Was Bin Laden already dead? -- Politically, Florida professors say

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Reports of Osama bin Laden's death reached a joyous U.S. public Sunday night and Monday morning.

But for many South Florida experts, bin Laden's importance in terms of shaping the Muslim world and affecting U.S. interests already had diminished greatly, especially since the popular uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa in recent months.

In other words, bin Laden already was dying politically in his own part of the world before the Navy SEALs' fatal bullets reached him in Pakistan.

"The floodgates of those popular uprisings have opened," said Amanullah DeSondy, a University of Miami visiting professor of Islamic studies who is of Pakistani descent. "Muslims are not going to allow these lunatic extremists to take the center stage and represent Muslims globally anymore. Now we have an uprising of many voices."

Russell Lucas, associate professor and expert on Middle Eastern and Arab affairs at Florida International University, said that bin Laden suddenly found himself in a world more affected by cellphones than suicide bombers.

"Bin Laden's message has been superseded by the events in Tunisia, Egypt and other countries," he said. "Young people tweeting President Hosni Mubarak out of power in Tahrir Square in Cairo is a stronger image today than Osama bin Laden and Al-Qaeda."

For Robert Rabil, a professor and expert in U.S.-Muslim relations at Florida Atlantic University, bin Laden's message was a negative one that never captured many minds and has been eclipsed by the legitimate hopes raised by recent uprisings.

"Osama bin Laden wanted to fight the West, to blame the West for all the ills of the Arab world," said Rabil, a Lebanon native. "It was a very radical and dangerous ideology. Bin Laden has been able to mobilize only a small minority of people to follow in his footsteps, on a path that was disastrous for Arab society. But he has not been able to mobilize the larger societies the way we have seen in recent events.

"The people in the uprisings have goals. They want a better life. Al-Qaeda didn't build schools or hospitals. It provided no one with services."
Mehmet Gurses, an FAU expert on the emergence of Islamist parties in the Muslim world, also cites the clear choice that young Muslims faced.

"The new generation is better educated, more politicized and more active," he said. "These people are not inspired by Al-Qaeda. What they are asking for is against what Al-Qaeda has been asking. They want more democratic reforms and not a state based on Islamic law."

Bin Laden's death could provide a boost to those uprisings, Gurses said.

"The people running these dictatorships where the uprisings are taking place are claiming that, if they are overthrown, radical Islamists will take over," Gurses said.

Now, he said, it will be more difficult to advance that argument because bin Laden's death weakens Al-Qaeda.

That's not to say that any of the experts believe the ideology of radical Islam will go to the grave with bin Laden.

"The dumbest thing I heard on TV was somebody saying the war on terrorism is over," said Ira Sheskin, an expert on the geopolitics of the Middle East at the University of Miami. "Yeah, this is good. We did well here. But the war on terrorism is far from over."

DeSondy sees Al-Qaeda using bin Laden's death as a recruiting tool in the short run among certain impressionable elements.

"The death of bin Laden gives a glimmer of hope, but that doesn't mean everything is going to be better," he said. "There will be lunatic branches in the Muslim community who will try to capitalize on this. The real challenge is building a bridge between the West and Islam. This is one step in that direction because this is a very strong message to those who might want to join Al-Qaeda."

Gurses agrees that Western nations must find better ways to understand and coexist with the Islamic world.

"Bin Laden was a symbol for resistance against the West," he said. "The U.S. and other Western countries have to get over their fear of Islam. Unless they reconcile with the Islamic world, another Osama could be generated in the next 50 years."