

Bin Laden Death Confirms Afghans' Mistrust of Pakistan

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Recent Pakistani attempts to woo Kabul have failed to build confidence.

For many Afghans, the death of al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden in Pakistan simply confirms a long-held belief that this neighbouring state is the root of all their problems, and that counter-terrorism efforts should be focused there and not in their own country.

The relationship between the two states has been troubled for decades, but especially since 2001, as Afghans have accused Islamabad of either allowing insurgents to base themselves in Pakistan, or not doing enough to root them out.

Ahmad Sayidi, a political analyst in Afghanistan, argues that Pakistan's credibility has been shredded by the revelation that Bin Laden lived quietly in the town of Abbottabad for years before the United States located his residence and raided it on May 1, killing the al-Qaeda chief.

Despite suggestions that the Pakistani authorities provided Washington with some useful intelligence in the search for Bin Laden, questions are being asked about how he could have lived in the country undetected for so long, and whether that indicates a degree of complicity on the part of some security officials.

Political expert Jawid Kohestani believes certain forces within the Pakistani establishment helped Bin Laden evade capture for years. He said the eventual success of the manhunt, culminating in an operation conducted independently, showed Washington was deadly serious, and also reflected increased pressure on Islamabad to step up to its responsibilities.

"This action... shows that the US is going to act more decisively from now on," he said. "It's a clear and explicit message to those who thus far have been reluctant to act in an above-board manner in the war on terror."

Afghans often accuse Islamabad of meddling in their country's affairs, and particularly of allowing the Taliban to operate relatively unhindered from bases in northwest Pakistan.

"The US has always exerted direct and indirect pressure on Pakistan to behave honestly in the war on terror, but Pakistan has refrained from doing so, on a number of pretexts," Abdul Rashid Waziri, an Afghan expert on regional affairs, said.

In recent months, Pakistani officials have redoubled efforts to mend fences with Kabul, but their advances have met with considerable scepticism.

When Pakistani prime minister Yusuf Raza Gilani visited Kabul on April 16, on his second trip there this year, he spoke of friendship between the two nations, and voiced his government's support for emerging efforts to create stability and forge a peace settlement within Afghanistan.

Gilani's remarks echoed those of President Asif Ali Zardari, who said in a recent interview that Afghan stability was to Pakistan's advantage.

However, Afghan commentators interviewed by IWPR were left wondering whether diplomatic expressions of goodwill reflect a real change of heart in Pakistan, which they suspect has never wanted a strong government in Kabul.

Some analysts believe Pakistan's government has been put on the back foot by signs of progress in Afghanistan – a specially-created council is trying to contact and negotiate with the Taliban, and government forces are gearing up to take over primary responsibility for security from the NATO-led troop contingent, as the US talks to Kabul about maintaining a force in the country long-term.

Waziri said recent Saudi and Turkish offers of help in negotiations with the Taliban had left Islamabad worried that that it might get left behind, concerns that had only been heightened by recent turbulence in US-Pakistan relations, and Washington's improving relationship with rival India.

"By moving closer to Afghanistan, Pakistan is trying to win US confidence, on the one hand, and exert control over changing political circumstance in Afghanistan, on the other," he said.

Waziri added that even if civilian politicians like Gilani were speaking in good faith when they spoke warmly

of Afghan peace efforts, they were not in a position to go against elements of the Pakistani military and intelligence services that had their own agendas.

Writer and political analyst Dad Nurani argues that Islamabad is in any case intimately aware of developments in Afghanistan, so the the recent flurry of diplomatic visits is aimed at figuring out how these can best be turned to Pakistan's advantage.

"Pakistan is apprised of the US and Afghan visions regarding the new war strategy; the US does not go ahead with new programmes without consulting Pakistan. No matter what Pakistan does, it remains of high value and importance to the US given the current situation in the region," Nurani said. "Pakistan is fully aware of the activities of the peace council in Afghanistan, so by [proposing] a joint Afghan-Pakistan peace commission, it is seeking to bring the Afghan government together with those Taleban who are pro-Pakistan."

When it came to what Bin Laden's demise meant for the conflict within Afghanistan, analysts interviewed by IWPR were divided about its implication.

Fazlurrahman Oria, a journalist and political analyst, said al-Qaeda would be greatly weakened by the loss of its chief, leading to weaker links with the Taleban, which in turn would become more open to compromise.

"The Taleban was under pressure as long as Osama was with them, and they were in contact with him, but that pressure isn't going to continue. The ground will be laid for the Taleban to engage in more diplomacy," he said. "Meanwhile, the remaining members of al-Qaeda will no longer feel safe in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and will have to relocate to other places. The pressures to engage in warfare will therefore be reduced in the region."

Others were less sure, saying that Bin Laden had not exercised real leadership for some time.

"Osama hadn't been particularly active and he didn't have much influence on operational plans. There are others who lead such operations. He just played a symbolic role as leader. Still, he did have a role, and influence in general," Kohestani said.

Sayidi said Bin Laden's group was down but not out.

"Al-Qaeda isn't going to be eliminated. This event may hit the morale of its followers, but only in the short term," he said.

He predicted that the group would find it hard to identify a new leader. "In addition, Bin Laden was wealthy, and his funding sources may not trust others as much as they trusted him. So that could leave al-Qaeda financially weak."

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