

Unanswered questions on US raid that killed bin Laden

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Some 24 hours have elapsed since the raid by US special forces and CIA operatives that killed Al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden in Pakistan, but many of the circumstances and details of the attack remain murky, particularly the role of Pakistani security forces, both in protecting bin Laden and in aiding the eventual attack.

The most striking contradiction between the official US propaganda about the “war on terror” and the reality demonstrated in the raid is the location of bin Laden’s hiding place. Far from being holed up in a cave, isolated from the world, the Al Qaeda leader was in a palatial compound in Abbottabad only half a mile from the Pakistan Military Academy, the equivalent of West Point, in a city which is home to many high-ranking retired military officers.

The disparity between the past claims of bin Laden’s location—made by US officials up to and including the president—and his actual residence was widely noted. *Time* magazine observed, “How bin Laden was able to reside in a posh compound for months, if not years, surrounded by former Pakistani military officers remains unknown.” Reuters news agency added, “The revelation bin Laden was living in style will hugely embarrass Pakistani officials, who will be under pressure to explain how he could have been right under their noses.”

Press accounts in the United States, based on descriptions supplied by the Pentagon, CIA and White House, depict a bin Laden fortress so obvious that it lacked only a neon sign on the roof advertising Al Qaeda. It had been built in 2005, apparently for the specific purpose of serving as a protected residence for the terrorist leader.

The house was huge—eight times the size of any of its neighbors, easily visible in satellite photographs—in a wealthy neighborhood not far from the center of the city. It was heavily secured, with walls as high as 18 feet in some places, topped with barbed wire, and a seven-foot high parapet around the top floor, suitable to concealing an unusually tall resident (Bin Laden reportedly stood nearly six foot five inches).

The house was valued at over \$1 million, but the two brothers who were listed as owners had “no explainable source of wealth,” and the structure had neither telephone nor Internet access, evidently for security reasons. The residents burned

their trash rather than leave it on the street for pickup.

While President Obama claimed in his Sunday night speech that US intelligence agencies only learned of the compound’s existence in August 2010, diplomatic cables obtained by the whistleblower web site WikiLeaks suggest that the US government learned of the Abbottabad site sometime in 2008, based on interrogations of an Al Qaeda leader, Abu al-Libi, detained at Guantaamo Bay.

WikiLeaks published a Twitter posting Monday giving some details of the cable, but a fuller release of material is expected. According to the posting, al-Libi had been chosen to be a special messenger for Al Qaeda in 2003 and was to be based in Abbottabad. He moved his family from Peshawar to Abbottabad in July 2003 to carry out this assignment.

Abbottabad has been variously described as a regional city and a distant suburb of Pakistan’s capital, Islamabad, a short helicopter ride away. It was certainly a focal point for the activity of Pakistan’s huge military apparatus, which has ruled the country for most of its 65-year history.

The city of 100,000 is strategically located, just inside the territory of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa state, where most of Pakistan’s Pashtun-speaking population live—ethnically related to the largest population group in Afghanistan—and only a few miles from the heavily militarized Pakistan-occupied portion of Kashmir.

A brigade of the Pakistani army’s Second Division makes its headquarters there, and so also have, in past years, Islamic fundamentalist guerrillas who sought to infiltrate the Indian-held portion of Kashmir and conduct terrorist attacks. One Pakistani-born columnist compared the city to Colorado Springs, Colorado, where the US Air Force Academy is located, featuring the same noxious combination of military brass and religious fundamentalists.

There are conflicting accounts of the role of the Pakistani security forces in the actual raid. Pakistani officials claimed Monday that their forces had actually assisted in the attack, but this was dismissed by Obama administration officials, who claimed that Islamabad was only told of the raid after bin Laden was dead.

According to the British *Guardian*, the four helicopters carrying the Navy SEALs lifted off from Ghazi airbase in

northwest Pakistan, where they would certainly have been observed flying east towards Abbottabad, not west towards the mountainous region on the Afghanistan border, the usual zone of operations for the US special forces. The helicopters flew straight into one of the main centers of the Pakistani military, in the middle of the night, supposedly without anyone noticing.

It seems clear that a critical issue in the timing of the raid was the complex and murky relationship between the US intelligence apparatus and its Pakistani counterpart. One important question involves the possible connection between the raid's planning and the activities of Raymond Davis, the American CIA agent arrested by Pakistani police in January after killing two men as they drove past his car in Lahore, the biggest city in Punjab province. The Davis affair touched off two months of increasing and public acrimony between the US and Pakistan.

After intense diplomatic pressure by the Obama administration, Davis was released from Pakistani custody on March 16 and quickly flown out of the country—two days after Obama convened the first of five meetings at the White House to plan the raid on Abbottabad.

Top US officials involved in the raid's planning and execution held meetings with their Pakistani colleagues in the weeks immediately preceding the attack, and after operational planning meetings had begun at the White House. CIA Director Leon Panetta, who was said to have been in overall charge of the operation, met with Ahmad Shuja Pasha, head of the Pakistani ISI, on April 11.

Two weeks later, General David Petraeus, the US commander in the Afpak theater, visited Pakistan and met with General Ashraf Kayani, the current military chief. Two days after that meeting, White House officials made it known that Panetta would replace Robert Gates as secretary of defense, while General Petraeus would succeed Panetta as CIA chief.

General Kayani was in Abbottabad only a week before bin Laden's capture, giving the commencement speech to a new graduating class at the Pakistan Military Academy. He told the graduates that his forces had "broken the back" of Islamic fundamentalist militants. "Let me assure you that we in Pakistan's army are fully aware of the internal and external threat to our country," Kayani said, speaking only a few hundred yards from the home of the Al Qaeda leader.

At least two other top Al Qaeda figures had been arrested previously in Abbottabad: Tahir Shehzad, an alleged Al Qaeda intermediary who had met with several French-born militants; and Umar Patek, the most recently arrested, in January 2011, a leader of the Indonesian Al Qaeda affiliate Jemaah Islamiya.

Another curious issue is the treatment of bin Laden's body. The claim that the US military disposed of the corpse at sea within 24 hours because of its deep respect for Muslim religious precepts doesn't pass the laugh test. It seems certain that the body was bin Laden's, since his supporters have confirmed the Al Qaeda leader's death in statements to the

press, but there is a smell of cover-up in the hurried dumping of the body, which more resembles the aftermath of a gangland hit.

Out of all this fragmentary information and loose ends, at least one conclusion seems evident: the least plausible story is the official one, promoted both by Washington and Islamabad for their separate reasons, that US intelligence only learned of the compound last August and only confirmed bin Laden's presence there in the last few months.

It is obvious that bin Laden was the guest, if not the prisoner, of the Pakistani security services. If the American media were really to probe the circumstances of bin Laden's life in Pakistan, instead of merely parroting the talking points of the Pentagon and CIA, it would have to raise the question of what US intelligence agencies, not just the Pakistanis, knew about bin Laden's whereabouts over the past nine years.

In perhaps the most remarkable passage in Obama's Sunday night speech, he recounted giving the order to incoming CIA Director Leon Panetta, in January 2009, to make finding and disposing of bin Laden the agency's number one priority. The obvious implication—almost ignored in the US media—is that under the Bush administration, targeting bin Laden was NOT a priority.

This only raises further questions about the longstanding connections between bin Laden and US intelligence agencies, since he got his early training in terrorist methods as a CIA contractor in the mujahideen war against the Soviet Army in Afghanistan in the 1980s. No serious analysis of the 9/11 attacks can avoid the conclusion that sections of the US intelligence apparatus protected the Al Qaeda operatives and looked the other way as the plot unfolded.



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