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Health and the Aging Terrorist ¹

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Introduction

In discussion of terrorism to date, little attention has been accorded to the long term health of terrorists. "Who cares?" you might say. We may not be concerned about the health of terrorists from a caring point of view, but poor health could affect terrorists' effectiveness, ability to make rational decisions, vulnerability to arrest. and reduce their life expectancy. Many of the radicals of the 1970s and 1980s are now starting to suffer health problems.

There are a number of reasons for this, some of which also account for the well documented reduced life span of police officers! These include the long-term effects of stress, poor diet, long hours - and resultant marital and family problems; and, additionally, in the case of terrorists, lack of regular access to quality healthcare and the long-term effects of living rough and combat trauma.

Usama bin Laden

Among many terrorists who are experiencing health problems is super terrorist Usama bin Laden, who has been linked to a number of attacks on US targets, including the August 1998 East Africa bombings.

Usama bin Laden was born in 1954 into a rich Saudi family and would have had excellent health care until he departed to fight in the anti-Russian jihad in Afghanistan in 1979. He lived rough for the next 10 years before returning to Saudi Arabia in 1989. The Saudi Government ordered him to leave in 1990, because of Saudi embarrassment at his influential opposition to the deployment of US forces to Saudi Arabia under Operation Desert Shield. Bin Laden then travelled to Sudan and remained there until 1996. He was forced to leave Sudan after US pressure on the Sudanese Government, and moved to Afghanistan. Since then his movements have been limited to Afghanistan and, perhaps, the northern border areas of Pakistan.

In 1999, reports started to surface that bin Laden was suffering from major health problems, including kidney failure.

Simon Reeve, in his book *The New Jackals*, published in 1999, claimed that the kidney failure was the result of a CIA sponsored assassination attempt, involving an assassin named Siddiq Ahmed, who was paid US\$267,000 to poison bin, Laden.! According to Reeves' information, it was only partially successful, causing the target, Usama bin Laden, to suffer from acute kidney failure.

According to a report in Defense & Foreign Affairs Strategic Policy earlier this year, bin Laden's health deteriorated markedly in the early winter of 1999/2000. He suffered debilitating pain that evolved into bouts of depression. By January 2000, bin Laden's overall health had deteriorated to the point that his closest confidants feared he was dying. Arab doctors, who had been rushed to Qandahar from the Persian Gulf, prescribed complex treatment that was not available in either Afghanistan or Pakistan.²



Dr Ayman al-Zawahiri resigned from the leadership of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ) in order to devote himself to bin Laden's al Qaeda organisation. Zawahiri was one of Egypt's leading paediatricians before he became involved in the EIJ and went underground. He became increasingly involved with bin Laden's health issues.²

According to Bodansky, in January 2000, Dr al-Zawahiri arranged for an eminent Iraqi doctor to examine bin Laden in Afghanistan. The Iraqi doctor prescribed a treatment involving dialysis, a series of injections and intravenous medicine delivery, as well as an assortment of medications.²

A thorough search of Afghanistan's medical facilities led to the discovery of a non-operational, but fixable, Soviet dialysis machine and related equipment. in the basement of a derelict Kabul hospital. The hospital was originally built to cater for the needs of the late President Najibullah and the ruling elite.²

Dr Zawahiri relied on his long-standing connection to the Chechen mafia, which dates back to the early 1990s, to have them find and deliver the parts needed for the dialysis machine and other medical equipment prescribed for bin Laden.²

The equipment needed was smuggled to Afghanistan via Iran and then on to Afghanistan. It was installed at bin Laden's forward headquarters near Sarobi, Laghman Province (between Kabul and Jalalabad).²

The medical team, led by the Iraqi doctor and Zawahiri, immediately got to work. Within a month or so they had bin Laden back on his feet again, to the point that he could attend brief meetings.²

By late March 2000, bin Laden was healthy enough to make a rare public appearance. He attended a high-level meeting with the Taliban leadership, convened to discuss President Clinton's upcoming visit to Pakistan. According to witnesses, bin Laden looked frail, his face thin and drawn. But he was well informed, lucid, and active throughout the lengthy meeting.²

Conclusion

One can only speculate on the impact of the death of bin Laden. It would certainly have been a major setback for al Qaeda and Sunni extremists internationally.

An outcome of his recovery has been an increased commitment on the part of al Qaeda to assist the Islamic fighters in Chechnya and Dagestan. There has, this year, been a surge in Islamic fighters passing through the training camps in Afghanistan and Pakistan, en route for the Caucasus.²

Bin Laden was more fortunate than other terrorists might be in similar circumstances because of the substantial finances available to him, and his popular support within the Arab World. The same is not necessarily true of other sick terrorist leaders, like the notorious Palestinian, Abu Nidal, seriously ill from cancer in Iraq.

Whether you believe that bin Laden was poisoned or has health problems induced by his frugal and demanding lifestyle, the fact remains that his health has probably changed the operational orientation of al Qaeda, for the time being at least, and has made bin Laden a less dynamic individual.

If his health problems are linked to cancer, it is unlikely that bin Laden will be able to secure in Afghanistan the kind of treatment he would need for long term survival. Any attempt to leave Afghanistan would make him vulnerable to betrayal, and arrest by US agents.

Medical intelligence on key individuals is a field that has been largely neglected since the Cold War, but the bin Laden case demonstrates that it is an area worthy of greater resources. Had the vital medical supplies been interdicted earlier this year, bin Laden might no longer be with us.

References

1. Reeve S. *The New Jackals: Ramzi Yousef, Osama Bin Laden and the Future of Terrorism*. Boston: Northeastern University Print; 1999.
2. Bodansky Y. Chechnya prepares for a "third war". using terrorism, the West and bin Laden. *Defense & Foreign Affairs Strategic Policy* 2000; (4): 13.