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The curious case of Osama bin Laden

Bin Laden was the ‘Golden Goose’ the army had kept, but to its chagrin, has been stolen from under its nose.

By Pervez Hoodbhoy

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Osama bin Laden, the figurehead king of al Qaeda, is gone. His hosts are still rubbing their eyes and wondering how it all happened. Although scooped up from Pakistani soil, shot in the head and then buried at sea, the event was not announced by General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani or by President Asif Ali Zardari. Instead, it was the president of the United States of America who told the world that bin Laden’s body was in the custody of US forces.

Suggestions that Pakistan played a significant role ring hollow. President Obama, in his televised speech on May 1, said “our counterterrorism cooperation with Pakistan helped lead us to bin Laden”. But no sooner had he stopped speaking that his top national security aides declared that the United States had not told Pakistani leaders about the raid ahead of time. Significantly, Obama did not thank Pakistan. An American official pointedly declared that the information leading to bin Laden’s killing was shared “with no other country” and this top secret operation was such that “only a very small group of people inside our own government knew of this operation in advance”.

Today, Pakistan’s embarrassment is deep. On numerous occasions, our military and civilian leaders had emphatically stated that bin Laden was not in Pakistan. Some suggested that he might be in Sudan or Somalia. Others hinted that he might already have died from a kidney ailment, or perhaps that he was in some intractable area, protected by nature and terrain and thus outside the effective control of the Pakistani state.

But then it turned out bin Laden was not hiding in some dark mountain cave in Waziristan. Instead, probably for at least some years, he had lived comfortably smack inside the modern, peaceful, and extraordinarily secure city of Abbottabad. Using Google Earth, one sees that the deceased was within easy walking distance of the famed Pakistan Military Academy at Kakul. It is here where General Kayani had declared on April 23 that “the terrorist’s backbone has been broken and *inshallah* we will soon prevail”. Kayani has released no statement after the killing.

Still more intriguing are pictures and descriptions of bin Laden’s fortress house. Custom-designed, it was constructed on a plot of land roughly eight times larger than the other homes in the area. Television images show that it has high walls, barbed wire and two security gates. Who approved the construction and paid for it? Why was it allowed to be away from the prying eyes of the secret agencies?

Even the famous and ferocious General Hamid Gul (ret'd) — a bin Laden sympathiser who advocates war with America — cannot buy into the claim that the military was unaware of bin Laden’s whereabouts. In a recorded interview, he remarked that bin Laden being in Abbottabad unknown to authorities “is a bit amazing”. Aside from the military, he said “there is the local police, the Intelligence Bureau, the Military Intelligence, the ISI — they all had a presence there”. Pakistanis familiar with the intrusive nature of the multiple intelligence agencies will surely agree; to sniff out foreigners is a pushover.

So why was bin Laden sheltered in the army’s backyard? General Pervez Musharraf, who was army chief when bin Laden’s house in Abbottabad was being constructed in 2005, unwittingly gives us the clearest and most cogent explanation. The back cover of his celebrated book, *In The Line Of Fire*, written in 2006, reads:

“Since shortly after 9/11 — when many al Qaeda leaders fled Afghanistan and crossed the border into Pakistan — we have played multiple games of cat and mouse with them. The biggest of them all, Osama bin Laden, is still at large at the time of this writing but we have caught many, many others. We have captured 672 and handed over 369 to the United States. We have earned bounties totalling millions of dollars. Here, I will tell the story of just a few of the most significant manhunts”.

So, at the end of the day, it was precisely that: A cat and mouse game. Bin Laden was the ‘Golden Goose’ that the army had kept under its watch but which, to its chagrin, has now been stolen from under its nose. Until then, the thinking had been to trade in the Goose at the right time for the right price, either in the form of dollars or political concessions. While bin Laden in virtual captivity had little operational value for al Qaeda, he still had enormous iconic value for the Americans. It was therefore expected that kudos would come just as in the case of Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, the Kuwaiti-born senior al Qaeda leader who was arrested in Rawalpindi, or Mullah Baradar, the Taliban leader arrested from Karachi.

Events, however, have turned a potential asset into a serious liability. Osama’s killing is now a bone stuck in the throat of Pakistan’s establishment that can neither be swallowed nor spat out. To appear joyful would infuriate the Islamists who are already fighting the state. On the other hand, to deprecate the killing would suggest that Pakistan had knowingly hosted the king of terrorists.

Now, with bin Laden gone, the military has two remaining major strategic assets: America’s weakness in Afghanistan and Pakistan’s nuclear weapons. But moving these chess pieces around will not assure the peace and prosperity that we so desperately need. They will not solve our electricity or water crises, move us out of dire economic straits, or protect us from suicide bombers.

Bin Laden’s death should be regarded as a transformational moment by Pakistan and its military. It is time to dispense with the Musharraf-era cat and mouse games. We must repudiate the current policy of verbally condemning jihadism – and actually fighting it in some places – but secretly supporting it in other places. Until the establishment firmly resolves that it shall not support armed and violent non-state actors of any persuasion – including the Lashkar-e-Taiba – Pakistan will remain in interminable conflict both with itself and with the world.

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