

Pakistan's Official Stand on the Killing of Osama bin Laden: A Case Study of the Daily Dawn

Amir Hamza Marwan *

Abstract

This research paper draws on the official stand of Pakistan after the killing of Osama bin Laden in Operation 'Neptune Spear' in Abbottabad, Pakistan. Bin Laden's death was one of the historic events in the 'War on Terror' as he was chased by US and her allies for more than a decade. All the news items carrying the official stand of Pakistan and published in the Dawn newspaper, from May 3, 2011 to May 12, 2011, have been selected and studied in this research study. The findings – based on the content analysis – show that Pakistani officials were less in sight on the issue of Abbottabad Operation and bin Laden's killing. It further shows that there was lack of coordination between the Pakistani military and civilian leadership over the issue – besides no media strategy to control the public opinion and possible damage.

Introduction

The world's most wanted man – Osama bin Laden – was killed in a US attack in Abbottabad, Pakistan. It was welcomed by many in the world and was considered one of the biggest achievements in the ongoing War on Terror as it cost the US and her allies almost a decade. The US government was very clear of its stand as they were claiming that 'justice has been done' (Obama, 2011), but in Pakistan, things were a bit different. It can be easily assessed from the initial reaction to bin Laden's killing by the Pakistani premier, Yousaf Raza Gillani, who called it a 'great achievement' initially (Gillani, 2011), but, later on, possibly succumbed to the public pressure and, started criticizing the US for the 'unilateral' attack.

Besides observing a change in the tone of initial response to the issue, it is also important to look at the Pakistan's official stand which is the frontline state ally of the US in this ongoing War on Terror – and has suffered more than any other country. Pakistan's top spy agencies claimed in the Supreme Court of Pakistan that so far, more than 49,000 Pakistani have laid down their lives in this ongoing War on Terror since 9/11 (Raja, 2013). Furthermore, Pakistani leadership has also accused Al Qaeda of destabilizing Pakistan – by carrying out different attacks in different times (Zardari, 2011; Gillani, 2011). Thus, it becomes important to look at the Pakistan's official stand on the issue after the killing of bin Laden in Abbottabad, Pakistan. Such stand will help us understand that how Pakistan dealt with the issue and what strategy they chalked out to control the public opinion?

* Department of Journalism and Mass Communication, University of Peshawar

The main research questions answered in this research study are the following:

- a) What was the official stand of Pakistan on the issue?
- b) Did the Pakistani government adopt any media strategy to cope with the situation which developed after bin Laden's killing?

The answer to these questions will inform us about the visibility of Pakistani officials in the coverage– when the country was in the crisis situation. It will also inform that was there any coordination between the different institutions of Pakistan–especially between military and civilian government – while dealing with the Abbottabad Operation and its aftermath. The killing of bin Laden was indeed good news for US and her (Western) allies – but the discovery of bin Laden in a villa in Abbottabad left many questions for the security agencies and civilian high-ups of Pakistan to answer.

Literature Review

Many researchers including Nacos (2002, p. 174) claims that media is the most effective tool to 'reassure' and 'pacify' the public in any crisis situation. Media outlets can indeed help the crisis managers to deliver their message to the countless number of people – but the first most important thing is also to identify that who are the 'internal' and 'external' stakeholders?

After the identification of the different publics, it is then important that that the crisis managers should provide information to the media outlets during and after the crisis, and this is really crucial (Nacos, 2002, p. 171). There are worries that if the government fails to design any media or communication strategy (in the right time), or if the stakeholders are not taken in confidence, then it may leave them 'confused, angry and negatively reactive'– as slower the response, the more chances of damage is there (Bernstein, 2013).

Therefore, it is the need of the hour that each organization or country should have a crisis communications team – who can deliver the best in the right time. Bernstein (2013) further suggests that each crisis communications team should have professionals, who are trained spokespersons for the different mediums of communication; and they should have the 'right skills', 'right position' and 'right training' in any crisis situation. Researchers further claim that most of the journalists and news organizations usually cooperate with the government – who are in 'truly' crisis situation (Nacos, 2002, p. 180).

Once the crisis managers implement their communication strategy, and starts interacting with the different media outlets then, in such situation, the most important thing is to assess the feedback from all the stakeholders and adapt your strategy and tactics accordingly to your needs (Bernstein, 2013).

Research Framework

This research study looks at the Pakistan's official stand on the issue, in the Dawn, after the killing of bin Laden in a villa in Abbottabad, Pakistan. The reason for selecting the Dawn newspaper is that it is a national newspaper of Pakistan; and one can expect that they would have covered it in more detail as compared to other International newspapers. Furthermore, it must be also noted that Dawn is the historic newspaper of Pakistan founded by Mohammad Ali Jinnah –founder of Pakistan. Dawn is highly regarded as best and objective oriented to the issues (Akhtar, 2000). It is widely read by the people in Pakistan; and is considered the newspaper of professionals.

In order to place an opinion on the official stand of Pakistan, all the news stories carrying the statements of Pakistani officials from May 3, 2011 to May 12, 2011 on the issue of bin Laden's death or Abbottabad Operation have been selected, and no discrimination (in selection) has been in this regard.

An effort has been made to show Pakistan's stand in ascending order – as it unfolded. Each official statement carries two dates – one stands for 'when it was said' and the other stands for 'when it was published' in the newspaper. The date of 'when it was said' is important as it shows the delay in government's response, in some cases; and it is also important to have the date of publication, for reference. Instead of writing the detailed story – carrying the official stand – this study only includes a short summary highlighting the most important points mentioned in the statements (which are already highlighted in the headline, lead or in the following paragraphs).

Research Methodology

Content analysis has been utilized to answer all the outstanding research questions raised in this research study. Riffe, Lacy and Fico (1998, p. 37) claim that content analysis is the best methodology when explicit research questions or hypothesis are raised.

Many other researchers also claim that content analysis only looks at the 'manifest' meaning of the text rather than the 'latent' meaning of the text (Berger, 2000, p. 117; Holsti, 1969). Riffe, Lacy and Fico (1998, p. 30) also claim that it only deals with manifest content and 'makes no claims beyond that'. Despite limitations of looking at the latent meaning, Hansen (1998, p. 98) still pleads that content analysis is the best methodology to address even the qualitative questions effectively.

It is obvious from the research questions answered in the study that none of it has any inclination towards the latent meaning of the text and all of them look at the explicit meaning of the text, and that is why this researcher believes that it is the best methodology to answer these questions.

Findings

The research findings have been presented below in the form of short summary of all the fourteen news stories, showing the official stand of Pakistan, with a little context and discussion. The main discussion about the findings will follow later in the separate section – which is named ‘Discussion’.

- i) Soon after the Abbottabad Operation, when President Obama confirmed the death of bin Laden (on May 2, 2011), the Pakistani Prime Minister, Yousaf Raza Gillani, initially reacted to his killing by terming it ‘a victory of anti-terror alliance’ (Dawn, May 3, 2011, p. 3). It was then followed by all-day silence in the Pakistan’s official camp as the media outlets waited all the day for further official detail on the issue.
- ii) The next day (May 3, 2011), a statement was issued from the Foreign Office of Pakistan, which showed resentment over the attack, and was different from the statement of satisfaction issued earlier by the Pakistani Premier by saying: “This event of unauthorized unilateral action cannot be taken as a rule” (Dawn, May 4, 2011, p. 1). It shows that the stance of Pakistani Foreign Office differed from the earlier stand taken by its Premier over bin Laden’s killing in Pakistan.
- iii) Interestingly, on the same day (May 4, 2011), Dawn carried out a news story on its back page and quoted the Pakistani President, Asif Ali Zardari, whose article was published in the Washington Post, and the excerpts were taken from his article: “We in Pakistan take some satisfaction that our early assistance in identifying an Al Qaeda courier ultimately led to this day” (Dawn May 4, 2011, p. 14). (Please note that President Obama in his speech also applauded Pakistan’s help, but he did not mention any detail of the help). It can also be observed that the Pakistani President preferred to address the US (international) audience rather than its own Pakistani (local) audience. Besides applauding the death of bin Laden, it also shows that there was some level of possible understanding between the US and Pakistan over the Operation which was not shared with the public.
- iv) Just a day after the Abbottabad Operation, when the country was receiving criticism from the International community for the presence of a high value target in the garrison city Abbottabad, the Prime Minister of Pakistan preferred to leave for France for a ‘preplanned’ three days official visit on May 3, 2011, instead of addressing the on-going session of the Senate to take the people of Pakistan in confidence. Apparently, it seems that no one of the high-ups in Pakistan was ready to take the blame or credit for the operation or killing of bin Laden. On May 4, 2011 in Paris, while responding to one of the

questions of a reporter about the failure of Pakistan's Intelligence Agencies in locating bin Laden, the Pakistani Prime Minister said: "There is intelligence failure of the whole world, not Pakistan alone" (Dawn, May 5, 2011, p. 1). It means that the Pakistani Prime Minister was trying to share the possible burden of his loss with the rest of the allies or was trying to make a diplomatic statement about the general failure.

- v) As the civilian leaders apparently avoided addressing its own audience, the next day, on May 5, 2011, Pakistan's Army Chief, Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, chaired corps commander conference at General Headquarters (GHQ) – Pakistan's Military Headquarters – to assess the situation developed after the Abbottabad Operation. The statement, issued to media after the conference, said: "The Chief of Army Staff (COAS) made it very clear that any similar action, violating the sovereignty of Pakistan, will warrant a review on the level of military/ intelligence cooperation with the US" (Dawn, May 6, 2011, p. 1). Although, he also counted the cooperation of Pakistani Intelligence Agencies to the US in tracing the phone call of Bin Laden's courier. This (possibly) shows that the Pakistani civilian and military leaders were not standing on the same page (regarding the operation and his killing) as the statement of the Army chief is also different from the one issued earlier by the Prime Minister or the President of Pakistan. It also shows that the Pakistani Military came forward and protested against the (one-sided) US operation when the civilian leaders were not visible.
- vi) On the same day, May 5, 2011, the Government asked the Foreign Secretary, Salman Bashir, to address a press conference. It must be noted that usually such briefings are given by the Foreign Office Spokesperson in Urdu, but he (Salman Bashir) addressed it in English. This was very important press briefing and was given live coverage by almost all the TV channels of Pakistan along with the international media. The main theme of his briefing was that USA and Pakistan both enjoy the 'strategic convergence' despite killing of bin Laden in Pakistan (Dawn, May 6, 2011, p. 1). Again, it shows the soft tone adopted by the Pakistani camp over the operation. Many analysts criticized the press briefing delivered in English as they claimed that their audiences were foreigners rather than locals. This again, up to some extent, shows that the Pakistani government was trying to balance their criticism leveled against the US after the operation (as the military head issued warning on the same day).
- vii) On May 6, 2011 (p. 3) a news story carrying the statement of Hussain Haqqani, a Pakistani Ambassador to the US, appeared in the Dawn newspaper, who promised to carry out a thorough probe into the

allegations that Pakistani officials helped bin Laden during his stay in Abbottabad. The statement was issued after many US officials criticized bin Laden's presence in Pakistan. This was again showing a softer and defensive tone of the government unlike the one taken by its military.

As one would have expected that with the passage of time, the dirt would settle down, but it did not happen in the case of bin Laden's death coverage as on May 6, 2011, the opposition political parties of Pakistan and the civil society were constantly putting pressure on the Government and Military to explain how it all happened. Many of them even demanded resignations of the Army Chief, President and Prime Minister. They all termed the Abbottabad Operation as attack on the 'sovereignty' and 'integrity' of Pakistan.

- viii) The next day, soon after the return of the Prime Minister of Pakistan from Paris, May 7, 2011, a meeting was held at the President House in which the Pakistani PM, President and Army Chief participated. The Dawn writes: "The meeting decided that the Prime Minister would take the nation into confidence through Parliament and give a policy statement on Monday (9th of May 2011)" (Dawn, May 8, 2011. p. 1). It means that it took six days of the civilian and military leadership to feel it necessary to take the people of Pakistan into confidence and to issue a policy statement to its people (and the rest of the world) about the incident. As the statement will be issued on May 9 so it will mark one week that the Pakistani leadership issues a policy statement about it.
- ix) Amid the growing concerns about the future of bin Laden's family, the Dawn in its May 9, 2011 issue quoted the Foreign Ministry Spokesperson of Pakistan, in its three paragraph news item, that no country had asked (Pakistan) for the return of bin Laden's relatives (Dawn, May 9, 2011, p. 3). There was a fear that bin Laden's family might be transferred to the US for further investigation.
- x) The same day, another news item appeared in the Dawn, carrying statement of Pakistani diplomat in the US, Hussain Haqqani, who claimed that Pakistan was not aware of Bin Laden's presence in Abbottabad. He further claimed that Pakistan was investigating bin Laden's presence in Abbottabad (May 9, 2011, p. 3).
- xi) After a week, on May 9, 2011, the Pakistani Prime Minister, in his much-awaited policy statement speech in the National Assembly, stated that all the state institutions of Pakistan 'are on the same page' as there was an impression in the Pakistani media that they are not. He appreciated the efforts of Pakistan's Army, and especially the ISI in the

War on Terror and their strength to defend the country. He said that an ‘in camera briefing’ will be given by the military heads (DG ISI) in the joint session of the Parliament (Senate and National Assembly) on May 13, 2011 (Please note that such in camera briefing is confidential and is not for the general public). He also condemned bin Laden and his Al Qaeda for killing the ‘innocent Pakistanis’ in different attacks and termed his death as ‘justice done’. He called the allegations of complicity and incompetence as ‘absurd’. He also ordered an inquiry under the serving military general to investigate bin Laden’s presence in Abbottabad. Besides issuing caution to the US over the ‘unilateral’ attack and violating Pakistan’s sovereignty, he also mentioned the ‘strategic partnership’ of Pakistan with the US, which, according to him, was based on ‘mutual respect’ and ‘mutual trust’ (Dawn, May 10, 2011, p. 1).

Indeed, the Prime Minister tried to control the damage (diplomatically) as much as possible. He condemned the US for carrying out the ‘unilateral’ attack, but at the same time, also appreciated her as a ‘strategic partner’. He agreed with many critics to investigate the Abbottabad Operation and bin Laden’s presence in Pakistan, but he also ordered it under the ‘serving’ military general. Again, it shows that he was trying to protect the establishment (as they didn’t want the independent judicial inquiry). The other most important thing was that he delivered his speech in English in the parliament. He switched to Urdu at the end once he finished reading the written speech.

It was also the day, when a ‘Memo’ was written to the Admiral Mike Mullen by Mansoor Ijaz, a Pakistani Businessman in the US. He claimed it in an article published in the London-based ‘Financial Times’. He claimed that he wrote the memo on behalf of his ‘friend’ Hussain Haqqani – a Pakistani diplomat to the US – who was advised by the Pakistani President, Asif Ali Zardari, to save his government from a possible military coup. This scandal worsened the relations between the civilian and military leadership.

- xii) Dawn, in its May 11, 2011 issue, carried out two news stories on its front page. In one, they quoted the Foreign Office Spokesperson by saying: “The US has not made any formal request to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for access to Bin Laden’s widows and children”. It means that new debate now started in Pakistan was about the future of bin Laden’s family.
- xiii) In another news item, Interior Minister was quoted who, while speaking to the CNN, said that the US would be given access to Osama bin Laden’s widows (Dawn, May 11, 2011, p. 1). It shows that the

government was still willing to cooperate with the US even after the Abbottabad Operation.

- xiv) On May 11, 2011, after strong reaction from Nawaz Sharif, a right-wing politician, who is now serving as the Prime Minister of Pakistan for a third term, rejected the US raid probe under Pakistani military as it was earlier promised by the Prime Minister, in his speech to the National Assembly. Nawaz Sharif called for a judicial inquiry to fix the responsibility (Dawn, May 12, 2011, p. 1). It shows that the opposition political parties of Pakistan were not ready to give any relaxation to the government and military over the issue. It also means that on the one hand, government could not turn up openly to the US to sever relations, and on the other hand, they could not afford to leave the army to own the failure of Abbottabad Operation for not locating bin Laden. The government was in the middle of nowhere, but the main opposition political party indeed played its card very well by taking the issue to the Supreme Court of Pakistan, where the government, army and even the judiciary stood in front of each other and it created a political instability in the country – which lasted for weeks.
- xv) The Prime Minister was (possibly) well aware of the intention of Mian Nawaz Sharif and the consequences of his act. Perhaps, it was the reason that the Prime Minister rushed to the Senate, on the same day, and in his first speech to the Senate, said: “We are at the crossroads today and the situation demands resolve and commitment of the nation to stand by the state institutions and defend our geographical and ideological frontiers” (Dawn, May 12, 2011, p. 1). It means that the government was mulling all the options which they did not utilize before, to control the damage; but perhaps, it was too late now.

Discussion

The above findings– on the Pakistan’s official stand on the killing of Osama bin Laden and covered in the Dawn – show that Pakistani officials have not turned up on the issue much openly, as many would have expected from a frontline state ally of War on Terror – especially when your own people have long sacrificed their lives to win it. The less visibility of Pakistani political high-ups on the issue also gives the impression that, most possibly, they did not know how to deal with the news of the operation, or were unaware of the situation that arose, or its consequences on the country’s political arena. One can guess many reasons for it, but if we suppose that it was a planned official strategy to keep its people blank and confused, and to think that everything will settle down with the passage of time; it seems that it has not stayed successful in the case of bin Laden’s death as there was a growing criticism over the US operation, government and military with each passing day. The less appearance of Pakistani officials among the public (via media outlets) and not owning the operation

further encourages the speculation that the government possibly wanted to avoid both – a possible reaction from Al Qaeda/ Taliban, or joining the US camp.

Apparently, it also shows that there was not much left with Pakistan to share about bin Laden's stay in Abbottabad – like bringing bin Laden's family to media (to divert public attention or show oneself innocent), or even contradict any single information issued by the US as anything in return might have further embarrassed them. All they wanted was that Pakistani media outlets should stop debating the issue, which is clear from the statements to media personnel by the Interior Minister, Rahman Malik, advising them to stop highlighting such sensitive issues as it will demoralize Pakistan's Army – who are busy in fighting the War on Terror on the western border (Malik 2011). It is also clear from the ban imposed on the live coverage from Abbottabad or even not allowing journalists to view bin Laden's compound from inside, despite of early assurance.

Most of the (new) information about the raid or the operation came from the US (via its media outlets or its officials), and Pakistani officials, mostly, reacted to it (Marwan, 2015). The US cashed the Abbottabad Operation and bin Laden's killing like a Soccer World Cup – which is hosted in another city, but at the end the guest team stays winner (or hero). Interestingly, this finale was 'Made in USA' in all the ways. The players in the game, referee, substitutes, and even the rules were laid down by the American forces and officials; the only thing outlandish was their enemy, Osama bin Laden, and the battlefield Abbottabad, Pakistan. The issue was handled so meticulously by the US government from the start till the end that they did not provide any space to any other country or organization to cast a doubt on their victory or achievement. The US enjoyed its victory and came back to work – but Pakistani government continued to feel its tremors for a very long time as it gave rise to 'Memo gate Scandal' and 'Judicial Commission on Abbottabad Operation'. The former resulted in forced resignation of Hussain Haqqani, a Pakistani Ambassador to the US. It further expanded the gap between Pakistan's civilian and military top heads. The tension enforced Prime Minister, Yousaf Raza Gillani, to question it on the floor of the National Assembly, that on what type of visa bin Laden was living in Pakistan for six years? (Gillani, 2011). He said this with reference to the ongoing tension between the civilian and military high-ups over the bin Laden's presence in Pakistan – and also the rumors about the possibility of the coup in Pakistan.

These are the reasons that the Western media outlets – after Pakistani officials staying out from the media and public frame – relied on accounts of the local people/ eye witnesses to tell the story of bin Laden's death from Pakistan (Marwan, 2015). From Pakistani officials coverage below, it is also clear that the civilian rulers of Pakistan initially tried to show happiness over bin Laden's killing, but as soon as the public opinion started turning against them in the form of protests or criticism from different segments of the society, even the powerful Army found itself in the hot water, and the government also had to modify their stand by complaining about the 'unilateral' US

attack. This contradiction has been witnessed till the end by saying something to the local audience and then saying something else to the International audience.

Conclusion

This article attempted to show the Pakistan's official stand on the killing of Osama bin Laden and covered in the Dawn. The findings – based on the Pakistan's official stand on the issue – support that the Pakistani officials were less in sight on the issue of Abbottabad Operation and bin Laden's killing. It also shows that there was no coordination between the Pakistani military and civilian leadership over the issue. It also shows that they had no media strategy to control the opinion of its people, and perhaps, that further escalated the confusion among the public.

But when we look at the coverage of Pakistani high-ups after the incident, it is obvious that they did not utilize the media outlets in the right way to resolve the crisis. The stand of Pakistani officials on the issue also shows that although the US was criticized by the Pakistani military and civilian leadership, but it was much harmless criticism. From the detailed account of Pakistan's official stand – mentioned above – one comes to the conclusion that (perhaps) Pakistani officials were not that much critical of the US operation, but they could not share their real feelings of satisfaction over bin Laden's death to its own public.

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