

HUFFPOST WORLD

[EXTRACT]

Why Did Bin Laden Hide In Plain Sight?

NEW YORK -- After living on the run in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, why did the world's most wanted terrorist decide to stay put for up to six years in a three-story hilltop compound just a thousand yards from Pakistan's most prestigious military academy?

The resort town of Abbottabad in northwest Pakistan, home to retired military officers, lies less than 40 miles from the capital of Islamabad. It was an unlikely setting for the targeted killing of Osama bin Laden. That incongruity has raised questions about whether Pakistani officials had knowledge of his presence and how American intelligence agencies were finally able to pinpoint his whereabouts after ten years of failing to find the 6'6" terrorist leader with a serious kidney problem.

The house bin Laden was found in had a reputation as a place to be avoided, according to interviews with local residents conducted by [USA Today](#) and [Time magazine](#): its threatening exterior boasted 14-foot-high walls topped with barbed wire that surrounded the complex. There was a 7-foot security wall on the second floor, as well as security gates and cameras. The compound was constructed in 2005 to house bin Laden, but it is not clear when he moved in, authorities told *The Wall Street Journal*. Senator Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.) said today that bin Laden had been living on the compound [for up to six years](#) and expressed concern that the Pakistani government may have known. And the sleepy town was starting to attract unwanted attention -- four months ago, Pakistani agents there arrested Indonesian al Qaeda member Umar Patek, who had a \$1 million bounty on his head as the mastermind of the 2002 suicide bombings that killed 202 at nightclubs in Bali.

bin Laden's presence in a town teeming with Pakistani military has reinforced for some the widespread suspicion that the country's intelligence agencies were fully aware of his movements. "It's very hard for me to understand how Pakistani [leaders], particularly the ISI, would not have known that something was going on in that compound," Feinstein said. "I've had a growing concern that the Pakistani government ... is really walking both sides of the street."

Despite numerous reports in recent years that bin Laden had fled Afghanistan for Pakistan -- a NATO official said last October that he was ["living comfortably"](#) in Pakistan -- the country's officials have consistently denied such reports. Yet bin Laden's ability to elude capture in Pakistan has helped fuel such suspicions. After crossing the Tora Bora mountains in December 2001 to Parachinar, Pakistan, where an army brigade was deployed to snag him, he slipped away and headed to the Army garrison town of [Kohat](#) before [vanishing into thin air](#), according to intelligence reports.

"Many Americans, convinced that Pakistan has done less than it might to confront radical militants and terrorists, see their worst suspicions confirmed by the fact that bin Laden lived in a large, well-protected compound right under the Pakistani military's nose," says Daniel Markey, a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations. "Either Pakistan's intelligence service is terribly incompetent, fatally compromised, or both, raising questions about its utility as a partner."

Even former Pakistani prime minister Pervez Musharraf was stunned to find out about bin Laden's hideout. "That really surprises me that it was next to the Pakistan Military Academy," he told [Bloomberg TV](#). "I used to run 9 miles en route, maybe passing by the house."

The dysfunctional nature of the relationship between the United States and Pakistan was evident in today's comments describing the operation. According to Pakistani officials, the operation was a joint U.S.-Pakistani operation, but U.S. officials insisted that only U.S. personnel were involved.

On the run since the 9/11 attacks, bin Laden has long been suspected of finding safe harbor in lawless parts of Pakistan, but he was known for never staying in one place too long. So the length of his time in the compound mystifies some former intelligence officials -- what brought him there, and why did he stay for so long?

Jack Cloonan, former FBI special agent with the bin Laden task force, suspects that there is more to the story than just the administration's claim that the CIA tracked bin Laden's couriers for several years. "What did it take to get him from wherever he was in August into this compound? And what made him go against his usual M.O. and stay at a single location for months upon months? There must have been some human intelligence," he said. "Maybe we had an inside source who helped keep him there."

Former CIA field officer Bob Baer also has his doubts about the official account of how bin Laden was tracked. "Intelligence agencies like the CIA and the US military will simply put out disinformation to protect the real sources, which could have been anything from intercepts to the Pakistani government itself," he [told the BBC](#).

An administration official declined to provide more details about the operation, explaining that some discretion is necessary to avoid tipping off al Qaeda members to methods used by U.S. intelligence agencies. A CIA spokesperson did not return an email requesting more details on the operation either. Efforts to develop double agents among al Qaeda and the Taliban have backfired at times -- last year, a Jordanian double agent blew up [seven CIA officers](#) in a suicide bombing at a CIA base in Afghanistan, the second-most deadly attack in CIA history.

Foreign policy experts were split on the impact of bin Laden's killing. The Council on Foreign Relations' Richard Haass, the former U.S. coordinator for policy toward the future of Afghanistan, emphasized that it is "not a transformational event," comparing al Qaeda to an out-of-control medical malady. "You might be successful at attacking this virus but you don't get rid of the disease. The scourge of terrorism remains."

He emphasized that al Qaeda's other prominent leaders, including bin Laden's number two Ayman al-Zawahiri and American-born Yemeni Anwar al-Awlaki, have been preparing for such a possibility for a long time. "Whether either of them comes to the fore, there remains a degree of decentralization within al Qaeda with so many franchises that operate independently of each other," Haass said. "I don't see this as altering what it might do."

Though the act of killing bin Laden is symbolically very important, Haass stressed that information that U.S. Special Forces obtain from the computer hard drives found in the compound may ultimately prove more valuable.

Michael O'Hanlon of the Brookings Institute pointed out that over the past ten years, bin Laden's role in al Qaeda had become less operational and more inspirational, as the group itself transformed from a centralized operation into more of a conglomerate. Therefore, his death won't have much of an impact on al Qaeda's ability to pull off future terror attacks. "But his legend may continue to inspire" members of the group, O'Hanlon said.

But former CIA analyst Marc Sageman predicts that bin Laden's death is further proof of al Qaeda's decline in influence, adding that its franchises in Yemen, Iraq and North Africa are not that effective. "I suspect the al Qaeda senior leadership will splinter," he said. "This will create a vacuum."

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