

## The Assassination of Bin Laden: A Comparative Look at the Official Response and “Popular Opinion” in the Online Arab Media

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## Foreword

The Arabic-language press heralded the positive reactions of leaders of Arab countries to the assassination of Osama Bin Laden. The United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Lebanese President Michel Suleiman,<sup>1</sup> senior Saudi officials, and officials from countries such as Yemen and Iraq were among those condoning the act.<sup>2</sup> For the most part, columnists in the established Arabic-language press aligned themselves with these Arab leaders. Some publicists expressed disapproval of Bin Laden's actions and ideas, others strongly condemned him, and still others praised the assassination. However, the official Arab press – that is, the articles and regular op-ed columns published in established, large-circulation newspapers – is not the only arena for public discussion of matters concerning the Arab street. Open, online public opinion polls and discussion forums have made the Internet an additional public arena for lively discussion of such issues. Some say that this arena even allows for a freer discussion, in which – unlike in the established press – legitimacy is accorded competing political, religious and cultural interpretations.<sup>3</sup> This article will attempt to identify the differences between these two arenas, as reflected in responses to the assassination of Bin Laden and attitudes towards his ideas. It contains both a qualitative and a quantitative analysis of the discussion in these arenas, in an attempt to divine the principle themes raised following Bin Laden's assassination, and the extent of sympathy for the man and his ideas.

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<sup>1</sup> *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat*, May 4, 2011,

<http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&article=620153&issueno=11845> (Arabic).

<sup>2</sup> *Al-Jazeera.net*, May 3, 2011,

<http://www.aljazeera.net/Mob/Templates/Postings/NewsDetailedPage.aspx?GUID=E8EE99BB-98EC-400F-9052-E5D0B38AE8F3> (Arabic).

<sup>3</sup> Khalil Rinnawi, "The Internet and the Arab World as a Virtual Public Sphere", *Socioeconomic Issues*, (2002) 16-17, 1-23. Retrieved from

<http://cmsprod.bgu.ac.il/NR/rdonlyres/E1D4CA76-9BEF-49A3-8B70-ADF2B3AF68FB/12231/Rinnawi.pdf>.

## Op-Ed Articles: Public Discussion in the Official Arab Media

### *A Qualitative Analysis of the Principle Themes Raised in Op-Ed Articles*

Like the Arab heads of state whose official responses condoned the assassination and saw it as a reason for hope, the publicists of the established Arab press presented a more or less unified stance in their op-ed articles concerning Bin Laden, his organization and his ideas. The regular column of *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat's* editor-in-chief Tariq Alhomayed, which appeared immediately subsequent to the announcement of Bin Laden's death, was devoted to ridicule of Bin Laden, and intimated the hypocrisy of one who had sent young men to die in battle, even as he himself died beside his young wife in an opulent, well-guarded house. Further, Alhomayed criticized Bin Laden for preaching a path that he himself did not follow. Alhomayed deemed the events of September 11, 2001 perpetrated by Bin Laden terrorist attacks, and called Al-Qaeda's leaders "sheikhs of evil and terror". In addition, he called Al-Qaeda's attacks "Al-Qaeda's evil, [which has been] spread through all the countries of the world" since September 11<sup>th</sup>. Alhomayed excoriated Al-Qaeda's actions, writing, "Innocents were decapitated, passers-by murdered, children betrayed and women killed, and the sheikhs of evil justified [Bin Laden]."<sup>4</sup>

Another writer for *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat*, Yusuf Al-Dayni, addressed Al-Qaeda's ideology, warning that Bin Laden's assassination might be interpreted by Al-Qaeda's rank and file as an heroic death, which could give rise to a fourth generation of that organization. He, like Alhomayed, did not dispute Al-Qaeda's standing, to all extents and purposes, as a terrorist organization. In Al-Dayni's words, "It is the practice of terrorist organizations, given the lack of a strategy of struggle in the extremist dialog, to rebuild themselves. What is lacking in

<sup>4</sup> Tariq Alhomayed, "Bin Laden Killed at His Home", *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat*, May 3, 2011, <http://www.aawsat.com/leader.asp?section=3&issueno=11844&article=619880> (Arabic).

sufficient quantity is not the pursuit of Al-Qaeda's leaders, but efforts to combat its ideology."<sup>5</sup>

The writer Elias Harfoush devoted an article in *Al-Hayat* to Bin Laden's assassination, in which he, too, denounced Al-Qaeda's ideology, claiming it has no hold on the Arab street. Regardless of whether or not this claim is accurate, Harfoush made it as a way of sharpening his criticism against Al-Qaeda and its leader, Bin Laden. Harfoush writes, "The Arab streets that have witnessed the resistance and popular uprisings, and the feet, the slogans and the electronic messages of the young people, have proven how false were the claims of Bin Laden and his organization, that they spoke for the Arabs and Muslims with their televised messages of hatred and their propaganda of death."<sup>6</sup>

Another of *Al-Hayat's* writers, Daoud Al-Sharian, criticized the United States for having buried Bin Laden's body at sea, thereby opening a portal to conspiracy theories and the rehabilitation of Bin Laden's image. At the same time, however, he harshly criticized Bin Laden's path: "The leader of Al-Qaeda lived in caves, conjured a foreign Jihadist idea, permitted the killing of children, women and innocents, committed terrorist acts for decades, seduced young people and then sent them to an unknown fate, succeeded in recruiting tens of writers and experts, and generated a cultural phenomenon known as the idea of Al-Qaeda".<sup>7</sup>

Jihad Al-Khazen, a regular columnist for *Al-Hayat* and a former editor-in-chief of both that newspaper and *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat*, criticized the government of George W. Bush, but also did not fail to level criticism against Osama Bin Laden. In a column devoted to Bin Laden's assassination titled, "The Danger of Al-Qaeda Has

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<sup>5</sup> Yusuf Al-Dayni, "What about Bin Laden?" *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat*, May 4, 2011, <http://www.aawsat.com/leader.asp?section=3&issueno=11845&article=620172> (Arabic).

<sup>6</sup> Elias Harfoush, "Obama Assassinated Osama", *Al-Hayat*, May 3, 2011, <http://international.daralhayat.com/internationalarticle/262256> (Arabic).

<sup>7</sup> Daoud Al-Sharian, "A Prayer for the Dead, American-Style", *Al-Hayat*, May 4, 2011, <http://international.daralhayat.com/internationalarticle/262663> (Arabic).

Not Passed", Al-Khazen began, "The world is in a better place since the death of Bin Laden". Nevertheless, he refused to ally himself with the US, explaining, "I don't wish for the death of any man, but I do wish that Osama Bin Laden, Ayman Al-Zawahiri, and the other members of Al-Qaeda, along with the government of George Bush, Jr., would all be thrown into the "Guantanamo" prison camp, and the key tossed into the sea".<sup>8</sup>

Abdullah Iskandar also censured Bin Laden's way but, more importantly, disparaged the concessions made to him in the Arab media, especially by commentators aligned with political Islam. Iskandar protested that much of the disapproval of Bin Laden emanated from the harm he did to Muslims, and from the fact that Al-Qaeda's terrorism reached everywhere but Palestine. Iskandar elaborated, "The deep meaning of this is that the violence [perpetrated by Bin Laden and Al-Qaeda] is not itself decried [by some commentators in the Arab media] as a political tool; rather, the censure comes only because [Bin Laden] has strayed from the real battle, which is defined by political conditions. Thus, some [political commentators] have not hesitated to call Bin Laden a Mujahid [fighter for Islam] and a Shahid [martyr]."<sup>9</sup>

The half-hearted condemnation Iskandar vilifies in his op-ed article is best exemplified by some of the opinion pieces posted on *Al-Jazeera's* online network. For example, an article on that Web site by Muhammad Al-Shanqiti states, "Al-Qaeda's fighting on multiple fronts, its failure to hew to clear moral strictures of conflict as required by Islamic values, its lack of a clear military strategy with a beginning and an end, are what led the organization to an impasse, despite its good intentions and immense sacrifice." Al-Shanqiti goes on to describe Al-

<sup>8</sup> Jihad Al-Khazen, "The Danger of Al-Qaeda Has Not Passed", *Al-Hayat*, May 4, 2011, <http://international.daralhayat.com/internationalarticle/262613> (Arabic).

<sup>9</sup> Abdullah Iskandar, "Has the Terror Ended?", *Al-Hayat*, May 4, 2011, <http://international.daralhayat.com/internationalarticle/262627> (Arabic).

Qaeda's good intentions, praising the sacrifices it made; the criticism he levels against it is for its not having clear enough parameters. In Al-Shanqiti's words: "The overwhelming majority of Muslims has understood that the methods used by Al-Qaeda in the fight against enemies was characterized by moral weakness at some times, and by a lack of political wisdom at many others, and therefore has not succeeded in penetrating the Muslim conscience...". In other words, Al-Shanqiti does not disagree with the conventions underlying Al-Qaeda's activities, which define the enemies of the Muslims and stress the necessity of fighting them; his only criticism of the organization is that its moral basis for action is weak and, politically, it does not act wisely – sometimes. Furthermore, Al-Shanqiti credits Bin Laden with having forfeited a life of luxury for the political struggle.<sup>10</sup>

Yasir Al-Zaatra, another writer for the *Al-Jazeera* Network, also devoted an article to the assassination of Bin Laden. In it, he does not take a clear stand on Bin Laden, but he does unstintingly praise him for several acts, defending him overall while expressing a few minor reservations. According to Al-Zaatra, "The facts regarding Bin Laden's history from beginning to end will make him a significant symbol, like Che Guevara for many in the world." Al-Zaatra depicts Bin Laden in an heroic light, writing that Bin Laden relinquished life's pleasures to "wage Jihad in Afghanistan during the Soviet occupation, before turning to fight the superpower that won the Cold War". Al-Zaatra devotes much of his article to an apologia for Al-Qaeda, explaining that the bulk of its efforts were directed against the outside enemy – that is, the West – and not against Arab regimes, a goal which he notes is unacceptable to the Arab public. Al-Zaatra defends Bin Laden, writing that "Osama Bin Laden himself ordered members of the organization in

<sup>10</sup> Muhammad Al-Shanqiti, "Bin Laden's Heritage During a Time of Revolution", *Al-Jazeera*, <http://www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/5B68E00B-5E68-4BF2-BBC7-D8F926E13E6E.htm> (Arabic).

Saudi Arabia to cease their activities, once he had become convinced of their ineffectuality and the aversion to them of the public, and especially of Islamist groups."<sup>11</sup>

Another writer for *Al-Jazeera.net*, Ali Badwan, unequivocally condemned Bin Laden's actions, but not without shooting a barb at Bin Laden's great rival, the US. He concludes his article with the words, "Ultimately, without ignoring the tragic, perverse, disastrous and painful events of September 11, 2001 – a mark of Cain against their perpetrators – it is clear that the phenomenon of Bin Laden, and Al-Qaeda in general, was one of excessive intimidation, which the American government used in its propaganda and media, aimed first and foremost at American public opinion, for internal-political reasons and to justify the American war program against Iraq, several years before the events of September 11, 2001<sup>12</sup>."

Among the reactions to Bin Laden's death, one can find on *Al-Jazeera's* Web site articles discussing conspiracy theories of the assassination. By discussing whether Bin Laden really had been eliminated, these articles skirt the difficulty of expressing an opinion about his actions or his organization. To illustrate: in an article titled, "Bin Laden...Why Don't We Believe the Lie?", Muhammad Al-Qadusi calls Obama's declaration of Bin Laden's demise "fishy", claiming that it reeked of "the stench of deceit", in essence because it was not filmed, and because Bin Laden was buried at sea.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Yasir Al-Zaatra, "The Long Journey and the Foreseeable End", May 2, 2011, *Al-Jazeera*, <http://aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/4077A284-CAB4-4852-A311-1981CDCD2DFF.htm> (Arabic).

<sup>12</sup> Ali Badwan, "What Comes After Bin Laden's Assassination?" 3.5.2011, <http://www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/069D191C-CF48-47AE-A314-412E713F29C9.htm>

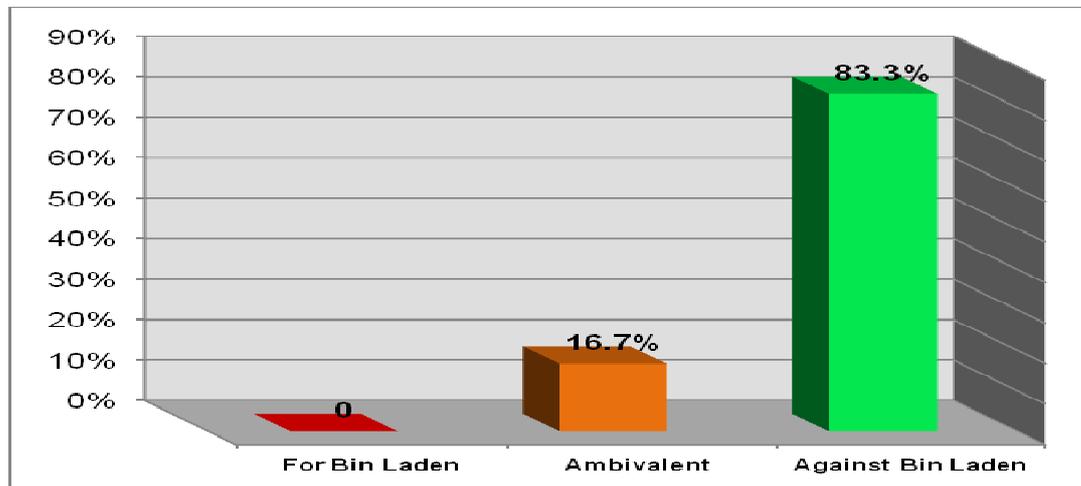
<sup>13</sup> Muhammad Al-Qadusi, "Bin Laden...Why Don't We Believe the Lie?", *Al-Jazeera*, May 3, 2011, <http://aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/4BD8D226-47F1-4D9E-80B1-946BF57304BD.htm> (Arabic).

### ***A Quantitative Analysis of Op-Ed Articles***

For the purposes of the quantitative analysis, we gathered all of the opinion pieces published on the three news Web sites *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat*, *Al-Hayat*, and *Al-Jazeera.net* in which either a positive or a negative view of Bin Laden and the activities of Al-Qaeda was expressed. Articles in which no distinct opinion, either positive or negative, was clearly expressed, were excluded from the data, even if they did contain hints or oblique references to the author's opinion. Op-ed articles from the newspapers *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat* and *Al-Hayat* were collected between May 1, 2011 (the announcement of Bin Laden's assassination) and May 6, 2011, inclusive – a time span that provided sufficient material for analysis. Collection of data from *Al-Jazeera.net* continued until May 9, 2011, to ensure a sufficient quantity of data. It should be stressed again that any article containing commendation or condemnation [of Bin Laden], or both, was included in the quantitative analysis. The articles were divided into three categories: articles antagonistic to Bin Laden, articles ambivalent towards Bin Laden, and articles supportive of Bin Laden. In all, 18 items were sampled, eight of them from *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat*, five from *Al-Hayat*, and five from *Al-Jazeera*. Fifteen of the articles unequivocally condemned Bin Laden and Al-Qaeda, and three articles were ambivalent – that is, although they condemned, in part, the activities of the man and his organization, they also expressed some sympathy with them. Not one article unequivocally supported Bin Laden and Al-Qaeda.

It is worth noting that the three ambivalent articles appeared on the Web site of the *Al-Jazeera* Network. The writers posting on the Web sites of *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat* and *Al-Hayat* toed one line: unreserved condemnation of Bin Laden and Al-Qaeda. A graphic representation of the breakdown of the articles follows in Figure 1.

**Figure 1: Percentage Breakdown of Opinions Expressed in Op-Ed Articles  
Concerning Bin Laden's Death, by Opinion Expressed**



It should further be noted that although none of the publicists posting on these three Web sites expressed staunch support of Bin Laden, this does not mean that no praise and commendation of Bin Laden and his work were registered in the established Arab press. For example, the Kuwaiti newspaper *Al-Qabas* published an article by Khulud Abd-Allah Al-Khamis titled, "Ahhh...Would I Were His Wife". In it, Al-Khamis extols Bin Laden and exclaims how much he would like to meet him in his cave and become his wife.<sup>14</sup> However, the quantitative data examined do suggest that any praise of Bin Laden was written in the margins of the mainstream press, most of which did not hesitate to criticize the man, his actions, and his ideology.

<sup>14</sup> Khulud Abdullah Al-Khamis, "Ahhh...Would I Were His Wife", *Al-Qabas*, May 4, 2011, <http://www.alqabas.com.kw/Article.aspx?id=700526&date=05062011> (Arabic).

## **Public Opinion Online: Discussions and Reader Reactions on Arab News Web Sites**

The following section used two means of assessing public opinion as expressed in online media, the arena that serves as the voice of the masses ("vox populi"). The first of these was an open opinion poll conducted by the Web site of the *Al-Jazeera* Network, which asked visitors to the site to answer several questions, chief among which was "What is your opinion of the death of Bin Laden?". The second of these was readers' reactions ("talkbacks") to various articles posted on news and current events Web sites in the Arab world, which we surveyed in an attempt to divine extant attitudes towards the issue at hand.

### ***A Qualitative Analysis of the Al-Jazeera Opinion Poll***

Bin Laden as a symbol whose ideas will not disappear because they have deep ideological roots

The Web site of the *Al-Jazeera* Network conducted an open poll, in which it invited visitors to the site to answer these questions: "What is your opinion of the assassination of Bin Laden? Will his assassination lead to a reduction in the terrorist attacks perpetrated by Al-Qaeda? Will Bin Laden's ideas live on after him? Do you expect Al-Qaeda to retaliate?"

For ten days, until May 12, 2011, Web surfers posted 450 responses in answer to these questions. The site emphasized that the opinions it subsequently posted did not reflect those of the *Al-Jazeera* Network, but rather only of the respondents themselves; it also stressed that the responses had been uploaded without any qualitative or quantitative analysis having been conducted on them.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> "How Do You View the Killing of Osama Bin Laden?", *Al-Jazeera*, May 2, 2011, <http://www.aljazeera.net/nr/exeres/aefea196-7ee2-43f6-844c-68f46c440ab8.htm> (Arabic).

Many of the responses posted supported Bin Laden and his actions, indicating that many see Bin Laden as a symbol and a paragon. For example, response number 2 to the opinion poll, posted by someone identifying himself as "a Tunisian Muslim who loves Sheikh Osama", says, "I'm going to call my son 'Osama'...". Respondent number 4, who identified herself as Maryam Abd Al-Rahman from Malaysia, placed Bin Laden in the pantheon of heroes of Islam, writing, "Jihad is a commandment, not an idea, [which has] existed since Islam began and the venerable Prophet migrated with the Da'awa [propagating Islam]. It [Jihad] did not end with the death of the Prophet, nor with the deaths of Abu-Bakr, Omar [Bin Al-Khatib], Othman or Ali [Muhammad's successors, the first four Caliphs of Islam]; it [Jihad] is continuous, until the Romans are defeated and the truth vanquishes the lie. Osama Bin Laden is nothing but a sword among the swords of justice, which threaten the lie. May Allah lodge him in the expanse of Paradise." This last blessing was repeated countless times in the responses of participants in the opinion poll.

Other respondents who supported Bin Laden claimed, "we are all Bin Laden", as if to trumpet popular support for the man and send a message that the struggle was not over. One respondent, who identified herself as a "Muslim woman" wrote, "If the US has indeed fulfilled its wishes by killing one lone man, it should know that a million [people like] Osama are lying in wait for [the US], oh, traitorous, dictatorial land. We are all Osama. May Allah have mercy on you and place you in the expanse of Paradise." Again and again, the phrase "we are all Osama" or "we are all Bin Laden" appeared among such responses.

In addition, many responses presented Jihad as an eternal struggle that would continue until Judgment Day. A respondent who identified himself as "eisaa" wrote, "...Osama has become a symbol for many, especially because he is the son

of a Yemeni-Saudi billionaire...but lived in the hills...Jihad will continue until Judgment Day. Osama founded a generation that will see only Allah...". Another example of this deterministic perspective is provided by respondent number 333, who identified himself as "Son of Bin Laden": "...I staunchly believe that Jihad against the infidel will continue until the day of the resurrection of the dead, and that the blood of the Martyr is the light and the flame that will illumine the path of the Mujahideen...". The idea that Jihad, or the struggle against the infidel, would continue until Judgment Day was cited in the poll 16 times.

Other respondents explained that Jihad, and Al-Qaeda's activities, would not cease with Bin Laden's death, and would even become more virulent, since they are [founded on] deeply-rooted Islamic ideas. In this vein, respondent 315 from Jordan wrote, "Osama, may Allah have mercy on him, is a Shahid [martyr] of the Ummah [Muslim Nation]. The terrorist attacks will not stop because of his death. Quite the contrary: with Allah's help, his ideas will not die, because they are derived from the Qur'an...".

Several of the respondents bolstered this claim by citing past heroes and martyrs for Islam. For example, respondent number 199, from Morocco, cited the Islamic philosopher Sayyid Qutb, writing, "No bullets can kill the idea, as Sayyid Qutb said, our ideas will remain like the ink on a page, until blood is spilled [on the enemy] and they are flooded and will hear even more clearly." Respondent number 35, from Yemen, equated Bin Laden with another modern Islamic hero, Umar Al-Mukhtar, who was famed for having fought Italian colonization of Libya: "[Al-Mukhtar said] 'We are a people that does not surrender, we either win or die'....and Osama Bin Laden like him". Abdullah Azzam, a founder of Al-Qaeda and one of its ideological stalwarts, was also mentioned several times in this context – for example, by respondent number 289: "The idea does not die with

the death of the man, but continues to live on. May Allah have mercy on you, our Sheikh, you have achieved a martyr's death, perhaps [your] organization will increase in power and Jihad. If the death of the man were the end of the road, then [Al-Qaeda] would have ended with the martyr's death of Azzam, but [in fact] Jihad will continue until the Day of Resurrection of the Dead". Respondent 184 wrote, "As for the Sheikh [Bin Laden], well, he does not represent himself, or a group of people, he represents the true way of Islam..."

#### Hoping for retaliation

Other responses expressed the hope that acts would be committed in retaliation. Respondent number 378, who identified himself as Chemad from Mauritania, wrote, "...If the murder of Bin Laden is a victory for them, then the murder of Obama is a victory for us...with Allah's help." Respondent number 383 wrote, "I will avenge the murder of Bin Laden, as is said in the proverb, 'an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth'...". Response number 155, written by Muhammad from Turkey, cited the motivation to die for Allah: "Since the body was created in order to die, it is preferable for a man to die by the sword. I have taken an oath before Allah that I will not die in my bed." Respondent number 369, who identified himself as Ahmad from Sudan, wrote, "Vengeance for Bin Laden will be extracted by attacking oil sites, so as to intensify the collapse of the American economy. If the price of oil reaches \$150 or more a barrel for a year, [America] surely will fall. I ask that [you] pray for it." Respondent number 360, who called himself Ahmad from Damascus, wrote, "Allah, Have mercy on the Shahid [martyr] of the Arabs and the Muslims, the Shahid Osama, and take him into Paradise. We hope that Al-Qaeda will increase its blows against the infidel America." In many of the other responses, it is possible to sense a militant spirit

of enmity toward the West, especially the US. Response number 101 illustrates: "I expect that [following] the death of Bin Laden, all of the Muslims will rise up in vengeance, that is, each and every Muslim will take his revenge, and the fighters of Jihad will goad them to it, so that the murder of Bin Laden will incite the downfall of the West and the US, [and] revenge terrorist attacks and killing will be everywhere, starting in Afghanistan." So, too, does response number 84: "Osama is not dead – the death is yours.... We will torture you, we will pull out your fingernails, we will spill your blood, we will make your women widows, we will make you and your children orphans. Torment will be yours."

#### Respondents speaking for a collective

Additional responses, in glorifying Bin Laden, indicated by their content the adoration Bin Laden was receiving from the public – that is, not only from the respondent but from those around him, as well. As one respondent from Saudi Arabia wrote, "Most of the young people in Saudi Arabia were flabbergasted by the news, it was a kind of shock which reawakened them from the dream they were [living in]. When we heard the news of Sheikh Osama's martyrdom, we remembered his days in Saudi Arabia, how he left a life of profit and business and went to help the Muslims." The same respondent settled a score with the Saudi regime and the religious sages of Saudi Arabia: "His martyr's death will be the end of the regime that refused to receive his body. There is a list of names of evil religious sages, who expressed their satisfaction upon hearing of the death of the Sheikh at the hands of the enemies of Islam and the Muslims." Another respondent from Saudi Arabia, who identified himself as "We are all Bin Laden", reflected the collective response, writing, "The Lions of the Tribe of Ghamid are

despondent at the death of the Shahid of the Islamic Nation. May Allah have mercy on you, oh hero.”

Even if he erred, Bin Laden deserves a reward; if he was right – then twofold

There were those who made excuses for Bin Laden but noted that, even though he might have been wrong in his interpretation of Jihad, even if indeed he was wrong, he deserved a reward from Allah – and if he was right, then he deserved an even greater reward, a twofold reward, as stated in the Islamic tradition regarding the legitimacy of independent [religious legal] interpretation – Ijtihad – handed down in Al-Bukhari’s compendium of the life and sayings of the Prophet [Hadith]. Respondent number 322 from Mauritania wrote: “I ask the respondents to understand that Bin Laden made an independent interpretive effort [Ijtihad] and, if he was right, then he deserves a double reward from Allah, and if he erred, then he [nevertheless also] deserves a reward.” Such a vindication of Bin Laden, even if he erred in his interpretation, was voiced by three respondents to the poll. These responses were included among those that were supportive of Bin Laden, as were the few responses that expressed mild reservations about his methods. However, the superlatives heaped on Bin Laden were disproportionate to such reservations, as exemplified in the response of someone calling himself Amr Sai’d from Alexandria: “I think Bin Laden is a hero and a Mujahid [soldier for Allah] who sacrificed his life in this world for the religion and earned a martyr’s death for Allah. He was wrong about a few things, but with Allah’s help he’ll be forgiven, thanks to the oceans of good deeds he performed, [and] since he is a man who relinquished life in this world even though he could have lived in luxury in one of the mansions in any country, instead of leading the organization that

frightened the most arrogant nation on earth. May Allah have compassion for him in the expanse of Paradise.”

#### Additional responses

Some respondents expressed their love for Bin Laden. For example, a woman from Dubai calling herself “She who loves Bin Laden”, wrote simply, “I love you, O Bin Laden”.

The sharp contrast between the official opinions expressed in the media and those reflected in the responses to *Al-Jazeera's* opinion poll is revealed in response number 380, written by someone from Egypt: “O, *Al-Jazeera*, shame on you, shame on you, shame on you a thousand times. Why do you report that Osama was killed, and not that he died a martyr’s death, when you reported that your photographer who died in Libya died a martyr’s death, rather than just that he was killed?...”.

#### Responses opposing Bin Laden

Harsh responses reviling Bin Laden were more rare, although they could be found. Thus, a respondent who identified himself as Ahmad from Egypt wrote, “To hell with him! Into the trash can of history along with Saddam and Hitler...Bin Laden, whom so many here think was a Shahid [martyr] and a Sheikh, killed more [people] than the Americans killed in Iraq, Egypt, Morocco and Yemen. How can a murderer be considered a Shahid [martyr] for the Ummah [Muslim Nation]? Is *anyone* who opposes the US a Shahid?... Respect the parents of all those who died at the hands of Bin Laden.”

Another example of severe condemnation of Bin Laden is offered by response number 337: “To Hell and to a bitter fate, that’s just desserts for bloodthirsty

[people] like him, that's the fate of people like him who distort Islam. Bin Laden showed the world that Islam is a religion of killing and war...".

At the same time, some of the responses denouncing Bin Laden were not exactly overflowing with tolerance towards the US and the West. Response number 287, from Iraq, illustrates: "I believe the death of Bin Laden is a victory for the Islam of [the Prophet] Muhammad. My Brother Muslims...compare the [number of] innocents killed by this murderer and the [number of] Americans he killed, and you will find that [Bin Laden killed] more innocents. Is this Islam?...". This response makes a clear distinction between "innocents" and "Americans", and denounces Bin Laden not for having killed Americans, but rather for having killed *fewer* Americans than Muslims. Respondent number 127 from Syria wrote: "Although I completely oppose Al-Qaeda's ideas, I am nevertheless saddened that a Muslim was killed by enemy hands like those of the US Army. I would have preferred that he be put on trial, even if he would have been sentenced to death."

#### Ambivalent responses

There were not many ambivalent responses. One such was written by someone calling himself Walid from Libya, in response number 7: "We know [Bin Laden] was a man of Jihad who killed in the name of [Islam], but he is a hero and courageous, in my opinion, because the arrogant US, which hates the Muslims and the Arabs, was his chief enemy...".

As with the responses opposing Bin Laden, those ambivalent to him were also not necessarily tolerant of the US. Respondent number 169 wrote: "...[Bin Laden] was a Mujahid, despite the few mistakes he made. I say to the Americans, don't

be so happy, because maybe this will be your end, and if Allah wishes, we will hear news of bombs at your embassies throughout the world...”.

#### Irrelevant responses

Many responses did not take a stand for or against Bin Laden, his organization and activities. Most such responses were instead devoted to claiming that the assassination of Bin Laden had not happened – that there were no photos of him, that the photos there were of him on media outlets had been faked, or that Bin Laden and Al-Qaeda were altogether an American or Zionist invention, meant to present a warped image of Islam. Respondent number 56, who identified himself as Muhammad from Algeria, wrote in this vein: “I believe this story is one of the lies of the Zionists, [meant] to distract the Arab public. Why hasn’t Bin Laden’s body been seen in videos? Enough with the tall tales, please.” Response number 448, written by someone from Sudan, was similar: “We’ve drunk so much Coca-Cola we’ve begun to believe every word that comes out of that White House. Allah help us.”

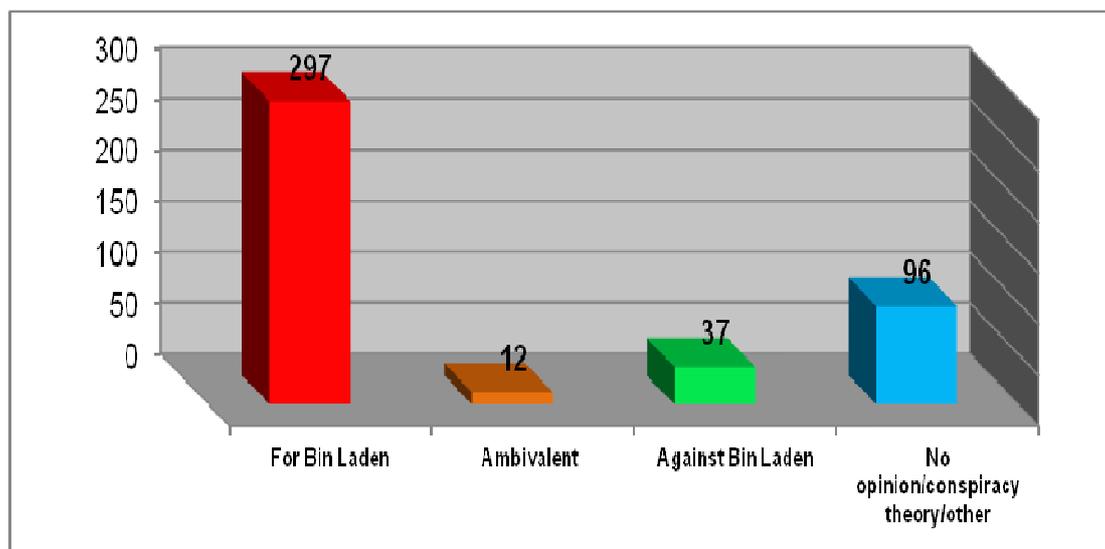
Among the responses classified as being neither for nor against Bin Laden, some reeked of antipathy to the US, even if they stopped short of expressing an opinion about Bin Laden. One such example is response number 385: “The US has known where Bin Laden is for some time now, but it waited with this until it could use [the murder] to stoke the American elections – since they haven’t found anything better than Arab [oil] for their factories and cars [and] Arab blood for their elections.”

### ***A Quantitative Analysis of the Al-Jazeera Opinion Poll***

Of the 450 responses to the opinion poll used in this analysis, eight were eliminated: some because they were duplicates, and some because they were suspected of having been written by the same respondent, weighing in multiple times. Thus, a total of 442 responses was included in the quantitative analysis.

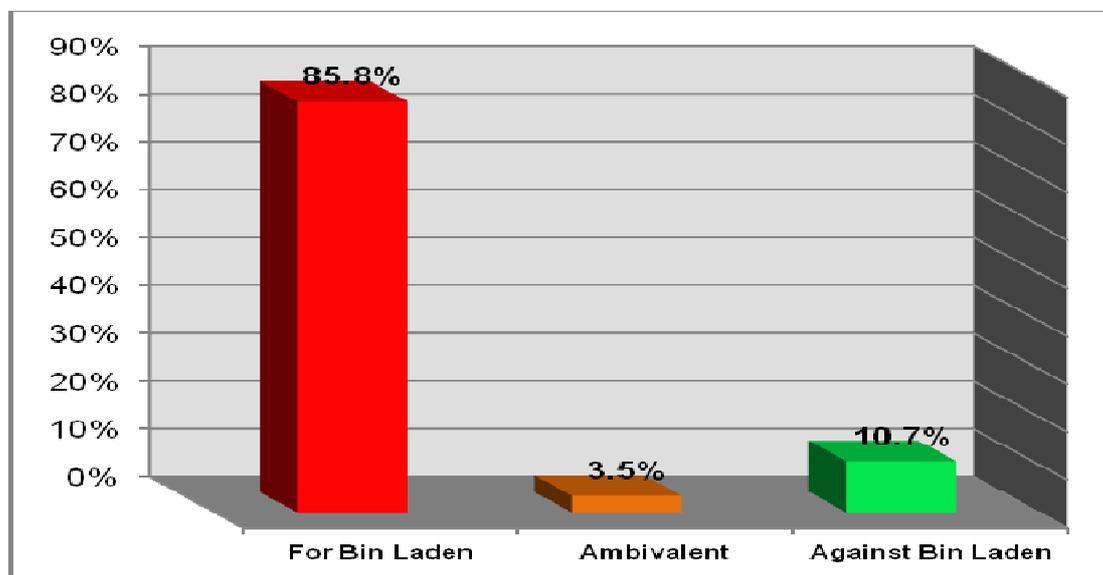
Figure 2 displays a numeric breakdown of the responses.

**Figure 2: Numeric Breakdown of Responses to an Al-Jazeera Opinion Poll Concerning Bin Laden's Death, by Opinion Expressed**



After controlling for responses that did not explicitly support Bin Laden and his activities, the percentage breakdown of responses to the *Al-Jazeera* poll was as follows (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3: Percentage Breakdown of Responses to an Al-Jazeera Opinion Poll  
Concerning Bin Laden's Death, by Opinion Expressed**



As can be seen in Figure 3, of all the responses to the poll that took a stand on Bin Laden and his activities, less than 11% of them expressed a strictly negative opinion. As was elucidated in the qualitative analysis, some of these responses saw nothing morally depraved in Bin Laden's terrorist attacks against the US and the West.

### **Reader Reactions ("Talkbacks") to Online News Articles**

Reader reactions ("talkbacks") were culled from key articles published on the three news and current events Web sites examined: *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat*, *Al-Arabiya*, and *Al-Hayat*. In order to avoid bias pursuant to the opinion expressed in the article to which the reader was reacting, we deliberately chose to examine reactions to articles that were "straight news" (reportage), as opposed to op-ed articles (which themselves were examined above). For the purposes of the sample, we culled reactions to two articles from the Web site of *Al-Hayat*, one

titled, "Osama Bin Laden...The End",<sup>16</sup> and the other titled, "Obama Announces the Death of Bin Laden: Justice for the Thousands of Victims of September 11<sup>th</sup>".<sup>17</sup> From the Web site of *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat*, we culled reactions to two articles, one titled, "The Murderer Murdered",<sup>18</sup> and the other titled, "Bin Laden Family Arrested, Bin Laden's Messenger Abu-Ahmad Reveals Family's Location".<sup>19</sup> We culled additional reactions to one article published on the Web site of the *Al-Arabiya* Network, titled, "The Death of Osama Bin Laden Implicates Islamabad...America Fears Pakistani Intelligence Complicit in Hiding Him".<sup>20</sup> For the purposes of the examination, we endeavored to choose the most pivotal articles we could identify, so as to derive the greatest possible number of reactions. As in the previous quantitative analyses, we excluded a limited number of reactions, which actually were, or were suspected of being, duplicates.

### ***A Qualitative Analysis of Reader Reactions to Online News Articles***

Reactions ("talkbacks") to the articles surveyed were not essentially different from responses to the *Al-Jazeera* opinion poll. Here as in the previous analysis, we found reactions, like number 37, written in response to the article published on the *Al-Arabiya* Network, that placed Bin Laden in the pantheon of Islamic heroes: "The Muslims and free people all over the world will write the history of this great Islamic hero, which will be studied in the curricula once the US and its

<sup>16</sup> "Osama Bin Laden...The End", *Al-Hayat*, May 2, 2011, <http://international.daralhayat.com/internationalarticle/262169> (Arabic).

<sup>17</sup> "Obama Announces the Death of Bin Laden: Justice for the Thousands of Victims of September 11<sup>th</sup>", *Al-Hayat*, May 3, 2011, <http://international.daralhayat.com/internationalarticle/262300> (Arabic).

<sup>18</sup> "The Murderer Murdered", *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat*, May 3, 2011, <http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=1&issueno=11844&article=619879> (Arabic).

<sup>19</sup> "Bin Laden Family Arrested, Bin Laden's Messenger Abu-Ahmad Reveals Family's Location", *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat*, May 4, 2011, <http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=1&issueno=11845&article=620173> (Arabic).

<sup>20</sup> "The Death of Osama Bin Laden Implicates Islamabad...America Fears Pakistani Intelligence Complicit in Hiding Him", *Al-Arabiya*, May 3, 2011, <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/05/03/147632.html> (Arabic).

metastases have been defeated, with Allah's help. He [Bin Laden] will be a symbol like Khalid Ibn Al-Walid [a Muslim military commander during the time of Muhammad], Salah Al-Din and Umar Al-Mukhtar."

Also, as in the previous analysis, we found deterministic reactions claiming that Jihad would persist until the end of days. To wit, reaction number 165, also on the *Al-Arabiya* Web site: "Jihad for Allah will continue until the end of days, and is not based on one person. The Americans are the ones who began the aggression; the Jihad and terrorism against them will continue until Judgment Day, as our Qur'an teaches us, and as long as their aggression and their hostility to Islam continue."

#### Reactions condemning Bin Laden – and also the US

As in the opinion poll analyzed above, those reader reactions that opposed Bin Laden were nevertheless antagonistic to the Americans, as is illustrated by reaction number 61 on the *Al-Arabiya* Web site: "I am not sorry for the death of Bin Laden, but what did make me very sad was that he died at the hands of the Americans, and that they saw this as a victory over the Muslims." Many of those writing "talkbacks" saw Bin Laden's assassination as a disgrace to all Muslims; their loathing for the US was palpable. Reaction number 122 on the *Al-Arabiya* Web site illustrates: "No one supports Bin Laden's killing of innocents, but the vile US wanted to cover up a secret, apparently regarding how Bin Laden was killed, by burying him at sea...what is more important is that [the US] wanted to shame all Arabs by throwing him into the sea like that...".

Many of those who reacted to the articles on *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat's* Web site were incensed that Bin Laden's body's had been buried at sea. One person, who identified himself as Hamza Khatib, reacted to the article "The Murderer

Murdered”: “I’m against the Takfiris [Muslims who accuse other Muslims of being infidels] and the Islamic extremists, but it’s absolutely unconscionable that Bin Laden’s body should have been tossed into the sea. Even in the US such a thing is unacceptable...”. Reactions voicing hatred for the US were so virulent that the person behind reaction 169 on *Al-Arabiya*, sensing the way the wind was blowing, felt a need to defend the US: “In the Name of Allah, leave the US and the Americans and all this talk about them aside. I lived in America and among its people for several years, and I never heard any curses or humiliation at any time. They are a good, dignified people that respects religions and people from all nations. They gave me help and support, like I have not found in my own country. They respected my religion, Islam, and I respected their religion. Now I have returned to my country, and I hear curses and ugly epithets against them...”.

#### Reactions discussing conspiracy theories

Many reactions were devoted to the conspiracy theories swirling around the death of Bin Laden. Most of these were written by people who refused to believe that Bin Laden had indeed been eliminated. One example of this is the reaction of Badir from Morocco to the article “Bin Laden Family Arrested, Bin Laden’s Messenger Abu-Ahmad Reveals Family’s Location” on *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat*: “If indeed Bin Laden has been killed, where is his body?... This is a great lie. He is still alive, the Americans have him, and he is being tortured. That is the truth, and enough with this story, ‘we killed him’. Allah is with you, O Bin Laden.” A similar reaction was penned by Talib Al-Juhani of Saudi Arabia: “Do you believe the fabrication of the photograph and of his death? I tell you Bin Laden is still

alive, he will appear on YouTube and surprise the world as to the Americans' lie...".

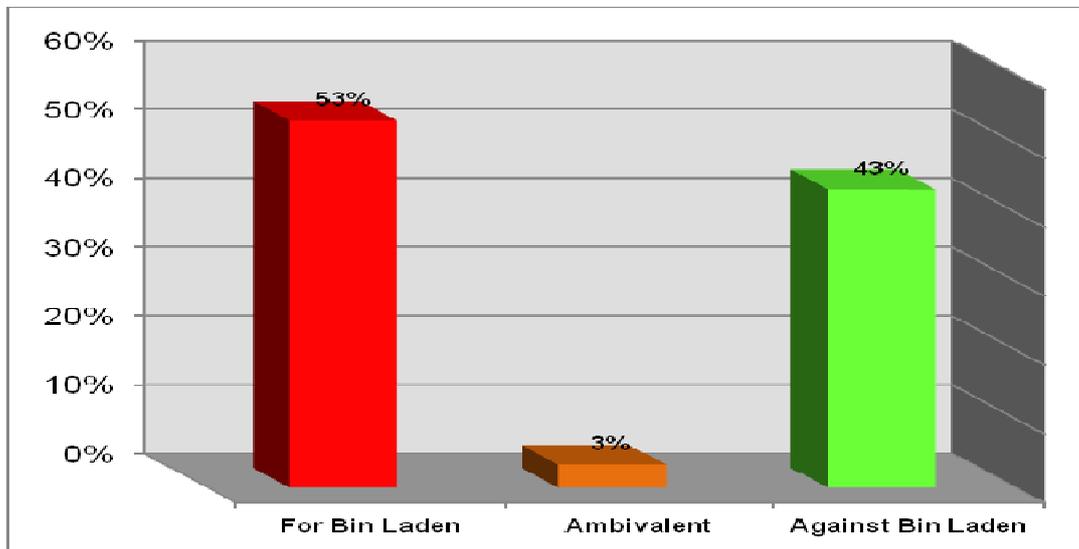
### ***A Quantitative Analysis of Reader Reactions to Online News Articles***

It should be noted at the outset that fewer reactions were written in response to the articles on the Web site of *Al-Hayat*, than to those on *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat* and *Al-Arabiya*. This may be for any of several reasons: a smaller number of visitors to the site; the type of visitors to the site; the site requires people who want to "talk back" to provide their email address; stricter site guidelines, meant to screen reactions. Furthermore, the reactions posted on *Al-Hayat* were more apt to deal with conspiracy theories than with a clear stance on Bin Laden and his actions. Since the latter type of response were relatively few in number, we do not present their breakdown separately.

The reactions to the articles on *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat* were more numerous, and a larger percentage of them took a stance on Bin Laden and his activities, relative to the reactions on the *Al-Hayat* Web site. However, here, too, a very large percentage of reactions proved irrelevant to our examination. In all, we counted 30 of a total 56 reactions on *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat* that took a stance on Bin Laden, his organization and his activities (see Figure 4).

**Figure 4: Percentage Breakdown of Reactions to Newspaper Articles**

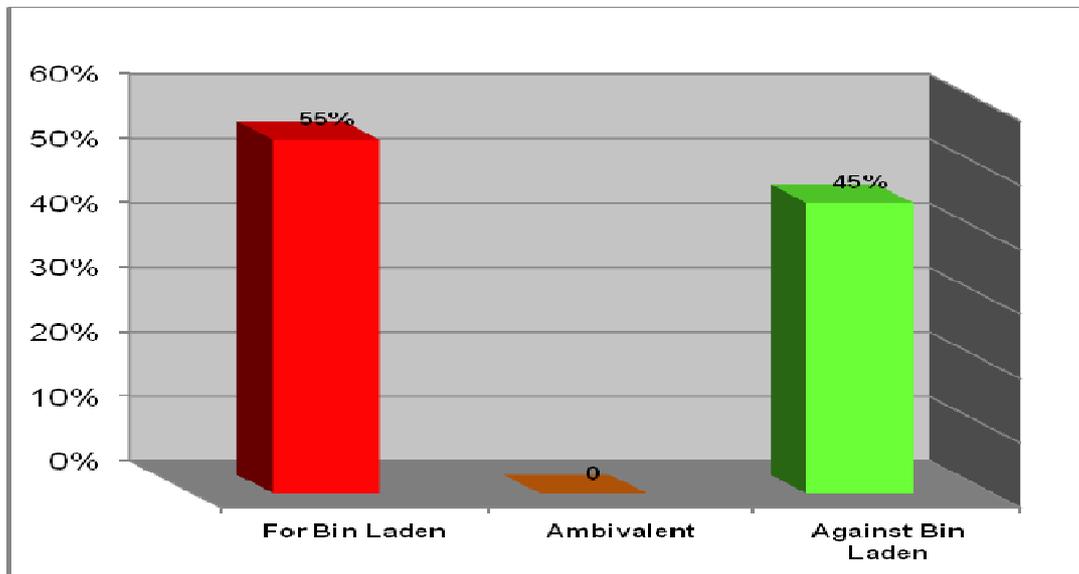
**Posted on the Web Site of *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat***



A total of 192 reactions or “talkbacks” addressed the article we examined on the Web site of *Al-Arabiya*, many of them duplicates or multiple reactions by the same writer. In addition, it should be noted that many of these reactions were taken down by the site managers, because their content contravened the site’s rules. Nevertheless, a total of 82 relevant reactions were culled, which took a clear stand on Bin Laden and his activities. The percentage breakdown is presented in Figure 5.

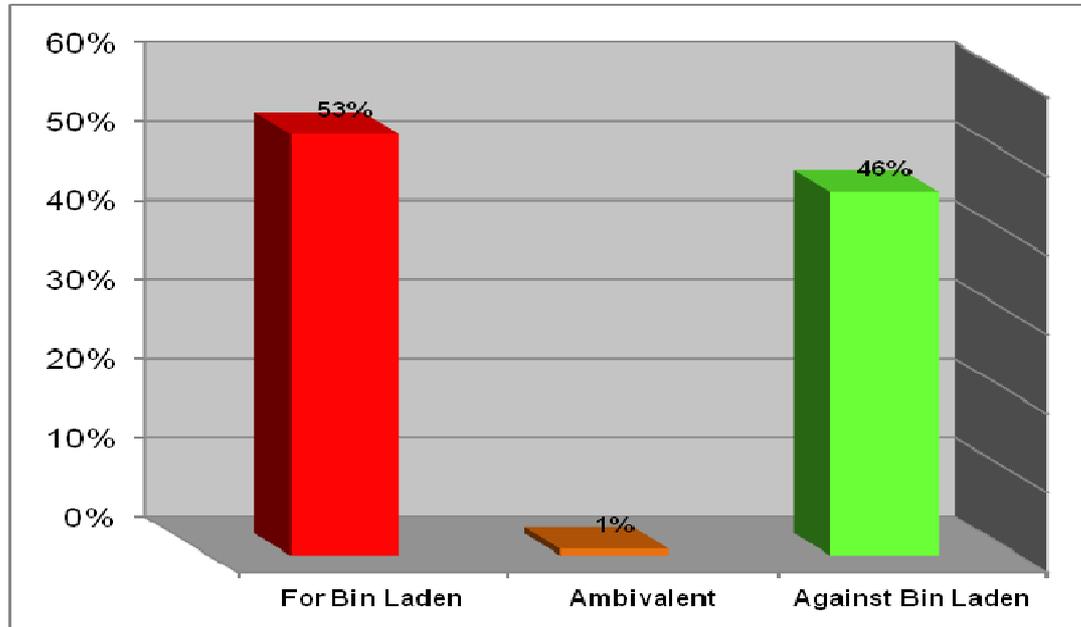
**Figure 5: Percentage Breakdown of Reactions to a Newspaper Article**

**Posted on the Web Site of *Al-Arabiya***



As can be seen in Figures 4 and 5, no significant quantitative difference was found in the percentage breakdown of reactions to the articles examined on *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat* and *Al-Arabiya*. On both Web sites, slightly more than half of the reactions expressing an opinion of Bin Laden and his activities were positive, slightly less than half were negative, and almost none were ambivalent. The percentage breakdown of the relevant reactions posted on all three Web sites appears in Figure 6.

**Figure 6: Percentage Breakdown of Reactions to Newspaper Articles  
on the Web Sites of *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat*, *Al-Arabiya*, and *Al-Hayat***



## Discussion

In his 2002 article, "The Internet and the Arab World as a Virtual Public Sphere", Khalil Rinnawi addresses the differences between traditional Arab media, which express sympathy for the US and opposition to Bin Laden, and Internet surveys and online forums, including forums on the Web site of *Al-Jazeera*, where support for Bin Laden is surprisingly great. Rinnawi also discusses the large percentage of Web surfers who expressed a belief in conspiracy theories regarding Bin Laden's responsibility for the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, as well as a survey conducted on *Al-Jazeera* in which a negligible percentage of respondents expressed a positive opinion of the US.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Khalil Rinnawi, "The Internet and the Arab World as a Virtual Public Sphere", *Socioeconomic Issues*, (2002) 16-17, 1-23. Retrieved from <http://cmsprod.bgu.ac.il/NR/rdonlyres/E1D4CA76-9BEF-49A3-8B70-ADF2B3AF68FB/12231/Rinnawi.pdf>.

Although the data cited by Rinnawi are not essentially different from the results of the quantitative and qualitative analyses presented herein, online opinion polls and reader reactions (“talkbacks”) are disadvantageous to drawing quantitative conclusions. Although some studies state that Internet surveys, if conducted properly, can lead to satisfactorily precise outcomes,<sup>22</sup> such surveys nevertheless raise a fear of selection bias,<sup>23</sup> especially given the lack of data on the extent of use of the Internet among various populations in the Arab world, and on the breakdown and extent of variance in the population of visitors to the Web sites examined. In addition, the difference between the outcome of the *Al-Jazeera* opinion poll and the breakdown of reader reactions to the articles posted on *Al-Arabiya*, *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat* and *Al-Hayat* may indicate a certain variance in the populations of visitors to these sites. Given the problematic nature of the methodology of Internet surveys, especially for research purposes, and the even more problematic nature of surveys of reader reactions, under no circumstances can we draw conclusions from the quantitative data presented herein regarding the proportion of support among the Arab population for Bin Laden, his ideas, and his organization.

Nevertheless, the quantitative data do signal a clear gap between the attitudes towards Bin Laden and his ideas expressed in the arena of official, established, mainstream Arab media – that is, news reports and op-ed columns – and the attitudes towards Bin Laden and his ideas expressed in the arena of online communication devoted to “public opinion” (which, as has been clarified, may differ from actual public opinion). If in the former arena support for Bin Laden is almost “taboo”, in the latter arena the percentages of support for him are

<sup>22</sup> Peter Kellner, “Can Online Polls Produce Accurate Findings?”, *International Journal of Market Research*, 46(1) (2004): 3-21.

<sup>23</sup> N.S. Koch and J.A. Emrey, “The Internet and Opinion Measurement: Surveying Marginalized Populations”, *Social Science Quarterly*, 82(2001): 131-138.

surprisingly large. This gap is liable to indicate that the popularity of Bin Laden and his ideas, and the tendency of the Arab "man in the street" to identify with them, are much greater than is reflected in the established, mainstream media. If this is indeed the case, then a sizable gap exists between the number of people who have actually joined Al-Qaeda, and the number who feel some degree of sympathy with Bin Laden's ideas. Moreover, as has been shown in our qualitative analysis, not all opponents of Bin Laden challenge the consensus underlying Al-Qaeda's actions.

If we wish to characterize the leadership of Bin Laden as it is reflected in the responses and reactions we have reviewed here, we may say that, according to the qualitative analysis, a large proportion of respondents expressed sympathy for Bin Laden *because* of his ideas, and not despite them. In other words, Bin Laden's popularity on the Arab street resulted from the very fact that he personified and fulfilled ideas that, according to the respondents, are rooted in Islam. This fact places in question the contribution of Bin Laden's personal charisma, if there was such a thing, to the popularity of his ideas among the public. In fact, our qualitative analysis hints at quite the reverse. To paraphrase some of the opinion poll responses and article "talkbacks": even if Al-Zawahiri, Bin Laden's successor, cannot in any wise be called a "charismatic" leader, it is dubious whether this will affect the popularity of Al-Qaeda and its ideology.