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[www.afgazad.com](http://www.afgazad.com)

[afgazad@gmail.com](mailto:afgazad@gmail.com)

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M. Mandl

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## *Osama bin Laden: The real story?*

The killing of bin Laden in a US Special Forces raid on a house in the Pakistani city of Abbottabad unleashed a torrent of stories about the event. The accounts by various US officials (given in bits and pieces immediately after the raid) gave little information on the details of the operation, and none on the ‘back story’. This left the field open to a lot of speculative accounts about how the raid took place and the events leading up to it .

A rash of conspiracy theories also sprang up, many of which flatly denied bin Laden was even present in the house, while others put forward various versions of the Pakistani role in these events.

Recently, two accounts have been published that claim to be based on information from sources ‘in the know’ or ones who actually participated in the planning (though perhaps not the execution) of the raid. The first was a detailed account by Nicholas Schmidle in The New Yorker, based on interviews with and information provided by senior White House staff and some of the planners of the raid. This was obviously the “official” version, what the US administration would like people to believe. The second is a post on her blog by RJ Hillhouse, in which she quotes her intelligence sources on certain aspects of the raid, especially the events leading up to it. By studying these two accounts, separating the grain from the chaff, and judiciously filling in some of the blanks, it is possible to come up with what is likely to be fairly close to the real story.

It begins with the CIA station chief in one of the Gulf States receiving an unexpected visitor with a fascinating tale. He was a recently retired senior officer of Pakistan’s

intelligence agency, the ISI, and he wanted to talk about Osama bin Laden. Some years ago, he said, the Saudi intelligence chief approached the ISI with the request to provide sanctuary to bin Laden within Pakistan. The Saudis said that bin Laden was prepared to come down from the hills where he was hiding, provided sufficient assurances were available about his security. In return, he would ensure that al Qaeda would not target Pakistan, and he would also limit his own involvement in its operations.

The Saudi motive behind this request presumably had to do with their internal imperatives. The bin Ladens are a very rich and influential family in Saudi Arabia. Osama and al Qaeda, and their goals, are supported by a large number of religious Saudis (even though the royal family considers them enemies). If bin Laden were to be hunted down and killed by the Americans in the tribal badlands of Pakistan, it would give the regime a black eye in the view of many of its people as well as being a serious blow to the bin Laden clan. It made sense to the Saudis to get Osama bin Laden into a safe hideout while at the same time neutralizing him as a functioning jihadi.

Whatever the Saudi motivation, their request placed the Pakistanis in a severe dilemma. The Saudis were their helpers and supporters, in fact the kingdom was their backer of last resort; they could not afford to alienate them. On the other hand, bin Laden was the principal enemy and target of their current backer and ally, the United States; they could not take the risk of being caught harbouring him. The matter went right up to President Musharraf, and was the subject of much debate. Finally, it was decided that the affair would be handled through one of the client jihadi outfits of the ISI, with no official involvement, thus ensuring plausible deniability in case something went wrong.

This, said the former ISI official, was how bin Laden was moved into Pakistan some years ago, and was safely harboured there. He was prepared to divulge his current location to the CIA provided he was given the reward on offer, and he and his family (accompanying him on this holiday) were securely relocated to the USA. The CIA station chief set up another meeting with the informant, and relayed the information to Washington. The background check on the ISI officer having proved satisfactory, at this second meeting the station chief accepted his offer on the condition that the reward would only be paid if his information proved accurate.

When the location of bin Laden reached Langley, the CIA commenced a sophisticated, but secret, operation to verify that bin Laden did indeed live in the house in Abbottabad that their ISI informant had leaked to them. Even before the results of this activity became available, the top security officials in the US administration began to consider actions that

could be taken if his presence there was confirmed. This process quickly narrowed down the options to essentially two: a drone strike on the house, or a Special Forces raid (of the type being regularly carried out in Afghanistan against suspected insurgent leaders). When the CIA established that there was a high probability that Osama bin Laden did indeed live in the Abbottabad house, detailed planning began for both options. Their pros and cons differed so radically, however, that choosing between them was not easy.

A drone strike would involve no risk to US personnel while also reducing the loss of face for the Pakistanis and, hence, their reaction after the event. An SF raid, on the other hand, would be a risky affair. Apart from the danger of various mishaps there was a possibility of Pakistani interference, both in the air and on the ground, which would endanger not only the success of the operation but also the US personnel involved. Such an intrusion of American 'boots on the ground' would likely cause serious problems in relations between the two countries. The biggest difference, however, lay in the degree to which the success of the operation could be established by the administration, and generally accepted by the world when announced. A successful drone strike would show that the house was destroyed, but not whether bin Laden had been killed (the Pakistanis would never admit that he had even been there). A successful SF raid, on the other hand, would provide definitive proof.

The two options were presented to President Obama for a decision. His military advisers generally favoured the drone option, though the JSOC command was quite happy to do the raid. The political advisers did not want to pass up this great opportunity to claim a notable success for the administration, but that would only be possible with an SF raid. Obama mulled over the choice for a few days and decided to carry out the raid — but with its risks minimized by getting the Pakistan military to cooperate. This set off another hectic debate among the advisers; it was finally decided that a very hard line be taken with the Pakistanis, giving them, in effect, neither the option to refuse nor any wiggle room in compliance. Leon Panetta was chosen to deliver the ultimatum: in essence, to do another 'Armitage' on them.

Panetta enjoyed playing the heavy with the Pakistanis (especially after their successful false emissary caper and their exploitation of the Raymond Davis affair). He told the ISI chief how the US had found out, and then confirmed, that bin Laden was being sheltered by them. The US was going to take him out; Pakistan could either help, or it would be considered an enemy of the US and treated accordingly. Backed into a corner, with their 'plausible deniability' in shreds, the Pakistani generals folded: they were prepared to help,

but they needed a good cover story, especially for the Saudis. The US agreed to work with them on this, but demanded that knowledge of the raid be confined to a very few people at the top of the command chain, no more than necessary to ensure that any attempt by someone in the security forces to interfere with the operation would be immediately detected and quashed.

The cover story finally agreed upon was that the US had carried out a drone strike on the house (though none would in fact take place). This would account for the night-time explosions at the house, and, more importantly, provide an explanation to give to the Saudis for bin Laden's sudden and unfortunate demise (his body having been almost obliterated by the bombs!). The US's agreement was simply a ruse, however, in order to keep the Pakistanis cooperating; having rejected the drone option because it did not allow a definitive claim of the operation's success, the US administration had no intention of going through with this cover story. Instead, it intended to announce the carrying out of the raid, and its momentous result, as soon as it was completed, though it is likely they planned to shift its venue to some undefined place under insurgent control so as to allow the Pakistani military some face-saving, and thus limit their adverse reaction. In the event, the helicopter crash put paid to this.

With the Pakistani military on board, the raid was launched on May 1st. Two Black Hawk helicopters with the Navy SEALs team on board took off from Jalalabad late evening and landed at the Ghazi airbase, Tarbela. This base is used by Pakistani SF (the Special Services Group), and has a US SF helicopter-training contingent stationed there. Helicopter flights into the US base area from Afghanistan are routine, and the flight of these two helicopters was cleared on the same basis. The attack on the Abbottabad target was launched from here later that night. The flying distance from Ghazi to the target is approximately 60 km (40 miles).

Even though the Pakistan army chief had agreed to allow the raid to go through without any interference, the US was not taking any chances. Schmidle describes a backup force of four Chinook helicopters, two with a backup SEALs team (which remained on the Afghan side of the border), and two as helicopter backups for the assault Black Hawks. He says that these latter two "landed at a predetermined point on a dry riverbed in a wide, unpopulated valley". This is probably correct since, in case of a Pakistani double-cross, they would be grounded if they were to wait at the Ghazi airbase instead. One of these Chinooks was later used as the replacement for the Black Hawk that crashed at the Abbottabad house.

Schmidle's account (and critiques of it published afterwards) dwell mostly on the details of the action inside the bin Laden compound. It doesn't really matter how that action unfolded, though controversy over it does shift attention away from those aspects of the operation that are being kept concealed by both the US and Pakistan. The important point of these actions is that they resulted in Osama bin Laden being killed. Many conspiracy theorists refuse to accept this, but al Qaeda does, and so do the Pakistanis, who have in their custody bin Laden's wives who witnessed the event. It may be worth commenting on a couple of the items of controversy. It doesn't matter whether bin Laden had a weapon or not; the orders were for him to be killed. The reason why Amal al-Fatah, bin Laden's wife who tried to protect him, was shot in the leg (DEVGRU normally just kills) was probably because the plan was to bring the wives and surviving sons back as prisoners (the loss of one of the Black Hawks forced a change there).

As for the fallout from the operation, it was, as expected, mainly on US-Pakistan relations. If the US had the intention of making it easier for the Pakistanis by fudging the site of the raid, the crashed helicopter's tail sticking up from bin Laden's Abbottabad compound ended that option. This stark evidence of the US incursion left the US with no option but to (in Hillhouse's apt phrase) throw the Pakistanis under the bus. Panetta couldn't let the opportunity pass without adding an extra kick of his own ("they were either complicit or incompetent"). The Pakistan military lost a lot of 'face' internally, but had a tolerable alibi for the Saudis. Most importantly, the raid and its aftermath ended all chances of them working as allies with the US in the future; the relationship became once again purely transactional, with no trust on either side.

The United States certainly got their man but, in the process, lost Pakistan. Time will tell whether that was a good deal.