

Bin Laden's death: 'Why kill the goose?'

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Pakistan is in the grip of a fierce debate about who knew what. The military won't come out of it well.

Blinded by the thirst for vengeance, the United States targets and kills another enemy. Its citizens celebrate. And functionaries of the George W Bush period tell us that what it proves is torture at Guantánamo worked, after all. Europe applauds. Vassals elsewhere (including Pakistan's president) congratulate the US on mission accomplished.

This is slightly bizarre, given that Bin Laden had apparently been in a safe house near the Pakistan military academy for six years. Nobody believes this could have happened without the knowledge of senior intelligence officials. A meeting with one such person in 2006, which I recounted in my last book on Pakistan, confirmed that Bin Laden was in the country and being kept safe. The person concerned told me the Americans only wanted Bin Laden dead, but that it was in Pakistan's interest to keep him alive. In his words: *"Why kill the goose that lays the golden eggs?"* – a reference to the billions in aid and weaponry being supplied to the army. At the time I wasn't sure whether my informant was fantasising to amuse or misinform me; he was obviously telling the truth.

Pakistan is in the grip of a fierce debate, its politico-military establishment damned whatever the case. If they admit they were in the know, they stand condemned within their own ranks. There is a great deal of dissension among junior officers and soldiers unhappy about border missions in which they are forced to target their own people. If it turns out that the US didn't even bother to inform the Pakistanis that helicopters were on the way to clip Bin Laden, they stand exposed as leaders who permit the country's sovereignty to be violated at will.

The departing CIA chief Leon Panetta has said the decision was made early not to tell Pakistan so as not to compromise the operation. But stories are changing rapidly, and nothing can be taken at face value. As WikiLeaks revealed, there was a US-Pakistan agreement, that while the latter would tolerate drone attacks they would be forced to denounce them because of public anger. On the other hand, given that within the CIA the ISI is referred to as a terrorist organisation, there may have been anxiety about leaks. The helicopters that entered Pakistan airspace would have been cleared as part of routine reconnaissance, though in the past Pakistani radar has been jammed to facilitate raids. This time it was not.

Reliable sources in Pakistan are insistent that the army had no prior knowledge of this raid. Since there is absolutely no way Pakistan could have come out of this looking good, the ISI, had it known, would undoubtedly have attempted a pre-emptive move as this event will almost certainly affect future US aid. If the Pakistani army or intelligence were involved they could have easily moved the final showdown to a less embarrassing location – the mountains in Waziristan, for instance. Furthermore it has handed both India and Afghanistan a major opportunity to settle scores in the propaganda wars.

In reality, Bin Laden's death changes nothing, except perhaps to ensure that, economy permitting,

Barack Obama is re-elected. The occupation of Iraq, the Af-Pak war and Nato's Libyan adventure look set to continue. Israel-Palestine is stalemated, though the despotisms in the Arab world that Obama has denounced are under pressure - except the worst of them all, Saudi Arabia.

In Afghanistan, the Taliban leaders will be relieved that they can no longer be tarred with the Bin Laden brush, but his killing does not change the situation there one bit. The insurgents might not be in a position to take Kabul, (they never could even during the Russian occupation) but elsewhere they control a great deal. The US cannot win this war. The sooner it gets out, the better. Until it does, it will remain dependent on Pakistan, the ally Americans love to hate.

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P.S.

* Guardian.co.uk, Wednesday 4 May 2011 20.00 BST:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/may/04/bin-laden-death-no-endgame>