By Fred Burton

Since May 2, when U.S. special operations forces crossed the Afghan-Pakistani border and killed Osama bin Laden, international media have covered the raid from virtually every angle. The United States and Pakistan have also squared off over the U.S. violation of Pakistan's sovereign territory and Pakistan's possible complicity in hiding the al Qaeda leader. All this surface-level discussion, however, largely ignores almost 10 years of intelligence development in the hunt for bin Laden.

While the cross-border nighttime raid deep into Pakistan was a daring and daunting operation, the work to find the target — one person out of 180 million in a country full of insurgent groups and a population hostile to American activities on its soil — was a far greater challenge. For the other side, the challenge of hiding the world's most wanted man from the world's most funded intelligence apparatus created a clandestine shell game that probably involved current or former Pakistani intelligence officers as well as competing intelligence services. The details of this struggle will likely remain classified for decades.

Examining the hunt for bin Laden is also difficult,

mainly because of the sensitivity of the mission and the possibility that some of the public information now available could be disinformation intended to disguise intelligence sources and methods. Successful operations can often compromise human sources and new intelligence technologies that have taken years to develop. Because of this, it is not uncommon for intelligence services to try to create a wilderness of mirrors to protect sources and methods. But using open-source reporting and human intelligence from STRATFOR's own sources, we can assemble enough information to draw some conclusions about this complex intelligence effort and raise some key questions.

The Challenge

Following the 9/11 attacks, finding and killing bin Laden became the primary mission of the U.S. intelligence community, particularly the CIA. This mission was clearly laid out in a presidential "finding," or directive, signed on Sept. 17, 2001, by then-U.S. President George W. Bush. By 2005 it became clear to STRATFOR that bin Laden was deep inside Pakistan. Although the Pakistani government was ostensibly a U.S. ally, it was known that there were elements within it sympathetic to al Qaeda and bin Laden. In order to find bin Laden, U.S. intelligence would have to work with — and against — Pakistani intelligence services.

Finding bin Laden in a hostile intelligence environment while friends and sympathizers were protecting him represented a monumental intelligence challenge for the United States. With bin Laden and his confederates extremely conscious of U.S technical intelligence abilities, the search quickly became a human-intelligence challenge. While STRATFOR believes bin Laden had become tactically irrelevant since 9/11, he remained symbolically important and a focal point for the U.S. intelligence effort. And while it appears that the United States has improved its intelligence capabilities and passed an important test, much remains undone. Today, the public information surrounding the case illuminates the capabilities that will be used to find other high-value targets as the U.S. effort continues.

The official story on the intelligence that led to bin Laden's Abbottabad compound has been widely reported, leaked from current and former U.S. officials. It focuses on a man with the cover name Abu Ahmed al-Kuwaiti, a Pakistani Pashtun born in Kuwait who became bin Laden's most trusted courier. With fluency in Pashto and Arabic, according to media reports, al-Kuwaiti would be invaluable to al Qaeda, and in order to purchase bin Laden's property and run errands he would also need to be fluent in Urdu. His position as bin Laden's most trusted courier made him a key link in disrupting the organization. While this man supposedly led the United States to bin Laden, it took a decade of revamping U.S. intelligence capabilities and a great deal of hard work (and maybe even a lucky break) to actually find him.

The first step for U.S. intelligence services after Bush's directive was focusing their efforts on bin Laden and the al Qaeda leadership. Intelligence collection against al Qaeda was under way before 9/11, but after the attacks it became the No. 1 priority. Due to a lack of human intelligence in the region and allies for an invasion of Afghanistan, the CIA revived connections with anti-Taliban forces in Afghanistan and with Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) directorate in order to oust the Taliban government and accrue intelligence for use in disrupting al Qaeda. The connections were built in the 1980s as the CIA famously operated through the ISI to fund militant groups in Afghanistan fighting the Soviet military. Most of these links were lost when the Soviets withdrew from the Southwest Asian state and the CIA nominally declared victory. Pakistan, left with Afghanistan and these militant groups, developed a working relationship with the Taliban and others for its own interests. A coterie of ISI officers was embedded with different militant groups, and some of them became jihadist sympathizers.

U.S. intelligence budgets were severely cut in the 1990s in light of the "peace dividend" following the fall of the Soviet Union, as some U.S. leaders argued there was no one left to fight. Intelligence collection was a dirty, ambiguous and dangerous game that U.S. politicians were not prepared to stomach. John Deutch, the director of the CIA from 1995 to 1996, gutted the CIA's sources on what was known as the "Torricelli Principle" (named after then-Rep. Robert Torricelli), which called for the removal of any unsavory characters from the payroll. This meant losing sources in the exact kind of organizations U.S. intelligence would want to infiltrate, including militants in Southwest Asia.

The CIA began to revive its contacts in the region after the 1998 U.S. Embassy bombings in Nairobi, Kenya, and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. While the U.S. intelligence community was looking for bin Laden at this time, he was not a high priority, and U.S. human-intelligence capabilities in the region were limited. The United States has always had trouble with human

intelligence — having people sitting at computers is less of a security risk than having daring undercover operatives running around in the field — and by the end of the 1990s it was relying on technological platforms for intelligence more than ever.

The United States was in this state on Sept. 12, 2001, when it began to ramp up its intelligence operations, and al Qaeda was aware of this. Bin Laden knew that if he could stay away from electronic communications, and generally out of sight, he would be much harder to track. After invading Afghanistan and working with the ISI in Pakistan, the United States had a large number of detainees who it hoped would have information to breach bin Laden's operational security. From some mix of detainees caught in operations in Afghanistan and Pakistan (particularly with the help of the ISI), including Khalid Sheikh Mohammed and Abu Farj al-Libi, came information leading to an important bin Laden courier known by various names, including Abu Ahmed al-Kuwaiti. (His actual identity is still unconfirmed, though his real name may be Sheikh Abu Ahmed.)

The efficacy of enhanced interrogation and torture techniques is constantly debated — they may have helped clarify or obfuscate the courier's identity (some reports say Mohammed tried to lead investigators away from him). What is clear is that U.S. intelligence lacked both a sophisticated and nuanced understanding of al Qaeda and, most important, human sources with access to that information. With the United States not knowing what al Qaeda was capable of, the fear of a follow-on attack to 9/11 loomed large.

Anonymous U.S. intelligence officials told Reuters the breakthrough came when a man named Hassan Ghul was captured in Iraq in 2004 by Kurdish forces and turned over to the United States. Little is known about Ghul's identity except that he is believed to have worked with Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and to have given interrogators information about a man named "al-Kuwaiti" who was a courier between al-Zarqawi and al Qaeda operational commanders in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Ghul was then given over to the Pakistani security services; he is believed to have been released in 2007 and to now be fighting somewhere in the region.

While U.S. intelligence services got confirmation of al-Kuwaiti's role from al-Libi, they could not find the courier. It is unknown if they gave any of this information to the Pakistanis or asked for their help. According to leaks from U.S. officials to AP, the Pakistanis provided the National Security Agency (NSA), the main U.S. communications interception agency, with information that allowed it to monitor a SIM card from a cellphone that had frequently called Saudi Arabia. In 2010, the NSA intercepted a call made by al-Kuwaiti and began tracking him in Pakistan. Another U.S. official told CNN that the operational security exercised by al-Kuwaiti and his brother made them difficult to trail, but "an elaborate surveillance effort" was organized to track them to the Abbottabad compound.

From then on, the NSA monitored all of the cellphones used by the couriers and their family members, though they were often turned off and had batteries removed when the phones' users went to the Abbottabad compound or to other important meetings. The compound was monitored by satellites and RQ-170 Sentinels, stealth versions of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), which were reportedly flown over the compound. According to The Wall Street Journal, the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency (NGA) even built a replica of the compound for CIA

Director Leon Panetta and other officials. The NGA is the premier U.S. satellite observation agency, which could have watched the goings-on at the compound and even spotted bin Laden, though it would have been difficult to confirm his identity.

Some of these leaks could be disingenuous in order to lead the public and adversary intelligence agencies away from highly classified sources and methods. But they do reflect long-believed assessments of the U.S. intelligence community regarding its advanced capability in technology-based intelligence gathering as well as the challenges it faces in human-intelligence collection.

The Utility of Liaison Relationships

Historically, U.S. intelligence officers have been white males, though the CIA has more recently begun hiring more minorities, including those from various ethnic and linguistic groups important to its mission (or at least those who can pass the polygraph and full-field background investigation, a substantial barrier). Even when intelligence officers look the part in the countries in which they operate and have a native understanding of the cultures and languages, they need sources within the organizations they are trying to penetrate. It is these sources, recruited by intelligence officers and without official or secret status, who are the "agents" providing the information needed back at headquarters. The less an intelligence officer appears like a local the more difficult it is to meet with and develop these agents, which has led the United States to frequently depend on liaison services — local intelligence entities — to collect information.

Many intelligence services around the world were established with American support or funding for just this purpose. The most dependent liaison services essentially function as sources, acquiring information at the local CIA station's request. They are often made up of long-serving officers in the local country's military, police or intelligence services, with a nuanced understanding of local issues and the ability to maintain a network of sources. With independent intelligence services, such as Israel's Mossad, there has been roughly an equal exchange of intelligence, where Israeli sources may recruit a human source valuable to the United States and the CIA may have satellite imagery or communications intercepts valuable to the Israelis.

Of course, this is not a simple game. It involves sophisticated players trying to collect intelligence while deceiving one another about their intentions and plans — and many times trying to muddy the water a little to hide the identity of their sources from the liaison service. Even the closest intelligence relationships, such as that between the CIA and the British Secret Intelligence Service, have been disrupted by moles like Kim Philby, a longtime Soviet plant who handled the liaison work between the two agencies.

Since most U.S. intelligence officers serve on rotations of only one to three years — out of concern they will "go native" or to allow them to return to the comfort of home — it becomes even more challenging to develop long-term human-intelligence sources. While intelligence officers will pass their sources off to their replacements, the liaison service becomes even more valuable in being able to sustain source relationships, which can take years to build. Liaison relationships, then, become a way to efficiently use and extend U.S. intelligence resources, which, unlike such services in most countries, have global requirements. The United States may

be the world's superpower, but it is impossible for it to maintain sources everywhere.

Liaison and Unilateral Operations in the Hunt for Bin Laden

In recent years, U.S. intelligence has worked with Pakistan's ISI most notably in raids throughout Pakistan against senior al Qaeda operatives like Abu Zubaydah, Ramzi bin al-Shibh, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed and Abu Farj al-Libi. We can also presume that much of the information used by the United States for UAV strikes comes through sources in Pakistani intelligence as well as those on the Afghan side of the border. Another example of such cooperation, also to find bin Laden, is the CIA's work with the Jordanian General Intelligence Department, an effort that went awry in the Khost suicide attack. Such is the risk with liaison relationships — to what extent can one intelligence officer trust another's sources and motives? Nevertheless, these liaison networks were the best the United States had available, and huge amounts of resources were put into developing intelligence through them in looking for major jihadists, including bin Laden.

The United States is particularly concerned about Pakistan's intelligence services and the possibility that some of their officers could be compromised by, or at least sympathetic to, jihadists. Given the relationships with jihadists maintained by former ISI officers such as Khalid Khawaja and Sultan Amir Tarar (known as Colonel Imam), who were both held hostage and killed by Pakistani militants, and most famously former ISI Director Hamid Gul, there is cause for concern. These three are the most famous former ISI officers with links to jihadists, but because they were (or are) long retired from the ISI and their notoriety makes them easy to track to jihadists, they have little influence on either group. But the reality is that there are current ISI and military officers sympathizing or working with important jihadist groups. Indeed, it was liaison work by the CIA and Saudi Arabia that helped develop strong connections with Arab and Afghan militants, some of whom would go on to become members of al Qaeda and the Taliban. The ISI was responsible for distributing U.S.- and Saudi-supplied weapons to various Afghan militant groups to fight the Russians in the 1980s, and it controlled contact with these groups. If some of those contacts remain, jihadists could be using members of the ISI rather than the other way around.

Due to concerns like these, according to official statements and leaked information, U.S. intelligence officers never told their Pakistani liaison counterparts about the forthcoming bin Laden raid. It appears the CIA developed a unilateral capability to operate within Pakistan, demonstrated by the Raymond Davis shooting in January as well as the bin Laden raid. Davis was a contractor providing security for U.S. intelligence officers in Pakistan when he killed two reportedly armed men in Lahore, and his case brought the CIA-ISI conflict out in the open. Requests by Pakistani officials to remove more than 300 similar individuals from the country show that there are a large number of U.S. intelligence operatives in Pakistan. Other aspects of this unilateral U.S. effort were the tracking of bin Laden, further confirmation of his identity and the safe house the CIA maintained in Abbottabad for months to monitor the compound.

The CIA and the ISI

Even with the liaison relationships in Pakistan, which involved meetings between the CIA station

chief in Islamabad and senior members of the ISI, the CIA ran unilateral operations on the ground. Liaison services cannot be used to recruit sources within the host government; this must be done unilaterally. This is where direct competition between intelligence services comes into play. In Pakistan, this competition may involve different organizations such as Pakistan's Intelligence Bureau or Federal Investigation Agency, both of which have counterintelligence functions, or separate departments within the ISI, where one department is assigned to liaison while others handle counterintelligence or work with militant groups. Counterintelligence officers may want to disrupt intelligence operations that involve collecting information on the host-country military, or they may simply want to monitor the foreign intelligence service's efforts to recruit jihadists. They can also feed disinformation to the operatives. This competition is known to all players and is not out of the ordinary.

But the U.S. intelligence community is wondering if this ordinary competition was taken to another level — if the ISI, or elements of it, were actually protecting bin Laden. The people helping bin Laden and other al Qaeda operatives and contacts in Abbottabad were the same people the CIA was competing against. Were they simply jihadists or a more resourceful and capable state intelligence agency? If the ISI as an institution knew about bin Laden's location, it would mean it outwitted the CIA for nearly a decade in hiding his whereabouts. It would also mean that no ISI officers who knew his location were turned by U.S. intelligence, that no communications were intercepted and that no leaks reached the media.

On the other hand, if someone within the ISI was protecting bin Laden and keeping it from the rest of the organization, it would mean the ISI was beaten internally and the CIA eventually caught up by developing its own sources and was able to find bin Laden on its own. As we point out above, the official story on the bin Laden intelligence effort may be disinformation to protect sources and methods. Still, this seems to be a more plausible scenario. American and Pakistani sources have told STRATFOR that there are likely jihadist sympathizers within the ISI who helped bin Laden or his supporters. Given that Pakistan is fighting its own war with al Qaeda-allied groups like Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan, the country's leadership in Islamabad has no interest in protecting them. Furthermore, finding an individual anywhere, especially in a foreign country with multiple insurgencies under way, is an extremely difficult intelligence challenge.

Assuming the official story is mostly true, the bin Laden raid demonstrates that U.S. intelligence has come full circle since the end of the Cold War. It was able to successfully collect and analyze intelligence of all types and develop and deploy on-the-ground capabilities it had been lacking to find an individual who was hiding and probably protected. It was able to quickly work with special operations forces under CIA command to carry out an elaborate operation to capture or kill him, a capability honed by the U.S. Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) in the development of its own capture-and-kill capabilities in Iraq and Afghanistan. The CIA is responsible for missions in Pakistan, where, like the JSOC, it has demonstrated an efficient and devastating capability to task UAV strikes and conduct cross-border raids. The bin Laden raid was the public proof of concept that the United States could collect intelligence and reach far into hostile territory to capture or kill its targets.

It is unclear exactly how the U.S. intelligence community has been able to develop these capabilities, beyond the huge post-9/11 influx of money and personnel (simply throwing

resources at a problem is never a complete solution). The United States faced Sept. 11, 2001, without strategic warning of the attacks inspired by bin Laden, and then it faced a tactical threat it was unprepared to fight. Whatever the new and improved human-intelligence capabilities may be, they are no doubt some function of the experience gained by operatives in a concerted, global campaign against jihadists. Human intelligence is probably still the biggest U.S. weakness, but given the evidence of unilateral operations in Pakistan, it is not the weakness it used to be.

The Intelligence Battle Between the U.S. and Pakistan

The competition and cooperation among various intelligence agencies did not end with the death of Osama bin Laden. Publicity surrounding the operation has led to calls in Pakistan to eject any and all American interests in the country. In the past few years, Pakistan has made it difficult for many Americans to get visas, especially those with official status that may be cover for intelligence operations. Raymond Davis was one of these people. Involved in protecting intelligence officers who were conducting human-intelligence missions, he would have been tasked not only with protecting them from physical threats from jihadists but also with helping ensure they were not under the surveillance of a hostile intelligence agency.

Pakistan has only ratcheted up these barriers since the bin Laden raid. The Interior Ministry announced May 19 that it would ban travel by foreign diplomats to cities other than those where they are stationed without permission from Pakistani authorities. The News, a Pakistani daily, reported May 20 that Interior Minister Rehman Malik chaired a meeting with provincial authorities on regulating travel by foreigners, approving their entry into the country and monitoring unregistered mobile phones. While some of these efforts are intended to deal with jihadists disguised within large groups of Afghan nationals, they also place barriers on foreign intelligence officers in the country. While non-official cover is becoming more common for CIA officers overseas, many are still traveling on various diplomatic documents and thus would require these approvals. The presence of intelligence officers on the ground for the bin Laden raid shows there are workarounds for such barriers that will be used when the mission is important enough. In fact, according to STRATFOR sources, the CIA has for years been operating in Pakistan under what are known as "Moscow rules" — the strictest tradecraft for operating behind enemy lines — with clandestine units developing human sources and searching for al Qaeda and other militant leaders.

And this dynamic will only continue. Pakistani Foreign Secretary Salman Bashir told The Wall Street Journal on May 6 that another operation like the bin Laden raid would have "terrible consequences," while U.S. President Barack Obama told BBC on May 22 that he would authorize similar strikes in the future if they were called for. Pakistan, as any sovereign country would, is trying to protect its territory, while the United States will continue to search for high-value targets who are hiding there. The bin Laden operation only brought this clandestine competition to the public eye.

Bin Laden is dead, but many other individuals on the U.S. high-value target list remain at large. With the bold execution and ultimate success of the Abbottabad raid now public, the overarching American operational concept for hunting high-value targets has been

demonstrated and the immense resources that were focused on bin Laden are now freed up. While the United States still faces intelligence challenges, those most wanted by the Americans can no longer take comfort in the fact that bin Laden is eluding his hunters or that the Americans are expending any more of their effort looking for him.

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