

Osama bin Laden: Pakistan loses its golden goose

Friday 6 May 2011, by [HOODBHOY Pervez](#) (Date first published: 6 May 2011).

One wishes Gen Kayani had addressed the nation and explained how Pakistan's honor and integrity has been preserved by sheltering the world's most wanted terrorist on its soil, and how a state allowing violent jihadist organizations to operate on its soil can ever become prosperous.

The killing of Osama bin Laden could be a transformational moment for Pakistan and its military. The country has an opportunity now to decide whether it wants to decisively confront Islamist violence or face the consequences of the military's current policy of giving support to jihadis with one hand even as it slaps them with the other. If Pakistan chooses this second path, it will be increasingly vulnerable to internal chaos, more drone strikes, and more direct U.S. action against the jihadist groups openly operating in Pakistan, such as the Lashkar-e-Tayyaba.

When 79 American commandos in four helicopters descended from the skies early on Sunday morning, they carried back the body of Al-Qaida's founder-king. His hosts are still rubbing their eyes, wondering how it all happened and why Pakistani air defences remained inactive. 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.

Subsequent suggestions from Pakistani and US leaders that Pakistan played a significant role ring hollow. President Obama, in his televised speech on Sunday, said "our counterterrorism cooperation with Pakistan helped lead us to bin Laden". But, just as he stopped speaking, his top national security aides declared that the United States had not told Pakistani leaders about the raid ahead of time.

John Brennan, assistant to the president for homeland security and counterterrorism is quoted as saying, "We didn't contact the Pakistanis until after all of our people, all of our aircraft were out of Pakistani airspace....we were watching and making sure that our people and our aircraft were able to get out of Pakistani airspace. And thankfully, there was no engagement with Pakistani forces." One sees that far from Pakistan's armed forces having a role in the action, they were seen as a potential threat. Significantly, Obama did not thank Pakistan.

Today, Pakistan's embarrassment is deep. There are only two logical possibilities: its military leadership was either incompetent or complicit. Neither situation inspires confidence either in Pakistan or the world.

On numerous occasions, both 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 insisted that he might already have died from a kidney ailment, or perhaps that he was in some inaccessible 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 from US drones in some dark mountain cave in

Waziristan. Instead, for around five years, he had lived rather comfortably inside a specially constructed and fortified house in the modern, peaceful, and extraordinarily secure city of Abbottabad. The city headquarters a brigade of the Second Division of the Northern Army Corps. Using Google Earth, one sees that the deceased lived 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 backbone has been broken and Inshaallah we will soon prevail".

As expected, member's of the "ghairat" brigade, the so-called defenders of Pakistan's "honor", dominate a multitude of TV channels. They make a sorry sight. Many are Flat-Earthers, who believe that 911 was a massive Jewish conspiracy or that the buildings were blown up from within. Some contradict themselves within the same sentence, disbelieving that Osama was dead while blaming America for killing him. These highly accomplished masters of double talk are finding themselves at a loss, invoking deep dark conspiracy theories.

Apologists for the military say it did not know. But even the famously ferocious Gen. Hamid Gul-Pakistan's former ISI chief who is pro-military and an open bin Laden sympathizer who advocates war with America - isn't buying the claim that Pakistan's military was unaware of his hero's whereabouts. In an interview he said he found that idea "a bit amazing". Aside from the military he noted, "there is the local police, the Intelligence Bureau, Military Intelligence, the ISI; they all had a presence there." And Pakistan's intrusive intelligence agencies are very good at sniffing out foreigners.

So why was bin Laden sheltered in the army's backyard?

General Pervez Musharraf unwittingly gave us the clearest and most cogent explanation for how the army thought about things then - and probably how it thought until this Sunday morning. The back cover of his celebrated book, *In The Line Of Fire*, written in 2006, reads:

"Since shortly after 9/11 - when many Al-Qaida 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 totaling millions of dollars. Here, I will tell the story of just a few of the most significant manhunts".

Musharraf was army chief when Bin Laden's specially fortified house in Abbottabad was being constructed. Back then, Pakistan's political pundits used to speculate about which Al Qaeda or Taliban leader would be miraculously "found" on the eve of some important U.S. military or political leader's visit to Pakistan. Indeed, like the proverbial rabbit pulled out of the magician's hat, some high or middle-ranking leader was usually produced. Important arrests included those of Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, the Kuwaiti-born senior Al Qaeda leader who was arrested in Rawalpindi, and Mullah Baradar, a Taliban leader arrested in Karachi. The Americans visitors generally left pleased.

It is therefore quite possible that Bin Laden was being kept in reserve by the army, the ultimate trophy to be traded in at the right time for the right price, either in the dollars or political concessions. While a bin Laden held in virtual captivity could scarcely be useful for directing Al-Qaida's global operations, it was clear that he still had enormous iconic value for the US.

Alas for the Pakistan Army, American SEALS have killed its Golden Goose. A potential asset has turned into a serious liability; Osama's killing has become 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 and killing its soldiers. On the other hand, to criticize the killing would suggest that Pakistan had knowingly hosted the king of terrorists.

With bin Laden gone, the military has two remaining major strategic assets: America's weakness in Afghanistan, and Pakistani nuclear weapons. It will surely move these chess pieces around adroitly to extract the maximum advantage. But this will not assure the peace and prosperity that we Pakistanis so desperately crave. They will not give security to Pakistan, give justice and opportunity to our citizens, solve the country's serious electricity and water crises, move us out of dire economic straits, or protect us from suicide bombers.

It is difficult to be optimistic. A few days before bin Laden's killing, speaking on the occasion of Yaum-e-Shahada (Martyr's Day), General Kayani acknowledged Pakistan was going through difficult times but stressed that "the nation's honor and integrity" had precedence over its prosperity. One wishes he had subsequently addressed the nation and explained how Pakistan's honor and integrity has been preserved by sheltering the world's most wanted terrorist on its soil, and how a state allowing violent jihadist organizations to operate on its soil can ever become prosperous. Sadly, as yet we have only silence from him. One expects that things will continue as usual until the master of Pakistan's destiny - the Pakistan Army - realizes how its strategies have worked only to destabilize and dishonor Pakistan.

Pervez Hoodbhoy

P.S.

* From VIEWPOINT ONLINE ISSUE NO. 49, MAY 6, 2011:

<http://www.viewpointonline.net/pakistan-loses-its-golden-goose.html>

* Pervez Hoodbhoy is a professor of physics and teaches in Lahore(LUMS) and Islamabad (QAU).