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Pakistani Intelligence and the CIA Mutual Distrust and Suspicion

By Scott Stewart
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On March 1, U.S. diplomatic sources reportedly told Dawn News that a proposed exchange with the Pakistani government of U.S. citizen Raymond Davis for Pakistani citizen Aafia Siddiqui was not going to happen. Davis is a contract security officer working for the CIA who was arrested by Pakistani police on Jan. 27 following an incident in which he shot two men who reportedly pointed a pistol at him in an apparent robbery attempt. Siddiqui was arrested by the Afghan National Police in Afghanistan in 2008 on suspicion of being linked to al Qaeda.

During Siddiqui's interrogation at a police station, she reportedly grabbed a weapon from one of her interrogators and opened fire on the American team sent to debrief her. Siddiqui was wounded in the exchange of fire and taken to Bagram air base for treatment. After her recovery, she was transported to the United States and charged in U.S. District Court in New York with armed assault and the attempted murder of U.S. government employees. Siddique was convicted in February 2010 and sentenced in September 2010 to 86 years in prison.

Given the differences in circumstances between these two cases, it is not difficult to see why the U.S. government would not agree to such an exchange. Siddique had been arrested by the local authorities and was being questioned, while Davis was accosted on the street by armed men and thought he was being robbed. His case has served to exacerbate a growing rift between the CIA and Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence directorate (ISI).

Pakistan has proved to be a very dangerous country for both ISI and CIA officers. Because of this environment, it is necessary for intelligence officers to have security — especially when they

are conducting meetings with terrorist sources — and for security officers to protect American officials. Due to the heavy security demands in high-threat countries like Pakistan, the U.S. government has been forced to rely on contract security officers like Davis. It is important to recognize, however, that the Davis case is not really the cause of the current tensions between the Americans and Pakistanis. There are far deeper issues causing the rift.

Operating in Pakistan

Pakistan has been a very dangerous place for American diplomats and intelligence officers for many years now. Since September 2001 there have been 13 attacks against U.S. diplomatic missions and motorcades as well as hotels and restaurants frequented by Americans who were in Pakistan on official business. Militants responsible for the attack on the Islamabad Marriott in September 2008 referred to the hotel as a “nest of spies.” At least 10 Americans in Pakistan on official business have been killed as a result of these attacks, and many more have been wounded.

Militants in Pakistan have also specifically targeted the CIA. This was clearly illustrated by a December 2009 attack against the CIA base in Khost, Afghanistan, in which the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), led by Hakeemullah Mehsud, used a Jordanian suicide operative to devastating effect. The CIA thought the operative had been turned and was working for Jordanian intelligence to collect intelligence on al Qaeda leaders hiding in Pakistan. The attack killed four CIA officers and three CIA security contractors. Additionally, in March 2008, four FBI special agents were injured in a bomb attack as they ate at an Italian restaurant in Islamabad.

Pakistani intelligence and security agencies have been targeted with far more vigor than the Americans. This is due not only to the fact that they are seen as cooperating with the United States but also because there are more of them and their facilities are relatively soft targets compared to U.S. diplomatic facilities in Pakistan. Militants have conducted dozens of major attacks directed against Pakistani security and intelligence targets such as the headquarters of the Pakistani army in Rawalpindi, the ISI provincial headquarters in Lahore and the Federal Investigative Agency (FIA) and police academies in Lahore.

In addition to these high-profile attacks against facilities, scores of military officers, frontier corps officers, ISI officers, senior policemen and FIA agents have been assassinated. Other government figures have also been targeted for assassination. As this analysis was being written, the Pakistani minorities minister was assassinated near his Islamabad home.

Because of this dangerous security environment, it is not at all surprising that American government officials living and working in Pakistan are provided with enhanced security to keep them safe. And enhanced security measures require a lot of security officers, especially when you have a large number of American officials traveling away from secure facilities to attend meetings and other functions. This demand for security officers is even greater when enhanced security is required in several countries at the same time and for a prolonged period of time.

This is what is happening today in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan. The demand for protective officers has far surpassed the personnel available to the organizations that provide security for

American officials such as the State Department's Diplomatic Security Service and the CIA's Office of Security. In order to provide adequate security for American officials in high-threat posts, these agencies have had to rely on contractors provided by large companies like Blackwater/Xe, DynCorp and Triple Canopy and on individual contract security officers hired on personal-services contracts. This reliance on security contractors has been building over the past several years and is now a fact of life at many U.S. embassies.

Using contract security officers allows these agencies not only to quickly ramp up their capabilities without actually increasing their authorized headcount but also to quickly cut personnel when they hit the next lull in the security-funding cycle. It is far easier to terminate contractors than it is to fire full-time government employees.

CIA Operations in Pakistan

There is another factor at play: demographics. Most CIA case officers (like most foreign-service officers) are Caucasian products of very good universities. They tend to look like Bob Baer and Valerie Plame. They stick out when they walk down the street in places like Peshawar or Lahore. They do not blend into the crowd, are easily identified by hostile surveillance and are therefore vulnerable to attack. Because of this, they need trained professional security officers to watch out for them and keep them safe.

This is doubly true if the case officer is meeting with a source who has terrorist connections. As seen in the Khost attack discussed above, and reinforced by scores of incidents over the years, such sources can be treacherous and meeting such people can be highly dangerous. As a result, it is pretty much standard procedure for any intelligence officer meeting a terrorism source to have heavy security for the meeting. Even FBI and British MI5 officers meeting terrorism sources domestically employ heavy security for such meetings because of the potential danger to the agents.

Since the 9/11 attacks, the primary intelligence collection requirement for every CIA station and base in the world has been to hunt down Osama bin Laden and the al Qaeda leadership. This requirement has been emphasized even more for the CIA officers stationed in Pakistan, the country where bin Laden and company are believed to be hiding. This emphasis was redoubled with the change of U.S. administrations and President Barack Obama's renewed focus on Pakistan and eliminating the al Qaeda leadership. The Obama administration's approach of dramatically increasing strikes with unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) required an increase in targeting intelligence, which comes mostly from human sources and not signals intelligence or imagery. Identifying and tracking an al Qaeda suspect amid the hostile population and unforgiving terrain of the Pakistani badlands also requires human sources to direct intelligence assets toward a target.

This increased human intelligence-gathering effort inside Pakistan has created friction between the CIA and the ISI. First, it is highly likely that much of the intelligence used to target militants with UAV strikes in the badlands comes from the ISI — especially intelligence pertaining to militant groups like the TTP that have attacked the ISI and the Pakistani government itself (though, as would be expected, the CIA is doing its best to develop independent sources as well).

The ISI has a great deal to gain by strikes against groups it sees as posing a threat to Pakistan, and the fact that the U.S. government is conducting such strikes provides the ISI a degree of plausible deniability and political cover.

However, it is well known that the ISI has long had ties to militant groups. The ISI's fostering of surrogate militants to serve its strategic interests in Kashmir and Afghanistan played a critical role in the rise of transnational jihadism (and this was even aided with U.S. funding in some cases). Indeed, as we've previously discussed, the ISI would like to retain control of its militant proxies in Afghanistan to ensure that Pakistan does not end up with a hostile regime in Afghanistan following the U.S. withdrawal from the country. This is quite a rational desire when one considers Pakistan's geopolitical situation.

Because of this, the ISI has been playing a kind of a double game with the CIA. It has been forthcoming with intelligence pertaining to militants it views as threats to the Pakistani regime while refusing to share information pertaining to groups it hopes to use as levers in Afghanistan (or against India). Of course, the ability of the ISI to control these groups and not get burned by them again is very much a subject of debate, but at least some ISI leaders appear to believe they can keep at least some of their surrogate militants under control.

There are many in Washington who believe the ISI knows the location of high-value al Qaeda targets and senior members of organizations like the Afghan Taliban and the Haqqani network, which are responsible for many of the attacks against U.S. troops in Afghanistan. This belief that the ISI is holding back intelligence compels the CIA to run unilateral intelligence operations (meaning operations it does not tell the ISI about). Many of these unilateral operations likely involve the recruitment of Pakistani government officials, including members of the ISI. Naturally, the ISI is not happy with these intelligence operations, and the result is the mistrust and tension we see between the ISI and the CIA.

It is important to remember that in the intelligence world there is no such thing as a friendly intelligence service. While services will cooperate on issues of mutual interest, they will always serve their own national interests first, even when that places them at odds with an intelligence service they are coordinating with.

Such competing national interests are at the heart of the current tension between the CIA and the ISI. At present, the CIA is fixated on finding and destroying the last vestiges of al Qaeda and crippling militant groups in Pakistan that are attacking U.S. forces in Afghanistan. The Americans can always leave Afghanistan; if anarchy and chaos take hold there, it is not likely to have a huge impact on the United States. However, the ISI knows that after the United States withdraws from Afghanistan it will be stuck with the problem of Afghanistan. It is on the ISI's doorstep, and it does not have the luxury of being able to withdraw from the region and the conflict. The ISI believes that it will be left to deal with the mess created by the United States. It is in Pakistan's national interest to try to control the shape of Afghanistan after the U.S. withdrawal, and that means using militant proxies like Pakistan did after the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989.

This struggle between the CIA and ISI is a conundrum rooted in the conflict between the vital interests of two nations and it will not be solved easily. While the struggle has been brought to the public's attention by the Davis case, this case is really just a minor symptom of a far deeper conflict.