

Minutes and Hours: The Bin Ladin Operation

In the early morning hours of May 2, 2011-Pakistan time (afternoon of May 1-Eastern Daylight Time), a US military raid on an al-Qa`ida compound killed Usama Bin Ladin, America's most wanted terrorist. The mission's success was the culmination of many years of complex, thorough, and highly advanced intelligence operations and analyses led by the CIA with support from partners across the Intelligence Community (IC).

While Bin Ladin had been a key focus of the IC since the 1990s, shortly after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States, the CIA began collecting information on key individuals connected to or providing support to Bin Ladin. Reporting identified a key courier by his *kunya*, or operational pseudonym. It would be years later that the *kunya* was matched to a real name.

By late 2010, further intelligence linked the courier to a compound in Abbottabad, a town in Pakistan's Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa Province (formerly the Northwest Frontier Province), about 35 miles north of Islamabad. The compound and its main residence had extensive security features unusual for the area: high walls topped with barbed wire, double entry gates, opaque windows, no apparent internet or telephone connections, and all trash was burned rather than collected. Moreover, the two registered owners did not appear to work or have an income that would allow them to afford such a large residence. This, along with other intelligence, led the IC to assess that the compound was probably being used to hide Bin Ladin, as well as the courier.

Intense training for the raid began, including the building of an exact life-size replica of the compound with movable interior walls to prepare the assault teams for any internal layout they might encounter.

The operation on May 2nd-local time, authorized by the President on April 29th-DC time, was a surgical raid by a small team of special operations forces chosen to minimize collateral damage, to pose as little risk as possible to noncombatants on the compound or to Pakistani civilians in the neighborhood, and to increase the likelihood of confirming the death.

The helicopters arrived at the Abbottabad compound at 0030-Pakistan time on May 2; one crashed, but the assault continued without delay. Bin Ladin was found and killed within 9 minutes. In the aftermath, Bin Ladin was positively identified via several independent means.

Timeline of the Raid

May 1 - EDT

1:25 p.m. EDT —President Obama, DCIA Panetta, and JSOC commander Admiral McRaven approve execution of the operation.

1:51 p.m. EDT — Helicopters depart from Afghanistan.

3:30 p.m. EDT — Two helicopters descend on the compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan (north of Islamabad). One crashes, but the assault continues without delay or injury.

3:32 p.m. EDT — President Obama, in the Situation Room, receives up to the minute reports on the situation on the ground in Abbottabad.

3:39 p.m. EDT — Usama Bin Ladin is found on third floor and killed.

3:53 p.m. EDT — President Obama receives tentative confirmation of positive identification of Bin Ladin.

3:55 p.m. EDT — Bin Ladin's body is moved to the first floor and placed in a body bag.

3:39 p.m. – 4:10 p.m. EDT — Assault Team retrieves a large quantity of materials from the compound for intelligence analysis.

4:05 p.m. EDT — First helicopter leaves the area.

4:08 p.m. EDT — Assault Team destroys the crashed helicopter.

4:10 p.m. EDT — Backup helicopter picks up remaining team members and materials and leaves Abbottabad.

5:53 p.m. EDT — Helicopters return to Afghanistan where Admiral McRaven greets the team.

7:01 p.m. EDT — President Obama receives confirmations of high probability of positive identification of Bin Ladin.

11:35 p.m. EDT — President Obama speaks to the nation from the East Room.

May 2 - EDT

1:59 a.m. EDT — Bin Ladin's body is buried at sea from the deck of the aircraft carrier *USS Carl Vinson* in the north Arabian Sea.

Materials Recovered:

The large quantity of materials collected from the compound required time for a thorough review. The CIA led a multi-agency task force to prioritize, catalogue, and analyze them for intelligence about al-Qa`ida's affiliates, plans and intentions, and current threats. The collected materials indicated that Bin Ladin remained an active leader in al-Qa`ida, providing strategic, operational, and tactical instructions to the organization. Though separated from many al-Qa`ida members in remote areas of the region, he was far from a figurehead. Bin Ladin remained in charge while in hiding.

The Director of National Intelligence recently **posted on the DNI public website** the second tranche of released Usama Bin Ladin documents that were captured during the raid. From the documents, analysts learned that Bin Ladin had been planning to leave his Abbottabad abode.

On January 14, 2011—three and a half months before the raid that killed him—Bin Ladin wrote a formal letter to the two brothers—one of whom was the courier identified years before—who had been hiding him for eight years. Apparently, the pressures of hiding Bin Ladin and his family had led the brothers to use harsh words in open argument days before with the al-Qa`ida leader, who in his written response

expressed profound gratitude to the brothers, acknowledging the “heavy burden” of their “huge responsibility” for his safety.

In other letters to relatives and friends, Bin Ladin confirmed that the brothers sheltering him were “exhausted” from the effort. On February 2, 2011, Bin Ladin wrote to an al-Qa`ida confidante that the brothers had “for a long time demanded separation from us,” that Bin Ladin had agreed in writing that they would retire and hand over to others the duty of hiding him and his family, and that this would involve moving to another location. The target date for the move and changeover was September 2011.

Of course, Bin Ladin’s plans to move from the Abbottabad compound were not known to CIA when the IC and our military partners discovered his hiding place in August 2010; nor were President Obama, other top US policymakers, and the leaders of the IC aware of these plans as they studied the intelligence on the compound during the many months leading up to the raid. Had the decision to conduct the raid been delayed, this story might have had a very different ending.

The Death of Bin Ladin

The death of Usama Bin Ladin marked a significant victory in the US-led campaign to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al-Qa`ida. He was al-Qa`ida’s founder and only *amir*, or commander, in its history until his death. He was largely responsible for the organization’s mystique, its ability to raise money and attract new recruits, and its focus on the United States as a target for terrorist attacks.

The daring raid that ensured Bin Ladin would never kill again was a team effort, the product of increased integration within the IC and of close collaboration with our military partners. The CIA was at the center of it all, driving the collection of vital information, assessing each piece of data, and analyzing all sources to produce the compelling intelligence case that led US forces to Abbottabad.