Intelligence exploited from Osama bin Laden’s compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan, revealed that the late al Qaeda leader exerted greater operational and tactical influence on the organization than previously thought. Not isolated in the mountains of western Pakistan, as presumed by many, bin Laden instead was located just miles from Islamabad, where he continued to play the preeminent leadership role in the larger al Qaeda organization.

Bin Laden’s role in the al Qaeda movement, particularly over the last few years, has been a topic of much debate both inside and outside of government. His death raises important questions regarding the future of al Qaeda and U.S. counterterrorism policy. Over time his true value to the organization will become clearer. But what remains certain is that while al Qaeda could never have been fully dismantled with bin Laden alive, bin Laden’s death in no way means the end of al Qaeda.

In the nearly 10 years since the September 11, 2001, attacks, al Qaeda’s associated movements—its
regional affiliates such as al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and al Shabaab—have evolved as significant threats of their own. For decades bin Laden’s al Qaeda “core” nurtured like-minded terrorist and insurgent groups with training, funding, and inspiration. Across the globe, personal networks, established among men who fought the Soviet Union in Afghanistan in the 1980s and trained in camps there throughout the 1990s, flourished. Based in Sudan in the mid-1990s, bin Laden networked militants from Eritrea, Morocco, Libya, Tajikistan, Indonesia, and areas further afield.

Bin Laden’s goal was always for al Qaeda to serve as the vanguard for a global “war” against the West and its Muslim partners by catalyzing a self-sustaining movement. Following 9/11 many of these nascent linkages matured from instances of direct patronage to public affirmations of ideological solidarity. Homegrown, self-radicalized individuals inspired by al Qaeda’s toxic narrative also emerged to compound the threat. In many cases, these individuals draw inspiration from key figures within al Qaeda’s diverse set of affiliates, like AQAP’s American born Anwar al-Awlaki. Awlaki has been particularly effective at radicalizing U.S. citizens and legal residents because he delivers online sermons in English. Ultimately, then, bin Laden succeeded in blending local grievances with his global terrorist agenda in hope that these groups would survive his inevitable demise.

Militant groups, validated and incubated under al Qaeda, now are self-sustaining and dangerous in their own right. They also network among themselves and reach beyond traditional areas of activity.

In Africa, al Shabaab is at the center of a maelstrom that defies solution and includes remnants linked to al Qaeda’s original network in East Africa. Algeria-based al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) moves freely across the ungoverned Sahel region and is eager to exploit chaos in Libya. On the Arabian Peninsula, AQAP, according to some within the intelligence community, has evolved into the most significant terrorist threat facing the United States. In Iraq, an unstable government and sectarian score-settling provide a chance for al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) to wreak further havoc. In Central and South Asia, al Qaeda–linked insurgent and terrorist groups threaten regional stability. Among these are Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), the Haqqani Network, and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). A fluid assortment of groups and individuals continue to support terrorism in Indonesia and the southern Philippines. One prominent Philippines-based terrorist, Umar Patek, was arrested in Abbottabad shortly before bin Laden was killed, raising suspicion about the current links between Southeast Asian and South Asian militants.
On the positive side, countervailing forces to these groups are unfolding throughout the Muslim and Arab world, repudiating al Qaeda’s raison d’être. Bin Laden’s death presents a unique opportunity to undercut the perverted philosophy of al Qaeda and to puncture, once and for all, the narrative that drives the movement. Opinion polls in Muslim-majority countries have indicated low approval of bin Laden and al Qaeda’s murderous agenda that overwhelmingly targets Muslim civilians. Most recently, the dramatic popular revolutions sweeping dictators from power forsook the formulas for victory prescribed by al Qaeda. But even this euphoria is tempered by the reality that ongoing volatility and disarray are igniting sectarian violence, while unmet expectations could allow militant groups to manipulate the failings of nascent democracies and muffle suggestions of al Qaeda’s irrelevancy.

Al Qaeda certainly will experience some degradation with the death of its founder. The reams of intelligence gathered at Abbottabad makes it likely that the next generation of al Qaeda leaders will lie low in the coming months, fearing U.S. action. And the network will change or even fragment, but several issues will help maintain al Qaeda’s appeal. The unresolved Israel-Palestine peace process, continued perceptions of undue Western influence in Muslim-majority countries, and dire socioeconomic conditions will thwart an imminent solution to this threat.

The future of al Qaeda—and bin Laden’s legacy—will remain uncertain for years. Did bin Laden do enough during the last two decades to ensure a self-sustaining movement, or did he create an organization ultimately limited by the persona of its leader? Faced with this unknown, the United States and its allies will be required to maintain counterterrorism pressure on al Qaeda and its affiliates to once and for all disrupt, dismantle, and defeat the network.