The hunting down of al-Qaeda supremo in the wee hours of May 1 in Abottabad, Pakistan by US Navy Seals is a landmark development in the war on terror. With the attacks on World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, bin Laden was elevated to the realm of evil in the American imagination, once reserved for leaders like Hitler and Stalin. In his speech confirming the death of Osama bin Laden, US President Obama said that the moment marked the “most significant achievement to date” in the US effort to defeat al-Qaida. However, he cautioned: “Yet his death does not mark the end of our effort. There is no doubt that the al-Qaida will continue to pursue attacks against us. We must-and we will-remain vigilant at home and abroad.” Echoing the popular mood of the jubilant masses on the streets of US, Obama said justice had been done.

The implications of this historical breakthrough in the war on terror is manifold. It certainly does not mean an end of al-Qaeda. It is a fact though that al-Qaida has lost its capacity to mastermind and execute attacks, that Osama had become more a “spiritual”, symbolic leader of the militant Islamic movement, but over the decade since 9/11, the network has expanded, spread, morphed and broken off into what came to be known as “al-Qaida franchises” round the world. These franchises have shown their ability to plan and carry out attacks in their area of operation independently of bin Laden. These local terror organizations want to punish America and its allies for their own reasons. Before 9/11 al-Qaida had one address, in Kandahar; today it has spawned groups in Pakistan, Yemen, Iraq, Somalia, not to forget individual operators in the West who vent an anger arising from their alienation from western societies through violent acts-all in al-Qaida’s name. There is every possibility that the killing of bin Laden will turn him into a martyr, inspiring others to take up the battle.

There will be growing domestic political pressure on Obama to accelerate the drawdown of US troops in the run-up to the 2012 presidential election. Obama needs to rethink the war in Afghanistan. Ten years on, it should be clear that the problems in Afghanistan do not have a military solution, at least not one the US can deliver. There is no justification for further military operation in that country and no excuse for delaying the departure of US and other foreign troops.

If we turn towards Pakistan, it seems impossible to believe that Pakistan’s intelligence agencies had no idea about the presence of world’s most wanted terrorist. Did they ignore what was going
on under their noses or worse, were they instrumental in providing safe haven? During his 2008 presidential election campaign, Obama pledged that if there was “actionable intelligence” about bin Laden in Pakistan, he would authorize action with or without Islamabad’s help. Eventually, Geromino EKIA happened without Pakistan’s help. CIA Director, Leon Panetta rubbed more salt in Pakistan’s wounds when he said that the US did not give notice to Islamabad about the operation because it feared it may be leaked to al-Qaeda supremo. Stormy conditions lie ahead for US-Pak relations. For years, US has accused Pakistan of playing a “double-game” by claiming to be America’s partner in fighting terrorism and collecting billions of dollars in military aid while clandestinely supporting extremists.

Osama’s killing has come as a major embarrassment to Pakistan. Many segments of Pakistan’s political and religious leadership view Osama’s killing as an act against the nation’s sovereignty. Osama’s death has also prompted terror outfits to step up its offensive against Pakistan. Therefore, Pakistan should review its policy of fighting this war against terror. There seems to be a growing clamour for Pakistan to review its strategies, stop treading in grey areas and treat a terrorist as a terrorist without getting entangled in the rhetoric of “your terrorist is my freedom fighter”. India should exploit the new opportunity—of bin Laden being holed up in Pakistan—to build an international coalition for mounting pressure on Pakistan to initiate action against the terror groups there. Unlike the Americans who have the impunity and wherewithal to strike in Pakistan, India has to depend on diplomacy, both persuasive and coercive, for achieving the objective.

As far as reactions of the world are concerned, Prime Minister of UK, Cameron cautioned that Osama’s death did not mark the end of threat from terrorism and stressed the need for utmost vigilance in the days ahead. According to Tony Blair, the ideology that bin Laden preached was still very much alive and continued to pose a threat. In the Middle East, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood advocated that with Osama’s death, US should end its occupation of Muslim countries. Saudi Arabia has welcomed the killing of Osama and expressed the hope that his death “would be a step towards supporting international efforts aimed at fighting terrorism”. Palestinian Hamas, however, has praised bin Laden as an “Arab holy warrior”.

Thus, zeroing in on bin Laden may seem to augur well for Obama’s re-election prospects in 2012, though 18 months is a long time in politics. If there should be another spectacular attack on US target, conducted to avenge bin Laden’s death, the euphoria will melt away. Now that the arch-perpetrator of 9/11 has been removed, Obama can shift towards a full exit strategy in Afghanistan by seeking a credible peace settlement that holds both inside Afghanistan, including Taliban and outside, including Pakistan. All that the people of Afghanistan want is peace and all
the West has brought them is war. It will take decades for the wounds to heal and they will never be healed by western arms. Though the most outrageous act of terrorism in modern times has led to the most gigantic manhunt and most costly tit-for-tat war (a mind-boggling $1.3 trillion), but the killing of bin Laden only removes bin Laden—not the al-Qaida or its cause. In an interview to Hamid Mir on November 8, 2001, Osama commented “…War against America will not be over even after my death. I will fight till the last bullet in my gun. Martyrdom is my biggest dream, and my martyrdom will create more Osama bin Ladens.” Physical elimination of Osama is a big news only for Americans. Many people outside America want the elimination of policies which may produce more Osamas.

Osama’s death may well become an afterthought and pass into history, even if it enjoys much prominence in jihadi websites as of now. Future attacks will most certainly be dedicated to bin Laden’s memory. Osama’s success in eluding capture and assassination for so many years has earned him an aura of invincibility, which undoubtedly was inspirational. But that aura is now broken. The information that the US gathered from his house will inflict severe damage to al-Qaida. Still the larger ideological movement that bin Laden left behind has by no means faded away and will continue to thrive. West’s picking and choosing of battles to back has cast a shadow on its talk of support for democracy. Majority of jihadis are motivated by grievances of western military interventions. So, it won’t be unfair to say that Osama bin Laden’s death has done nothing to change the underlying conditions of the protean enemy-terrorism.