

A Breakthrough in the War on Terror? I'll Believe it When We See the Evidence

by Robert Fisk

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In the theatre of the absurd into which America's hunt for al-Qa'ida so often descends, the "arrest" – the quotation marks are all too necessary – of Khalid Sheikh Mohammed is nearer the Gilbert and Sullivan end of the repertory.

First, Mr Mohammed was arrested in a joint raid by the CIA and Pakistani agents near Islamabad and spirited out of the country to an "undisclosed location". "The man who masterminded the September 11 attacks" was how the US billed this latest "victory" in the "war against terror" (again, quotation marks are obligatory). Then the Pakistanis announced that he hadn't been taken out of Pakistan at all. Then a Pakistani police official expressed his ignorance of any such arrest.

And then, a Taliban "source" – this means the real Taliban but "source" is supposed to cover the fact that the old Afghan regime still exists – claimed that Mr Mohammed "is still with us and in our protection and we challenge the US to prove their claim". By this stage, it looked like a case of the "whoops" school of journalism; a good story that just might be untrue.

Not least because the last post known to be held by the former Kuwaiti with a Pakistani passport was media adviser to the marriage of Osama bin Laden's son in Kandahar in January of 2001. Then there was the slow revelation that the man whose supposed arrest was described by Ari Fleischer, the White House spokesman, as "a wonderful blow to inflict on al-Qa'ida" had been handed over to the Pakistani authorities (if indeed he had been handed over) by the ISI, the Pakistani Interservices Intelligence – for whom Mr Mohammed used to work.

Like the man accused of arranging the murder of the Wall Street Journal reporter Daniel Pearl, Mr Mohammed was an ISI asset; indeed, anyone who is "handed over" by the ISI these days is almost certainly a former (or present) employee of the Pakistani agency, whose control of Taliban operatives amazed even the Pakistani government during the years before 2001. Mr Pearl, it should be remembered, arranged his fatal assignation in Karachi on a mobile phone from an ISI office.

True, Mr Mohammed is the uncle of the 1993 World Trade Centre conspirator Ramzi Yousef and a brother of an al-Qa'ida operative. True, another brother was killed in a bomb explosion in Pakistan – he was allegedly making the bomb at the time. But claims that he was the 11 September "mastermind" – "It's hard to overstate how significant this is," the ever loquacious Mr Fleischer told the world yesterday – are still unprovable. Hitherto, the nearest to a "mastermind" anyone got was Mounir al-Motassadeq, who was jailed in Germany last month as an accessory to mass murder.

The deep waters were also muddied by the White House's claim that four men executed in an attack by a missile-firing pilotless drone aircraft in Yemen last year were "among al-Qa'ida's top 20 leaders". Whether they were numbers 2 to 5 or 17 to 20, no one at the Pentagon or White House could say. So how can we trust the authorities' word that Mr Mohammed is a "mastermind"?

Of course, it may all turn out to be true. We may be provided with the proof the Taliban demand. Or Mr Mohammed may be kept in Pakistani custody until another "mastermind" can be discovered. Or it may be that reports of the "arrest" of the likes of Mr Mohammed are very useful to General Pervez Musharraf, Pakistan's President, when he's just angered the Americans by criticising any US military attack on Iraq, or when Pakistan's new regional government in the North West Frontier province has just instituted Taliban-style laws in Peshawar.

All in all – as far as Mr Mohammed's arrest and deportation and then his non-deportation are concerned – when constabulary duty's to be done, a policeman's lot is not a happy one. Especially if he belongs to the ISI.

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