2001, Tora Bora was an area rich in wildlife. It was, for example, home to huge flocks of the beautiful partridge, the chukor, native to that region. After December 2001, nothing could be found alive there; not even beetles and lizards. So either Osama bin Laden was not in those caves and tunnels in December 2001, or, if he was, then he was killed then and there.

So strong are the arguments in favour of the hypothesis that Osama bin Laden is dead, that we should ask why Hilary Clinton, General Stanley McChrystal and President Barrack Obama still talk about the need to search for him in Pakistan and to capture him. Since the onus is now firmly upon anyone claiming that Bin Laden is alive to give us good reasons to believe it, and since no one who makes that claim ever offers such reasons, and since it is not

credible that the officials I have just mentioned do not know that Bin Laden is almost certainly dead, we are forced to conclude that they are using Bin Laden's supposed existence as one of the four major fictions designed to justify their interventions in the Af-Pak region.

The other three cynical fictions are

(i) that there is an organised group of insurgents in Pakistan that justifies the title 'Al Qaeda' and that can be disrupted and dismantled' (Obama's words),

(ii) that this organisation poses a serious threat to the security of Western nations, and

(iii) that the actions of NATO forces in Afghanistan at present substantially increase the safety of non-combatant citizens in the public areas of Western countries whose troops are involved in killing Afghans at America's behest.

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