

Robert Fisk: Was he betrayed? Of course. Pakistan knew Bin Laden's hiding place all along

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A middle-aged nonentity, a political failure outstripped by history – by the millions of Arabs demanding freedom and democracy in the Middle East – died in Pakistan yesterday. And then the world went mad.

Fresh from providing us with a copy of his birth certificate, the American President turned up in the middle of the night to provide us with a live-time death certificate for Osama bin Laden, killed in a town named after a major in the army of the old British Empire. A single shot to the head, we were told. But the body's secret flight to Afghanistan, an equally secret burial at sea? The weird and creepy disposal of the body – no shrines, please – was almost as creepy as the man and his vicious organisation.

The Americans were drunk with joy. David Cameron thought it "a massive step forward". India described it as a "victorious milestone". "A resounding triumph," Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu boasted. But after 3,000 American dead on 9/11, countless more in the Middle East, up to half a million Muslims died in Iraq and Afghanistan and 10 years trying to find Bin Laden, pray let us have no more "resounding triumphs". Revenge attacks? Perhaps they will come, by the little groupuscules in the West, who have no direct contact with al-Qa'ida. Be sure, someone is already dreaming up a "Brigade of the Martyr Osama bin Laden". Maybe in Afghanistan, among the Taliban.

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But the mass revolutions in the Arab world over the past four months mean that al-Qa'ida was already politically dead. Bin Laden told the world – indeed, he told me personally – that he wanted to destroy the pro-Western regimes in the Arab world, the dictatorships of the Mubaraks and the Ben Alis. He wanted to create a new Islamic Caliphate. But these past few months, millions of Arab Muslims rose up and were prepared for their own martyrdom – not for Islam but for freedom and liberty and democracy. Bin Laden didn't get rid of the tyrants. The people did. And they didn't want a caliph.

I met the man three times and have only one question left unasked: what did he think as he watched those revolutions unfold this year – under the flags of nations rather than Islam, Christians and Muslims together, the kind of people his own al-Qa'ida men were happy to butcher?

In his own eyes, his achievement was the creation of al-Qa'ida, the institution which had no card-carrying membership. You just woke up in the morning, wanted to be in al-Qa'ida – and you were. He was the founder. But he was never a hands-on warrior. There was no computer in his cave, no phone calls to set bombs off. While the Arab dictators ruled uncontested with our support, they largely avoided condemning American policy; only Bin Laden said these things. Arabs never wanted to fly planes into tall buildings, but they did admire a man who said what they wanted to say. But now, increasingly, they can say these things. They don't need Bin Laden. He had become a nonentity.

But talking of caves, Bin Laden's demise does bring Pakistan into grim focus. For months, President Ali Zardari has been telling us that Bin Laden was living in a cave in Afghanistan. Now it turns out he was living in a mansion in Pakistan. Betrayed? Of course he was. By the Pakistan military or the Pakistan Inter-Services Intelligence? Quite possibly both. Pakistan knew where he was.

Not only was Abbottabad the home of the country's military college – the town was founded by Major James Abbott of the British Army in 1853 – but it is headquarters of Pakistan's Northern Army Corps' 2nd Division. Scarcely a year ago, I sought an interview with another "most wanted man" – the leader of the group believed responsible for the Mumbai massacres. I found him in the Pakistani city of Lahore – guarded by uniformed Pakistani policemen holding machine guns.

Of course, there is one more obvious question unanswered: couldn't they have captured Bin Laden? Didn't the CIA or the Navy Seals or the US Special Forces or whatever American outfit killed him have the means to throw a net over the tiger? "Justice," Barack Obama called his death. In the old days, of course, "justice" meant due process, a court, a hearing, a defence, a trial. Like the sons of Saddam, Bin Laden was gunned down. Sure, he never wanted to be taken alive – and there were buckets of blood in the room in which he died.

But a court would have worried more people than Bin Laden. After all, he might have talked about his contacts with the CIA during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, or about his cosy meetings in Islamabad with Prince Turki, Saudi Arabia's head of intelligence. Just as Saddam – who was tried for the murder of a mere 153 people rather than thousands of gassed Kurds – was hanged before he had the chance to tell us about the gas components that came from America, his friendship with Donald Rumsfeld, the US military assistance he received when he invaded Iran in 1980.

Oddly, he was not the "most wanted man" for the international crimes against humanity of 11 September 2001. He gained his Wild West status by al-Qa'ida's earlier attacks on the US embassies in Africa and the attack on the US barracks in Dhahran. He was always waiting for Cruise missiles – so was I when I met him. He had waited for death before, in the caves of Tora Bora in 2001 when his bodyguards refused to let him stand and fight and forced him to walk over the mountains to Pakistan. Some of his time he would spend in Karachi – he was obsessed with Karachi; he even, weirdly, gave me photographs of pro-Bin Laden graffiti on the walls of the former Pakistani capital and praised the city's imams.

His relations with other Muslims were mysterious; when I met him in Afghanistan, he initially feared the Taliban, refusing to let me travel to Jalalabad at night from his training camp – he handed me over to his al-Qa'ida lieutenants to protect me on the journey next day. His followers hated all Shia Muslims as heretics and all dictators as infidels – though he was prepared to cooperate with Iraq's ex-Baathists against the country's American occupiers, and said so in an audiotape which the CIA typically ignored. He never praised Hamas and was scarcely worthy of their "holy warrior" definition yesterday which played – as usual – straight into Israel's hands.

In the years after 2001, I maintained a faint indirect communication with Bin Laden, once meeting one of his trusted al-Qa'ida associates at a secret location in Pakistan. I wrote out a list of 12 questions, the first of which was obvious: what kind of victory could he claim when his actions resulted in the US occupation of two Muslim countries? There was no reply for weeks. Then one weekend, waiting to give a lecture in Saint Louis in the US, I was told that Al Jazeera had produced a new audiotape from Bin Laden. And one by one – without mentioning me – he answered my 12 questions. And yes, he wanted the Americans to come to the Muslim world – so he could destroy them.

When Wall Street journalist Daniel Pearl was kidnapped, I wrote a long article in The Independent, pleading with Bin Laden to try to save his life. Pearl and his wife had looked after me when I was beaten on the Afghan border in 2001; he even gave me the contents of his contacts book. Much later, I was told that Bin Laden had read my report with sadness. But Pearl had already been murdered. Or so he said.

Yet Bin Laden's own obsessions blighted even his family. One wife left him, two more appeared to have been killed in Sunday's American attack. I met one of his sons, Omar, in Afghanistan with his father in 1994. He was a handsome little boy and I asked him if he was happy. He said "yes" in English. But last year, he published a book called Living Bin Laden and – recalling how his father killed his beloved dogs in a chemical warfare experiment – described him as an "evil man". In his book, he too remembered our meeting; and concluded that he should have told me that no, he was not a happy child.

By midday yesterday, I had three phone calls from Arabs, all certain that it was Bin Laden's double who was killed by the Americans – just as I know many Iraqis who still believe that Saddam's sons were not killed in 2003, nor Saddam really hanged. In due course, al-Qa'ida will tell us. Of course, if we are all wrong and it was a double, we're going to be treated to yet another videotape from the real Bin Laden – and President Barack Obama will lose the next election.

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