Welcome to Abbottabad, Pakistan

by Simon Henderson **(/experts/simon-henderson)**

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Articles & Testimony

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So Osama bin Laden has not been hiding in Karachi or somewhere in the mountains of Waziristan; rather, he's been in Abbottabad. Oh dear. There might be a place more embarrassing for Pakistan, but it is hard to think of one. It is yet further evidence that Pakistan, supposedly a key ally of the United States, has gone rogue.

Abbottabad is like West Point, New York. Each is home to a nation's top military academy. Each is close to a major city. In the case of Abbottabad, that is the Pakistani capital, Islamabad. It takes about an hour and half to drive -- the same time that West Point's website says it takes to the U.S. military academy from New York City.

A military town dating back to British India, Abbottabad is named for Major James Abbott, an imperial soldier and administrator, who founded it in 1853. Like other military towns in the area -- Rawalpindi (the headquarters of the Pakistan Army) and Wah (a munitions manufacturing center) -- it has a cantonment, a district of straight roads and open spaces where military personnel live and work. Cantonments are the smarter part of towns. Osama bin Laden was living near Abbottabad's cantonment.

Abbottabad is also where Pakistan's retired military live. Back in the late 1970s, I used to visit a straight and secular Pakistani politician who lived there -- retired air marshal Asghar Khan -- a rare breed. He had been a commander of the Pakistan air force who thought he had something to offer Pakistani political life. He did -- but he was a poor politician and distrusted by the Pakistan Army, so he failed. Now aged 90, he still lives in Abbottabad.

(Also in the late 1970s, the town was where one western intelligence representative, working under diplomatic cover in Islamabad, had a cottage where he used to meet East bloc diplomats whom he hoped to persuade to defect. The Pakistan government of the day tolerated the activity, also providing local security for it.)

That was then, and this is now. Trust between the United States and Pakistan has been perilously thin since the 2001 attacks when, according to the memoirs of General-turned-President Pervez Musharraf, then Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage said Pakistan "had to decide whether we were with America or with the terrorists, but that if we chose the terrorists, then we should be prepared to be bombed back to the Stone Age."

The need for a logistics base, from which to go after al Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan, has forced Washington to compromise at several points. Pakistan's nuclear proliferation [ties] to Iran, Libya, and North Korea were all too conveniently blamed on the scientist Dr. A. Q. Khan. The links between the 2008 terror attacks on the Indian city of Mumbai and the Pakistani military's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) were slow to be established, at least publicly. Militarily, Pakistan's help for U.S. and allied forces in Afghanistan has been poor; politically, the country has sought to actively undermine Washington.

But cooperation between the United States and Pakistan is a continuing need, so further diplomatic fudging might be necessary. This time it could be a tough sale. The Pakistan military and people have always been suspicious of clandestine CIA activities in Pakistan, as the recent diplomatic cause celebre of contractor Raymond Davis, who killed two Pakistanis in Lahore earlier this year, showed. Information about months of surveillance of bin Laden's lair will exacerbate the paranoia of many Pakistanis.

Until early Sunday morning, U.S. military operations in Pakistan officially sanctioned by the government were apparently limited to drone attacks on terrorist hideouts in the wild tribal areas along the border with Afghanistan. Pakistan's embarrassment at being shown as having provided sanctuary to the world's most wanted terrorist is likely to prompt diplomatic, military, political, and public responses. It will be a miracle if the politicians in Islamabad or the army in nearby Rawalpindi confine themselves to a monstrous sulk.

Either way, expect public protests. Abbottabad is part of Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, as the more evocative northwest frontier province is now known. The local people -- Pashtoons -- are suspicious of foreigners, especially non-Muslims. But they provide hospitality and, more importantly, sanctuary, to Muslims in need. Some, probably many, will regard the killing of Bin Laden as being an affront to their culture. (Don't ask why they don't regard giving him sanctuary as being an affront to our culture.)

Bin Laden's death is the end of a chapter. But it is not the end of the story.

Simon Henderson, the Baker fellow and director of the ***Gulf and Energy Policy Program (http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=23&newActiveSubNav=Gulf%20and%20Energy%20Policy%20Program&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D23&newActiveNav=researchPrograms)*** *at The Washington Institute, formerly worked as a correspondent for the BBC and* Financial Times *in Islamabad.* ❖

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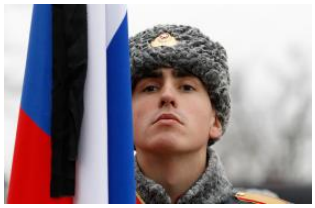

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