

Pakistan: Did the Right Enemy Know Where Bin Laden Was?

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Carlotta Gall, *The Wrong Enemy: America in Afghanistan, 2001-2014* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014).

When the United States decided to launch Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan on October 7, 2001, it seeded the ground for its certain failure when it made Pakistan its partner in the conflict. Of all countries in the region, Pakistan was the most opposed to the very goals that the United States sought to achieve in Afghanistan.

After all, Pakistan had been using non-state actors as tools of foreign policy [since 1947](#). However, as Pakistan's [nuclear program advanced](#), Pakistan became ever more brazen in using an increasingly lethal menagerie of Islamist militants in India and Afghanistan. At the time of the invasion, only three countries recognized the Taliban government in Afghanistan: Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Pakistan.

While Pakistanis are fond of repeating the canard that "America made the Taliban," and cite a highly stylized version of U.S.-Pakistan relations under Muhammad Zia ul Haq's regime, in fact, Pakistan's Afghan jihad policy began under Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in 1974 after Mohammad Daoud Khan ousted King Mohammed Zahir Shah and began implementing a Soviet Union-backed secularization campaign. As Daoud violently cracked down on the Islamist opposition, many fled to Iran and to Pakistan. Bhutto set up the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) Afghanistan cell to work with these Islamists. After a brief interregnum, Zia ul Haq continued with this policy after seizing power in a coup in 1977. The main jihadi groups were formed long before the Soviets rolled across the Amu Darya.

Notably, under President Jimmy Carter, the United States was unmoved by the developments in Afghanistan. Zia ul Haq had repeatedly requested U.S. support, but the United States demurred. In fact, the Carter administration sanctioned Pakistan in April 1979 for progress made in its nuclear weapons program. These sanctions complicated eventual U.S. efforts to work with Pakistan after President Ronald Reagan came into office and embraced Zia ul Haq's jihad with gusto and dollars.

After the Soviets withdrew, so did the United States. In 1990, the United States re-employed sanctions that had been waived since 1979. However, Pakistan continued to interfere in Afghanistan. First, it sought to back the Pashtun Islamist Gulbuddin Hekmatyar as the mujahidin-cum-warlords fought over Afghanistan's post-Soviet carcass. Then in 1994 — under the watch of Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto — Pakistan's intelligence agency threw its weight behind a new force: the Afghan Taliban.

The Pakistanis had hoped that the Taliban would act on Pakistan's behalf but were disappointed in many respects. However, the Taliban did *one* thing for Pakistan: it restricted the presence of the Indians to the north.

Handing the Keys of Kabul to the Indians

When the Americans invaded Afghanistan, it did so with a handful of special operators carrying cash. They partnered with the remnants of the Northern Alliance, which was somewhat hampered by the loss of Ahmad Shah Masoud, whom al Qaeda killed the day before the 9/11 attacks. Even though Pakistan was adamant that the Northern Alliance not take Kabul, the Americans were not in a position to prevent it from doing so.

From Pakistan's point of view, the Northern Alliance was an Indian proxy. It was not wrong. The Indians — along with the Iranians, Tajiks, Uzbeks, Russians and even the Americans — had been providing help to the Northern Alliance as it was the only opposition to Pakistan's own proxies: the Taliban. Consequently, in Pakistan's eyes, the Americans

essentially handed the keys of Kabul to the Indians.

While it remains an issue of some debate whether or not Pakistan's U-turn on the Taliban was genuine — if furtive and brief — the evidence to the contrary is significant. And Carlotta Gall does an admirable job laying out this evidence for all to evaluate in her new book, *The Wrong Enemy: America in Afghanistan, 2001-2014*.

On the Side of the Victims

Gall does not pretend to be impartial. She bluntly states that she sides with the victims: the Afghans. Gall draws upon her vast experience in Pakistan and Afghanistan to make the point clear that the United States invaded the wrong country. The real enemy has long escaped the reach of the United States. The real enemy is Pakistan.

She traces out some of the first steps that Pakistan undertook to undermine the United States in Afghanistan even while providing unfettered logistical support for the same. She describes the Kunduz airlift, in which Pakistan arranged for numerous sorties to evacuate Taliban members and their Pakistani advisors. My own contacts in the U.S. Special Forces who witnessed the sorties suggest that they were even more numerous than Gall claims.

Gall describes how Afghan Taliban leaders were safely ensconced in Quetta, the provincial capital of Balochistan. More than others, she has firsthand experience with the Pakistani intelligence agencies and the [Pakistan army](#). They strenuously sought to prevent reporting of the Afghan Taliban's presence and activities in Quetta and have long grown comfortable using lethal force when necessary to protect their secrets. Of course, it was no secret to anyone who had been reading Gall's dispatches for the *New York Times*, or even following the Pakistani press. However, the United States was not interested in the Taliban or their Pakistan-based redoubts until it was too late.

After all, the Americans were content with Pakistani cooperation on al Qaeda. It was not until 2007, that the United States and its [NATO/ISAF partners](#) understood that the Taliban had re-emerged stronger and more effective than before and that Afghanistan was in the throes of a genuine insurgency. Before then, the international community thought that it had routed the Taliban. It thought it had succeeded. As Gall describes, things were only going downhill, further and faster. Afghanistan plunged ever deeper into an insurgency, while the Americans struggled to formulate an effective Pakistan policy. Incidentally, it *still* has no effective Pakistan policy. As the Pakistanis redoubled their support to the Taliban, the insurgency intensified and claimed more and more lives of Afghans, Americans and their allies in and out of uniform. Yet American checks continued going to Pakistan. And, the checks continue to date despite growing public knowledge of Pakistan's multitudinous perfidies.

While Gall is unreserved in her condemnation of Pakistan's role in Afghanistan, she is appositely scathing of American failures. She notes that early American behavior foreshadowed defeat and makes a robust case that American indifference to the loss of Afghan life, the reliance upon indiscriminate use of air power, and failure to understand the country (among numerous other inadequacies and blunders) contributed to turning Afghans against the Americans. As the Americans failed to provide security, the Taliban appeared to some as a relatively better bet. It is hard to fault Gall's logic. Indeed, I came to similar conclusions when I arrived in Afghanistan in 2007 to work with the United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan.

Gall applauds the shift in American thinking towards "population centric counter insurgency." However, she believes that it came too little and too late. Proponents of population-centric counterinsurgency will be heartened by her exposition.

The Abbottabad Raid

Much of Gall's reportage is simply incontrovertible truths. However, her assertion that Pakistan's ISI knew about the whereabouts of Bin Laden have sat uneasily with some, including me. There were two components to her assertion. First, an unnamed American official told her that he or she had evidence that the then-director general of the ISI knew of bin Laden's whereabouts. Second, she claimed that the ISI actually ran a special desk that was dedicated to handling bin Laden and that Pakistan's military leadership was aware of this.

Her claims have a certain appeal. After all, bin Laden was caught in Abbottabad a very short distance from the Pakistan Military Academy. The Pakistanis have made no effort to understand how bin Laden arrived in Pakistan or how he lived for years near the academy. Not only have they failed to arrest anyone who aided them, the Pakistanis have only arrested a Pakistani doctor who worked with the CIA in a (failed) vaccination scam to secure DNA from the bin Laden house. And the Pakistani government's much-discussed [Abbottabad Commission Report](#) attributed the debacle to [state incompetence rather than complicity](#). Still, Gall's sourcing for this stunning claim is dubious at best. Given the significance of this assertion from such a seasoned and accomplished reporter, one expects more robust evidence.

Noted al Qaeda doyen, Peter Bergen, even wrote [a spirited rebuke of her account](#). Bergen draws from his own copious interviews with Pakistani officials who (predictably) deny such knowledge. He also notes that numerous U.S. officials deny having any evidence that supports her claim.

Pakistani Blackwaters?

I agree with Bergen although I reject his reasoning. If U.S. officials had such information, they certainly would not share it with Bergen or anyone else for that matter. If in fact, the U.S. government had such information and it became public, the American public would demand a comprehensive restructuring of relations with Pakistan. So would the U.S. Congress who has a less salubrious view of Pakistan than some perennial Pakistan defenders in the U.S. Department of State. We should all be clear that American intelligence agencies have an enormous incentive to obscure any information it has about any information the Pakistani government had about bin Laden and his Abbottabad redoubt.

There is another — more compelling — explanation that was offered by [Kamran Bokhari](#). (Incidentally, I came to a similar conclusion independently of Bokhari.) Pakistan has long had “Blackwater”-like organizations in which retired military and intelligence personnel work. Some of these organizations are working in Arab countries such as [Bahrain](#) where they help the local forces manage insecurity threats. These retired personnel work on a contractual basis for the ISI in a way that is not dissimilar from the way these same kinds of organizations are contracted by the U.S. Departments of State or Defense, or even the CIA. These clandestine organizations are a critical component of Pakistan's ability to manage a menagerie of terrorist organizations with increasingly plausible deniability. Once such a cell has been dedicated to a particular safe house or network, other intelligence agencies more or less leave that asset alone. And the cell would be responsible for managing the local police and other curious state and non-state observers of the safe house.

As anyone who has followed the coverage of the Abbottabad house knows, Pakistanis in the neighborhood widely referred to it as a “Waziristan” safe house. This is important to understand. Many Pakistanis would be hesitant to report such a suspicious house *if* they believed it was an asset of the state. After all, they would assume that, at some level, the local police and intelligence agencies were associated with the house. Under these circumstances, the whistleblower would then come under suspicion of the “agencies,” as they are called in Pakistan as a potential troublemaker. No one wants the “angels,” (farhishte) as the agencies are also sometimes called, to visit their home. Ever.

From bin Laden's point of view, he would have been a fool had he entrusted his safety to the various directors general of the ISI who rotated through this post during his sojourn in Pakistan. After all, at whim or caprice, such a director could literally sell him to the Americans. Bin Laden would most certainly have preferred to work with a network of persons he knew from decades past, persons who had long retired and may have well been a part of a series of semi-private clandestine organizations.

Gall May have Been Wrong about Bin Laden

Gall's claims about Pakistani knowledge of bin Laden's whereabouts will remain a source of controversy and debate for some time to come. Only when American intelligence archives become declassified will anyone have a sense of

what the United States thought it knew about Pakistani complicity and at what level such complicity occurred — if it occurred at all.

What is not in debate is the salience of her central thesis that the Americans have long failed to recognize what the Afghans have known all along: Pakistan is the enemy. Unless the United States comes to terms with this most basic fact, it will never be able to manage the myriad threats that Pakistan poses to its neighbors, and increasingly, to itself as well.

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