

Ahmed Rashid: What Did Pakistan Know?

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Host: TERRY GROSS

Interview Transcript

This is FRESH AIR. I'm Terry Gross.

We've had a running conversation about terrorism on FRESH AIR with Pakistani journalist Ahmed Rashid ever since 2000, when he wrote the book "Taliban."

So we called him this morning to get his reaction to Osama bin Laden's death. Rashid is a columnist for the Financial Times. His books include "Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam" and "Descent into Chaos: The United States and the Failure of Nation-Building in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia." Ahmed Rashid lives in Lahore, Pakistan, but we caught up with him in Madrid.

Ahmed Rashid, welcome back to FRESH AIR. I'm so interested in hearing what you have to say. Now, you've been following Pakistani intelligence for years, and you know, a lot of people are saying - a lot of people are setting it up like this: Bin Laden's compound was 35 miles away from the capital city and right near Pakistan's equivalent of West Point. So either Pakistani intelligence didn't know bin Laden was in that compound in Abbottabad, which would make them kind of incompetent, or they did know, and they've been deceptive to the U.S.

Another option I've heard is that Pakistan secretly turned in bin Laden to the U.S. but doesn't want to say anything publicly about that.

I don't know if you agree with any of those points of view. I'm wondering what your point of view is.

Mr. AHMED RASHID (Financial Times): Well, categorically, I have no idea what the truth is. But, I mean, the facts are that, you know, I mean, Pakistan has gone after al-Qaeda, both during the Bush era, right after 9/11; al-Qaeda threatened to kill President Musharraf, and in 2003 there were two attempts against his life, and after that the army, the intelligence, went after al-Qaeda in a very big way.

So that's one side of the picture, where even though the Pakistani intelligence and military have not gone after some of the Afghan Taliban groups and other groups which the Americans would like to see them go after, they have gone after al-Qaeda.

On the other side of the picture is the picture that we had over the last 48 hours, the fact that bin Laden was living in this house for five or six years and, you know, somebody must have known about it.

And now, who exactly knew about it? You know, are we implicating here the whole state structure of Pakistan and the whole army, intelligence, government, et cetera? Or are we talking about a few people or retired intelligence people?

You know, it's not a clear black and white sort of picture. But, you know, I would suspect that certainly he had - bin Laden had protection from somewhere and from some people in some kind of authority.

Now, that does not mean that he had protection from the ISI or from the army or from the government. It could be a group within them. It could be a group of retired officers who have a lot of clout in Pakistan. Or it could be militant groups.

GROSS: Do you know the neighborhood that he was hiding in?

Mr. RASHID: No, I know Abbottabad very well, but I don't exactly know the neighborhood that he was in.

GROSS: Is it likely a compound like the one that he was in would be suspicious and stand out, or would something like that blend in?

Mr. RASHID: This is an area of the, you know, the former Northwest Frontier Province where, you know, a lot of people do live in fortress-type houses. This is a very traditional way of looking at things.

A lot of houses in cities in this area are also, you know, looking like fortresses - very, very high walls and barbed wire and all the rest of it.

I mean, what I think would stand out is that this was a huge compound. You know, for the neighbors it obviously belonged to somebody very rich and wealthy. So it was not so much the walls and the height and the - it was more, I think, the size and the fact that probably the people in this compound kept very much to themselves.

GROSS: So with bin Laden dead, you say that, you know, he was an inspirational figure even though he wasn't really a leader anymore. So if you take away the inspirational part of bin Laden because he's dead, is he still inspirational because a lot of people would now see him as a martyr, or is he kind of, you know, more invisible now because he's dead, less inspirational because he's - like, what kind of inspirational power do you think he'll have in the near future?

Mr. RASHID: Well, you know, it's probably too early to speculate on that. But I think a lot depends on what happens to al-Qaeda now. You know, are the Americans going to be able to wrap up most of the leading elements of al-Qaeda, given that they captured a whole heap of information in this house with computer files and all the rest of it?

Or you know, is there going to be a very vicious, nasty power struggle here for the leadership of al-Qaeda between various elements, various factions? I think that is very possible, in which case al-Qaeda will obviously then be very diminished as an inspiration to a younger generation of extremists.

GROSS: So bin Laden's death is simultaneous with the Arab pro-democracy uprisings. So does his elimination from the scene open up possibilities for peace or for democracy in places where there has been neither?

Mr. RASHID: Well, you know, firstly, I think the Arab revolt has -really came as a surprise to al-Qaeda. And it's very clear that, you know, al-Qaeda had no angle to exploit. It was on the fringes.

It didn't know how to react to it. There was no element, or at least not visibly, there was no strong element of Islamic extremism in this revolt. It was not anti-American, anti-Western. In fact, a lot of this revolt has been, if you like, pro-Western rather than anti-Western.

And of course, you know, we've been watching very closely as to what al-Qaeda can do or will do in order to get back into the game of winning hearts and minds in the Arab world.

Now, the first thing is that al-Qaeda has never tried to win the majority of the Arab people on its side. What it always wanted is a fringe group of supporters in every country. And it doesn't seem to even have that at the moment.

I don't think al-Qaeda will be able to get back into the game.

GROSS: Really? You don't think al-Qaeda is going to get back into the game?

Mr. RASHID: No, I mean, you know, I'm sure they can set off, you know, bombs, and there can be terrorist attacks against minorities like Christians or Jews or, you know, other - the Druze or other kinds of minorities.

But you know, I don't think that they have - you know, with bin Laden's death, they have they will not find it easy at all to get support from the bulk of the Arab population.

GROSS: In the short term, are you expecting retaliations, either in Pakistan or in the United States?

Mr. RASHID: I think there will be retaliation almost anywhere, anywhere al-Qaeda is. There will be people who will want to take revenge on the Americans, on his death, avenge his death, and martyr themselves in the same way that he was martyred.

Of course, there will be all sorts of myths that he fought back, and he was, you know, shot dead by the Americans and how he was martyred, and he fought like a lion, and all this kind of thing I'm sure will emerge on al-Qaeda websites in the next few days and weeks.

And likewise, there will be people who will be very moved and inspired by that and will want to copy him and copy his death and take as many, you know, infidels, as they believe them to be, with them in that death.

I fear that there will be a wave of terrorism, and clearly we are seeing already very severe security measures being taken by Western governments and Western embassies and travel and all the rest of it. And this is justified because I think there will be attacks.

GROSS: What impact do you think that the death of bin Laden might have on the war in Afghanistan?

Mr. RASHID: Well, I'm hoping that it'll have a very positive effect because, you know, the Afghan Taliban have been in talks with President Karzai of Kabul. They have expressed a desire to talk to the Americans, and they have now had several rounds of talks, very secret talks, but they have had several rounds of talks with the Americans.

And of course, one of the stumbling blocks has been their old friendship and linkages with al-Qaeda, and I think, you know, partly this is, of course, historical in the sense that, you know, the Taliban, being Pashtun tribesmen, they have given hospitality to al-Qaeda.

They can't suddenly now turn around, as the Americans want them to do, turn around and say: Well, you know, we're dumping you now, and you're no longer our friends, and in fact we'll come and hunt you down because this is what, you know, will make us friends with America.

I think now, with the death of bin Laden, they can really take - follow a new strand of thought in the sense that, you know, whatever debts that they owed bin Laden personally, and Mullah Omar owed - Mullah Omar, the leader of the Taliban, did owe him debts in the sense that bin Laden gave him money and bailed him out in the '90s and gave him fighters and all the rest of it - and that debt is now over.

I mean, the man is dead, and perhaps this would be a good moment for the Americans and for NATO and for President Karzai and the regional countries to really now push for negotiations with the Taliban, because I think the Taliban can now emerge from al-Qaeda's shadow.

GROSS: So you have been a guest on our show many times in the past 11 years, talking about jihadi groups, talking about the Taliban, al-Qaeda, jihadi groups in Central Asia. So how surprised were you at how U.S. operatives actually killed bin Laden and where he turned out to be?

You know, I was surprised. I was not surprised - you know, after 10 years of sort of looking for him, you get a bit - there have been so many false starts. And I was woken up at 4:00 in the morning by Al Jazeera, and Al Jazeera, I mean, they're a very good TV station, but they often get the story wrong.

And I thought: Well, this is probably another, you know, tip-off rather than anything serious. And then like 15 minutes later, the BBC and CNN phoned. And so then I got up, and I said: Well, this is obviously very serious. And so I was very surprised. I mean, after 10 years you tend to forget about, you know, whether bin Laden will be caught and killed or not.

I was not surprised as to where he was found. I've always maintained that he would be found in Pakistan. The question was where. You know, he would be found - and I knew for certain he was not in the mountains. He was not in some cave. He was not hiding low. He was in a city somewhere.

I certainly hadn't thought of Abbottabad, which is a very small, very sleepy, conservative, but a very beautiful small town, you know, just north of Islamabad in the hills.

And - but now one thinks about it, this is an ideal place. It is close to the mountains. It is, you know, it's a place, it's small enough for you to make a quick getaway.

I'm sure we will probably discover that there were probably other safe houses in Abbottabad or around there, where bin Laden could have escaped to if there was suddenly suspicion that people were coming up to the house. So yes, I mean, you know, I was surprised at the place.

GROSS: Ahmed Rashid, it's always a pleasure to talk with you. Thank you so much for your time.

Mr. RASHID: Thank you.

GROSS: *Ahmed Rashid*, recorded this morning from Madrid. He's a columnist for the Financial Times and author of the books "Taliban," "Jihad" and "Descent into Chaos." He lives in Lahore, Pakistan.

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