VACCINATION AND LEAK WARS

In spite of the fact that the Administration's cooperation with Hollywood on an Osama bin Laden flick is included among the leaks Republicans want investigated, there has been no discussion about how the CIA's use of a vaccination program as cover got reported in the press.

Now that a Pakistani Taliban leader, Hafiz Gul Bahadur, has frozen polio vaccinations for 161,000 children, maybe we ought to look more closely at that leak, which (along with the terrible judgment to use it as CIA cover in the first place) is officially putting thousands of children—and the effort to completely eradicate polio generally—at risk.

The Leak War

As I noted last year, the vaccination cover was not among the things Administration officials discussed for Eric Schmidle's propagandistic account of the OBL raid; for that, he relied—alone among all details on the raid—on the Guardian's report on the vaccination cover. And while the Guardian is generally credited with breaking the story—at least in the English and American press—the story appeared a month and a half after the doctor in question, Shakeel Afridi, was arrested three weeks after the raid. A version of the Guardian story, with additional reporting from Jonathan Landay, appeared the same day in McClatchy.

The ISI learned of Afridi's role in their own investigation of the OBL raid.

> Pakistani intelligence became aware of the doctor's activities during the investigation into the US raid in which Bin Laden was killed on the top floor of the Abbottabad house.

A source quoted by the Guardian—a Pakistani

official—described how irregular the doctor's actions were, which may have tipped them off.

> "The whole thing was totally irregular," said one Pakistani official. "Bilal Town is a well-to-do area. Why would you choose that place to give free vaccines? And what is the official surgeon of Khyber doing working in Abbottabad?"

Subsequent reports make it clear Afridi told his colleagues enough—that he had business in Abbottabad—that might have roused suspicion.

> His medical colleagues at Jamrud Hospital in Pakistan's northwestern Khyber tribal agency suspected he was having an extramarital affair. When they asked Dr. Shakeel Afridi, the hospital's chief surgeon, why he was absent so often last spring, he replied curtly that he had "business" to attend to in Abbottabad. The mystery only grew when one doctor accused Afridi of having taken a half-dozen World Health Organization cooler boxes without authorization. The containers are for keeping vaccines fresh during inoculation campaigns, and yet no immunization drives were underway in Abbottabad—or the Khyber agency either, for that matter.

In addition, the nurse who went into OBL's compound, Mukhtar Bibi, would have realized after the fact what she had been involved in—though she did not speak with the Guardian.

> A nurse known as Bakhto, whose full name is Mukhtar Bibi, managed to gain entry to the Bin Laden compound to administer the vaccines. According to several sources, the doctor, who waited outside, told her to take in a handbag that was fitted with an electronic device. It is not clear what the device was, or

> whether she left it behind. It is also not known whether the CIA managed to obtain any Bin Laden DNA, although one source suggested the operation did not succeed.
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> Mukhtar Bibi, who was unaware of the real purpose of the vaccination campaign, would not comment on the programme.

In other words, Afridi's colleagues and Abbottabad locals would have known enough to be suspicious, and the ISI presumably learned of these suspicions and arrested and interrogated the doctor (they learned the name of his CIA handler, for example).

The Guardian cites the following sources: Pakistani and US officials and residents of Abbottabad.

The US sources seem to have been trying to pressure the Pakistanis for investigating how CIA found OBL rather than how OBL managed to hide for so long.

> American officials are concerned that Pakistan is more focused on finding out how the CIA tracked down bin Laden than on determining how he managed to remain undetected for as long as five years in Abbottabad, a military garrison town where the nation's premier military academy is less than a mile from the bin Laden compound. So far, no one is known to have been arrested for helping to hide bin Laden.

None of that reveals who first went to the press with this story, though it seems like it arose in response to or conjunction with US efforts to put more pressure on Pakistan. Perhaps the US sources revealed that the Pakistanis still held one of the people who had helped find OBL, and the Pakistanis responded by revealing what he had been doing? Or perhaps the Pakistais

responded to US pressure by revealing what the doctor had been doing, and the US downplayed the efficacy of it, noting (for example) that they had not succeeded in obtaining OBL's DNA.

In any case, it seems it started with the Pakistani investigation, followed by US pressure, followed by this leak to the press in response to US pressure, followed by a response from the other side.

Vaccination Wars

Which brings us to the repercussions of the leak. Saturday's outright ban on polio vaccinations was not the first response to the news. Already, several humanitarian workers have been seized and tribal groups were already resisting vaccination programs.

> The revelations about Afridi have imperiled the work – and lives – of aid workers. InterAction, which represents nearly 200 U.S. NGOs, allegesthat the CIA's immunization project "compromises the perception of U.S. NGOs as independent actors," and "may also jeopardize the lives" of aid workers in Pakistan.
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> Tellingly, last summer, just weeks after the *Guardian*broke the story about Afridi's collusion with the CIA, Warren Weinstein, an American aid worker with J.E. Austin Associates, was abducted in Lahore. More recently, last April, the beheaded body of a British Red Cross doctor was found in Balochistan. Khalil Rasjed Dale had been kidnapped in January.
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> There are also alarming ramifications for Pakistan's devastating polio epidemic. That a doctor was secretly running a bogus vaccination campaign under CIA orders lends credibility to a suspicion that many Pakistanis hold, that inoculation efforts are Western conspiracies. Several months ago, a

> Peshawar-based Pakistani anti-polio worker reported that tribal peoples were resisting new vaccination campaigns because they feared another CIA plot.

What's interesting about Saturday's pronouncement, though, is how it demands a quid pro quo. Most outlets report that Bahadur has demanded the end to drone strikes, speaking explicitly in terms of how many more innocents die in drone strikes than die from polio.

> The threat came in a pamphlet distributed Saturday in markets in the troubled North Waziristan tribal region. "We don't want benefits from well-wishers who spend billions to save children from polio, which can affect one or two out of hundreds of thousands, while on the other hand the same well-wisher (America) with the help of its slave (Pakistan's government) kills hundreds of innocent tribesmen including old women and children by unleashing numerous drone attacks," it said.
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> The pamphlet also said spies could enter the region under the cover of vaccination teams to get information for the United States about "holy warriors." It said teams who disregarded his warning would be responsible for any consequences.

But Pakistan's Express Tribune says local tribes are also demanding electricity.

> Meanwhile, tribal elders in North Waziristan vowed to continue boycotting polio vaccination drives until the government electrifies the region.
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> The boycott was announced at a grand jirga of Asad Khel, Dhur Dhanee, Muskee and Dosalee tribes on Saturday.
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> The elders said they have been deprived

> of electricity for the past 30 years. They accused the local political administration of siphoning off Rs34million set aside for the provision of a new electricity line to the region.
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> “We have been without electricity for the last 30 years and the government is ignoring the problem. They have not bothered to look into the matter despite repeated requests and protests. We have no option but to boycott vaccination drives,” an elder of Dhur Dhanee tribe, Malik Mashal Khan, told *The Express Tribune*, “Our children die of scorching heat and mosquito bites, what difference does it make if they die of polio? We will continue our boycott until the government fulfills our demand,” Khan said. The political administration of North Waziristan told *The Express Tribune* that it could not take any action against the tribe until a new political agent was appointed.

So whereas Bahadur, who is aligned with Pakistan’s military, demands an end to the drone strikes, tribal leaders are also using this ban to call attention to the failure of basic governance.

Leaks, multinational cooperation, and the impossibility of secrecy

Now, let me be clear. The CIA, by choosing to use a vaccination program as cover, deserves ultimate blame for turning vaccinations into such an effective political football. Nothing excuses that poor judgment (and we’d be well-served having some leaks naming all the people who signed off on that decision).

Presumably, however, the CIA had no intent of revealing sources and methods, of ultimately having the former CIA Director confirm the source that ultimately confirmed the method on a primetime TV, when they chose to use those

methods. Afridi’s reported refusal of CIA offers of protection forced the issue, but ultimately the doctor’s inability to hide his actions and our own miscalculation of the Pakistani reaction to the OBL raid led to the leak. That may well be the same kind of miscalculation we made with StuxNet—a belief that we could really hide public actions and displaced trust in a nominal ally. Displaced trust in our nominal allies (on top of John Brennan’s sieve like mouth) may have also led to the UndieBomb 2.0 leak.

But this is the reality of counterterrorism. We have always relied on international cooperation to fight it. And while operational security would help things, ultimately there are some secrets you can’t keep.

Which brings us to the reason why the leak wars are misplaced. Had the CIA’s piss poor judgment in using a vaccination program for cover remained secret, it might not have been a problem. But ultimately, the problem is that poor judgment.