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Subject: Seized Phone Offers Clues to Bin Laden's Pakistani Links (NYT)

By CARLOTTA GALL, PIR ZUBAIR SHAH and ERIC SCHMITT

ISLAMABAD (NYT) - The cellphone of Osama bin Laden's trusted courier, which was recovered in the raid that killed both men in Pakistan last month, contained contacts to a militant group that is a longtime asset of Pakistan's intelligence agency, senior American officials who have been briefed on the findings say.

The discovery indicates that Bin Laden used the group, Harakat-ul-Mujahedeen, as part of his support network inside the country, the officials and others said. But it also raised tantalizing questions about whether the group and others like it helped shelter and support Bin Laden on behalf of Pakistan's spy agency, given that it had mentored Harakat and allowed it to operate in Pakistan for at least 20 years, the officials and analysts said. In tracing the calls on the cellphone, American analysts have determined that Harakat commanders had called Pakistani intelligence officials, the senior American officials said. One said they had met. The officials added that the contacts were not necessarily about Bin Laden and his protection and that there was no "smoking gun" showing that Pakistan's spy agency had protected Bin Laden.

But the cellphone numbers provide one of the most intriguing leads yet in the hunt for the answer to an urgent and vexing question for Washington: How was it that Bin Laden was able to live comfortably for years in Abbottabad, a town dominated by the Pakistani military and only a three-hour drive from Islamabad, the capital?

"It's a serious lead," said one American official, who has been briefed in broad terms on the cellphone analysis. "It's an avenue we're investigating."

The revelation also provides a potentially critical piece of the puzzle about Bin Laden's secret odyssey after he slipped away from American forces in the Tora Bora region of Afghanistan nearly 10 years ago. It may help answer how and why Bin Laden or his protectors chose Abbottabad, where he was killed in a raid by a Navy Seals team on May 2.

Harakat has especially deep roots in the area around Abbottabad, and the network provided by the group would have enhanced Bin Laden's ability to live and function in Pakistan, analysts familiar with the group said. Its leaders have strong ties with both Al Qaeda and Pakistani intelligence, and they can roam widely because they are Pakistanis, something the foreigners who make up Al Qaeda's ranks cannot do.

Even today, the group's leader, Maulana Fazlur Rehman Khalil, long one of Bin Laden's closest Pakistani associates, lives unbothered by Pakistani authorities on the outskirts of Islamabad.

The senior American officials did not name the commanders whose numbers were in the courier's cellphone but said that the militants were in South Waziristan, where Al Qaeda and other groups had been based for years. Harakat's network would have allowed Bin Laden to pass on instructions to Qaeda members there and in other parts of Pakistan's tribal areas, to deliver messages and money or even to take care of personnel matters,

analysts and officials said.

Wielding a Militant Tool

Harakat is one of a host of militant groups set up in the 1980s and early '90s with the approval and assistance of Pakistan's premier spy agency, the Directorate for Inter-Services Intelligence, or ISI, to fight as proxies in Afghanistan, initially against the Soviets, or against India in the disputed territory of Kashmir. Like many groups, it has splintered and renamed itself over the years, and because of their overlapping nature, other groups could have been involved in supporting Bin Laden, too, officials and analysts said. But Harakat, they said, has been a favored tool of the ISI.

Harakat "is one of the oldest and closest allies of Al Qaeda, and they are very, very close to the ISI," said Bruce O. Riedel, a former Central Intelligence Agency officer and the author of "Deadly Embrace: Pakistan, America, and the Future of the Global Jihad."

"The question of ISI and Pakistani Army complicity in Bin Laden's hide-out now hangs like a dark cloud over the entire relationship" between Pakistan and the United States, Mr. Riedel added.

Indeed, suspicions abound that the ISI or parts of it sought to hide Bin Laden, perhaps to keep him as an eventual bargaining chip, or to ensure that billions of dollars in American military aid would flow to Pakistan as long as Bin Laden was alive.

Both the chairman of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, Representative Mike Rogers, Republican of Michigan, and the panel's ranking Democrat, Representative C. A. Dutch Ruppersberger of Maryland, said this month that they believed that some members of the ISI or the Pakistani Army, either retired or on active duty, were involved in harboring Bin Laden.

Bin Laden himself had a long history with the ISI, dating to the mujahedeen insurgency that the Americans and Pakistanis supported against the Soviets in Afghanistan in the 1980s.

Two former militant commanders and one senior fighter who have received support from the ISI for years said they were convinced that the ISI played a part in sheltering Bin Laden. Because of their covert existence, they spoke on the condition that their names not be used.

One of the commanders belonged to Harakat. The other said he had fought as a guerrilla and trained others for 15 years while on the payroll of the Pakistani military, until he quit a few years ago. He said that he had met Bin Laden twice.

Meetings in Tribal Areas

In the spring of 2003, Bin Laden, accompanied by a personal guard unit of Arab and Chechen fighters, arrived unexpectedly at a gathering of 80 to 90 militants at a village in the Shawal mountain range of North Waziristan, in Pakistan's tribal areas, the former commander said. He met Bin Laden briefly inside a house; he said he knew it was him because they had met before, in Afghanistan before the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

The encounter in North Waziristan occurred before the American campaign of drone aircraft strikes, which began in 2004, made it unsafe for militants to gather in the area in large numbers. For about three years before the American drone campaign, Bin Laden was moving from place to place in Pakistan's mountainous tribal areas, the commander said.

The United States had small Special Operations units and C.I.A. operatives working with Pakistani security forces to track Qaeda members at that time. At some point Bin Laden went deeper underground. That is when the commander speculated that the Qaeda leader was moved to a safe house in a city, though he did not say he knew that Bin Laden had gone to Abbottabad.

He and the other commander, who spent 10 years with Harakat, offered no proof of their belief that Bin Laden was under Pakistani military protection. But their views were informed by their years of work with the ISI and their knowledge of how the spy agency routinely handled militant leaders it considered assets — placing them under protective custody in cities, often close to military installations.

The treatment amounts to a kind of house arrest, to ensure both the security of the asset and his low profile to avoid embarrassment to his protectors.

Art Keller, a former C.I.A. officer who worked in Pakistan in 2006, said he had heard rumors after he left Pakistan in 2007 that Harakat was providing "background" assistance with logistics in moving and maintaining the Qaeda leader in Pakistan. That did not necessarily mean that members of the group were aware of the role they played or knew of Bin Laden's whereabouts, another American intelligence official said, speaking on the condition of anonymity because of the nature of his work.

It remains unclear how Bin Laden arrived in Abbottabad, where American officials say he and his family lived for five years, beginning in 2006. The city is home to one of the nation's top military academies, which sits less than a mile from the compound where Bin Laden was killed.

It is also a transit point for militants moving between Kashmir and the tribal areas. The region is the prime recruitment base of Harakat, whose training camps and other facilities still exist nearby in Mansehra.

Through the late 1990s, Harakat collaborated closely with the Taliban and Al Qaeda, sharing training camps and channeling foreign fighters to Qaeda camps in Afghanistan.

The group's leader, Mr. Khalil, was a co-signer of Bin Laden's 1998 edict ordering attacks against America. The group even organized press trips for journalists to see Bin Laden in Afghanistan before 9/11 and was used to pass messages to him, said Asad Munir, a retired brigadier and former intelligence official.

Such were the links between the groups that when the United States fired cruise missiles at Bin Laden's camps in Afghanistan, after the 1998 American Embassy bombings in Tanzania and Kenya, 11 Harakat fighters were killed. Some of the group's fighters were also killed in the bombings of one of Bin Laden's bases in Afghanistan at the start of the American invasion in October 2001.

Driven Underground

Under strong American pressure, Harakat and similar groups were officially banned and driven underground by the government of President Pervez Musharraf in 2002. Harakat just renamed itself and continued to run camps unencumbered by Pakistani authorities and to train militants, some of whom have been caught while fighting American and NATO forces in Afghanistan, the commanders said.

After 2007, many of its fighters left to join the Taliban, but its leadership and network have remained intact, if reduced, the commanders said. Indeed, Bin Laden's courier appears to have used a camp in Mansehra that belonged to a Harakat splinter group, Jaish-e-Muhammad, as a transit stop, said an American government official familiar with the analysis of the Bin Laden material.

The Pakistani Army continued its links with the Harakat leadership, in particular Mr. Khalil, Pakistani officials and analysts said. In 2007, Mr. Khalil was used by the Musharraf government as a member of a group of clerics who tried to negotiate an end to a siege by militants at the Red Mosque in Islamabad.

"They can find him when they want him," said Muhammad Amir Rana, the director of the Pak Institute of Peace Studies, who has written a book on militant groups.

What role if any Mr. Khalil may have played in helping Bin Laden in Abbottabad, or whether he even knew he was living there, is still not clear. It is also the case that hard-liners within the ranks of his organization may have become disillusioned with their ISI handlers over the years, broke from them and operated more independently. Another Pakistani militant leader closely connected to Bin Laden is Qari Saifullah Akhtar, the leader of Harakat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami. Mr. Akhtar stopped in South Waziristan on the way to Afghanistan just months ago, a militant interviewed by phone said.

The presence in Waziristan of Mr. Akhtar — who is wanted in connection with the attack that killed Benazir Bhutto, a former prime minister, in 2007 — demonstrated that he could still move freely without ISI interference.

A report by the Pakistani Interior Ministry said that Mr. Akhtar had visited Bin Laden in August 2009 near the border with Afghanistan to discuss jihadist operations against Pakistan, according to an account that was published in the Pakistani newspaper The Daily Times in 2010.

It is the only recorded episode showing that Bin Laden's presence inside Pakistan was known to Pakistani intelligence, until the American raid that killed him.

Carlotta Gall reported from Islamabad, and Eric Schmitt from Washington. Jane Perlez and Salman Masood contributed reporting from Islamabad, and Mark Mazzetti from Washington.

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