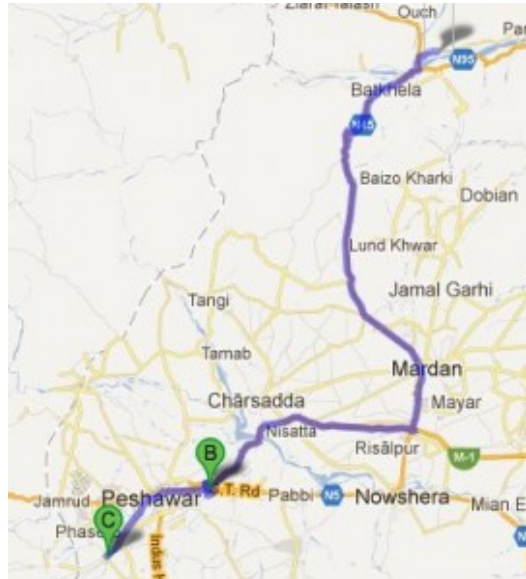


ARMED US DIPLOMATS DETAINED AT PESHAWAR TOLL BOOTH: WHAT WAS MISSION?



Google map showing Malakand University (missing "A" label at top right), Chamkani Police Station (B) and Bara (C). Driving time from Malakand University to Chamkani Police Station is given as about two and a half hours, while it is only a half hour to Bara from the police station.

The Raymond Davis incident in Lahore, Pakistan raised the issue of people moving within Pakistan under US diplomatic cover while heavily armed. Davis, who in fact worked for the CIA, had a number of weapons in his possession (see here for photos) when he was arrested for killing two men. A third man was killed by a consular vehicle rushing to the scene of the shooting. That issue arose again yesterday, when two vehicles transporting US "diplomats" were stopped at a toll plaza outside Peshawar and

multiple weapons were seized:

Four US diplomats and their three Pakistani employees were arrested and shifted to the nearby Chamkani police station.

An FIR was registered against the three Pakistanis under Section 13 of the Arms Ordinance, while the US diplomats were released after hours-long negotiations between SP Shafeeullah Khan and US Consul General in Peshawar Marie Richard.

The police intercepted two bullet-proof vehicles of the US consulate on the motorway in Peshawar and found four pistols, four SMG rifles and several ammunition magazines in their possession, Chamkani police station's SHO Haji Inayatullah told *The Express Tribune*.

/snip/

Inayatullah identified the four diplomats as Vincent Capodicci, Timothy Daniel, Leon Carter and Daryal Lee Groom. The arrested Pakistanis were security in-charge Manzoor and drivers Ihsan Khan and Asif Khan.

The Chamkani Police Station is on the eastern outskirts of Peshawar. It is very hard to understand the stated destination the diplomats had visited. From Dawn:

Police said the Americans were taken into custody along with their vehicles during examination on a Motorway checkpoint when they were on their way to Peshawar from Malakand University.

Malakand University is quite small and moderately isolated. It is hard to understand why diplomats would be visiting there. The "nearby" Chamkani Police Station where the

diplomats were taken from the toll plaza area is on the most direct route back into Peshawar from Malakand University, which is to the north and east.

Dawn and the Express Tribune differ on both the number of and names of the diplomats detained. The list of four names above is from the Express Tribune, while Dawn claims only two were detained, "Daniel and Levan". The "Levan" name does not appear in the Express Tribune list of names, which does include "Timothy Daniel". Taken together then, the two articles implicate anywhere between two and five Americans being in the vehicles.

If we assume that the University is just a cover location, then what was the real purpose of the trip? Two possibilities come to mind in light of recent events. The trial and imprisonment of Dr. Shakeel Afridi has upset many in the US, and so it is possible that this was indeed a diplomatic trip and that it was aimed at securing the release of Afridi. The problem with that explanation, though, is that Afridi's trial was carried out in Bara, which is on the western outskirts of Peshawar, rather than the eastern side where the diplomats were detained. Further, it appears that Afridi is now jailed in Peshawar's central jail, so it would not be necessary to leave Peshawar to visit with Afridi or his local jailers.

The second possibility for the diplomats' trip relates to today's news that yesterday's drone attack in North Waziristan may have taken out al Qaeda's number two in command. From AP's article on this development:

The State Department's Rewards for Justice program had set a \$1 million reward for information leading to al-Libi, who had filmed numerous propaganda videos urging attacks on U.S. targets after he escaped a prison at Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan in 2005.

The significance here is that this is described as a State Department program and the diplomats who were detained presumably work for the State Department. Of course, anyone traveling through Pakistan's tribal areas with a million dollars in cash would be well-advised to travel in "bullet-proof vehicles" and to be heavily armed. Arguments against this explanation are that at least on the official news front, it is not yet clear whether al-Libi was indeed killed and that North Waziristan is considerably to the west and south of Peshawar, instead of north and east where Malakand University is located.

At any rate, since shooting did not break out this time, we are likely not to hear more about this event and whether these were indeed State Department employees or CIA agents working to gather intelligence such as locations of high value targets for drone strikes.

As a final parting note, it seems worth pointing out that the AP article cited above trotted out Bruce Riedel to claim that the possibility of having killed al-Libi somehow justifies the entire drone program:

Al-Libi's death would be "another reason not to accept Pakistan's demand for an end to drone wars," added Brookings Institute's Bruce Riedel, a former CIA officer and adviser to the White House on Afghanistan and Pakistan policy.

That is quite a contrast with these words from Pakistan's Foreign Minister Hina Rabbani Khar in an interview with Foreign Policy:

In the wake of a *New York Times* article laying out how Obama personally guided the drone war on Pakistani soil, Khar criticized the use of drones as counterproductive. "If you are creating 10 more targets for every target you take, are you doing a service or a disservice to your eventual goal of winning the war?" she asked.

Update: From a comment by Marcia Anglerill: I am the Public Affairs Officer at US Consulate General in Peshawar and I can tell you exactly what the "mission" was. It was to organize an inauguration ceremony for an English language program at Malakand University. This program gives scholarships to economically underprivileged students to participate in a 2-year intensive after school program to improve their English skills, thereby giving them a better chance to pursue higher education and secure a better job in the future. The Americans who traveled to Malakand went there as part of a security advance, as is standard procedure. They had the proper documents and permission from the Pakistan Ministry of Affairs to travel there, despite what the local media is reporting and now blogs such as yours.