

Did Muslim Doctrine Bury Bin Laden at Sea?

Many have questioned why Osama bin Laden's body was buried at sea—some have even criticized the decision, especially in the wake of President Obama's choice against showing photos of the terrorist leader's corpse.

The Obama administration said bin Laden was buried at sea because no other country would take his body—and because Muslim law mandates burial within 24 hours.

Dr. Christian van Gorder, an associate professor of religion at Baylor University who teaches world religions, is familiar with the many different Muslim burial customs around the world. He has an interesting theory on why the U.S. decided to bury bin Laden at sea.

“Leaving aside all other religious considerations, it is my opinion that bin Laden's burial at sea was designed to prevent his grave from becoming a holy site for terrorist sympathizers,” van Gorder says. “The speed of the burial also saved money and diminished possible security threats related to such a controversial person.”

Van Gorder says that Muslim burial traditions vary from region to region, and the Quran itself does not specify how to perform a burial.

Within the Arabian context—and keeping in mind that bin Laden is of Arabian descent—a burial may be performed at sea if the individual died at sea and is such a distance from land that he cannot be buried there within the guidelines of burial within 24 hours of death and before the first sundown following death.

“Because bin Laden was not killed on a ship, his at-sea burial

would not be acceptable by strict Muslim standards,” van Gorder says. “However, Muslims are confident God is capable of preserving and then raising a body from the bottom of the sea for the day of final judgment.”