

DID UMAR PATEK LEAD THE US TO OSAMA BIN LADEN?

Yesterday, Al Jazeera published a leaked copy of the final report from the Abbottabad Commission appointed by Pakistan's government to investigate both how Osama bin Laden could have lived within Pakistan (on military land!) for so long and how the US was able to carry out its mission to kill him without Pakistan's military responding in any way.

The report is published as a pdf file of what is clearly a photocopy of the report. The English version has a few translation and/or transcription errors where a word here and there does not make sense. The copy is nearly complete, but Al Jazeera notes that every copy they saw was missing a page in which former ISI director Pasha described conversations Musharraf had with the US just after 9/11.

I'm about a third of the way through reading the report. So far, it has been organized as summaries of the testimony from individuals who had some sort of role at bin Laden's compound or a role in government or law enforcement that intersected with the event. Each summary of testimony is followed by a bit of reaction from the commission itself, and this reaction can be quite pithy at times. The commission found Shakeel Afridi's testimony completely unbelievable, as he claimed to have no knowledge at all that he was working with the CIA. The commission also, in response to the testimony of a lower level local police figure, ascribed the abdication of duty as due to "government implosion syndrome", adding that "This explains a lot without excusing it."

What stands out to me in the reading so far is the role that Umar Patek could have played in aiding the US to find bin Laden. Recall that so far, the party line from the US is that bin

Laden's compound was located in Abbottabad by tracing the two couriers who lived there. However, Indonesian bomber Umar Patek was arrested in Abbottabad in January of 2011, just a few months before the May raid by the US.

Here is a bit of the testimony from the Home Secretary of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province (so as not to add further transcription errors, I am relying on partial screen captures of the pdf document that is in a form not allowing text to be copied):

Home Secretary, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

178- The Home Secretary of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) government was asked by the Commission whether as a result of the arrest of the Bali Bomber, Umar Patek, in Hazara district in January 2011 he took any special measures to find out if other terrorists and wanted persons were residing in the area. The Home Secretary said he had issued specific instructions to the concerned authorities to conduct a survey of houses rented to outsiders who had come into the district and these instructions were also conveyed to all field functionaries. Periodic meetings were held by Commissioners to ensure the completion of the survey. (It was not clear what the nature and content of the survey were. Moreover, militants were not necessarily outsiders. Many were Pakistanis.)

179- According to him there was a general apprehension about the presence of HVTs in the area but no intelligence agency had reported anything to the Home Secretary about the presence of any specific person, or about the area being a safe haven for terrorists and militants. He believed the current system needed to be reviewed, especially the role of provincial authorities with regard to the apprehension of militants and terrorists needed to be properly defined.

So the arrest of Patek aroused at least some concern, but it was not followed up on. The testimony of the wife of one of the couriers, Maryam, got into a very interesting analysis of the Patek situation, though, with the commission offering some incisive deductions:

119- We know from Maryam, the wife of Ibrahim, that after the arrest of Khalid Shaikh Muhammad, OBL had decided not to meet Al-Qaeda personnel in person. It could be that Patek came to meet OBL but was unaware that OBL no longer met Al-Qaeda members for fear they were being tracked by intelligence agencies and could unwittingly compromise his own security. It seems the ISI never developed any real intelligence on what Umar Patek had come to Abbottabad for beyond the romantic story of going to Afghanistan to seek martyrdom. Moreover, Abbottabad does not lie on the usual routes to Afghanistan. Did the CIA have access to Patek during his detention in Pakistan? If not, they would certainly have had access to him in Indonesia and may have extracted far more information from him than the ISI was able to. It

And after a page break:

would seem very likely that Patek, despite his denial, had come to seek instructions or inspiration from OBL. If so, it shows that Patek knew where to look for him.

Almost nobody had paid any attention to Patek's arrest being so close in time and location to the bin Laden raid. Well, one foul-mouthed blogger did, a year ago this week:

But there's a question that has, AFAIK, never been answered. Patek was arrested in January 2011 in Abbottabad, Pakistan. There have always been suspicions that the arrest of Patek in the city Osama bin Laden was hidden out in (Patek reportedly planned to meet OBL) helped to solidify the case that he was in fact the "Pacer" in the compound. Did Patek help the US get OBL?

Both Marcy and the commission find the interrogation window for Patek to fit extremely well with the timing of the bin Laden raid. The commission also shows considerable insight in noting that despite the efforts by bin Laden to cut off all interaction with the outside world except for the use of his two couriers, at least one high level al Qaeda affiliate may well have known that bin Laden was in Abbottabad.

While the world focuses on the role of following bin Laden's couriers, it may well be that Patek

provided some of the most actionable
intelligence on bin Laden being in Abbottabad.