



(U) The Only Game in Town (part 1)

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IA intern [REDACTED] describes her experience at the first SIGINT Fusion Cell in Islamabad, March-August 2004... (S//SI)

(S//SI) As I was sitting in the Heathrow terminal on an eight-hour layover, awaiting my flight to Islamabad, I thought about all the advice I had been given the week before my departure. Several experienced travelers had suggested I buy baggy clothes and a headscarf to cover myself, while others claimed that Islamabad was a fairly progressive city compared to the rest of Pakistan. I was anxious to find out for myself and excited about the opportunity to be part of the first NSA SIGINT Fusion Cell at Station* Islamabad. Over the next four and a half months, I would learn the importance of this team and why Station once described SIGINT as "the only game in town" during a critical time in the Pakistani Spring Offensive when there were no other intelligence sources available.


(S) Just a few weeks before, I had been making preparations to deploy to Baghdad as part of a [NIST team](#), which was a logical follow-on to the Iraq reporting I had been doing in the Counterterrorism (CT) Sunni Extremism Branch. When the NIST office asked if I would be interested in a brand-new position in Pakistan instead, I eagerly jumped at the chance to experience a country I had studied in graduate school, as well as spent a year targeting in the Pakistan Branch. I quickly went through the deployment processing checklist, put my belongings into storage, and boarded the plane less than three weeks later.

(U//FOUO) When I touched down in Pakistan, it was obvious that I would need to get accustomed to the constant stream of stares and curious looks I would receive, since women with blonde hair are a rarity. As I sat alone in the terminal waiting for my driver, with literally hundreds of Pakistanis in traditional dress watching me inquisitively, it truly hit me that I was embarking on one of the most exciting times in my personal and professional career. I was taken [REDACTED] where I would be living out of my two suitcases for the next four and a half months. I instantly thought of how different my living arrangements would have been in Baghdad, as I was now in a mini-bar stocked room and able to enjoy all the amenities that a Western hotel has to offer.



(U) A colorful jinga bus filled with passengers in Taxila.

(TS//SI) The Embassy compound itself is one of the largest in the world and sports a new gym, pool, restaurant/dub, track, and softball field. My desk would be in a very small room on the third floor, which could have as many as 10 people working shoulder-to-shoulder at any given time. Even though I had originally deployed

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as part of a NIST, it was quickly determined that interests would be best served if I worked in another capacity. I became the NSA CT representative to the Settled Areas Office (SAO) Liaison Branch, which focuses exclusively on non-tribal areas such as Islamabad, Karachi, Lahore, Peshawar, and Quetta. My role would be to provide NSA CT analytic support and keep SAO informed of any relevant NSA reporting or SIGINT leads. SAO, in conjunction with the Pakistani partner, has been responsible for over 600 arrests since September 11. I would be able to witness first-hand the arrest of several dozen terrorists during my tenure at Station.

(TS//SI) My typical workday began around 0830 when I started preparations for my daily SIGINT briefing to the Tribal Areas Office and also COS (Chief of Station) Islamabad, which involved prioritizing various SIGINT reporting, gists, or tips that we had received. Following the briefings, I dedicated the rest of the day to supporting the SAO targeters and acting as the middleman between Station and NSAW to facilitate a variety of issues. I coordinated with the appropriate offices at NSA to ensure that Station had the most up-to-date intelligence possible, as well as keep NSA apprised of activity in the field. In addition to the steady stream of support I received from HQs, I was able to utilize the various NSA databases and analytic tools to provide services ranging from a quick number look-up to comprehensive targeting packages.

(TS//SI) As mentioned above, SAO works closely with its liaison counterpart to track and arrest high-value targets throughout Pakistan, which means that Station must supply daily releasable tearlines with the relevant intelligence. I was able to author several of these tearlines, as well as coordinate approvals with the necessary offices at NSAW. There were several occasions when I was literally on the phone with NSOC while a SAO targeter waited in the doorway for approval to pass the time-sensitive message to liaison.

(TS//SI) Perhaps the best aspect about the position was that it afforded me the opportunity to witness the start of one of the most collaborative ventures NSA has undertaken. With the stand-up of the Fusion Cell, NSA became truly integrated with Station personnel for the first time and was able to contribute in ways that were once impossible. As the SAO representative, I was able to coordinate with NSAW, Bagram, GRSOC, and the Tribal Areas Office at Station to ensure that actionable SIGINT was in the operators' hands as close to real-time as possible.

(TS//SI) One success story was when a high-value target was captured due to timely intelligence and a good working relationship between NSA and CIA. Analysts at NSAW worked extra hours to ensure that Station had the latest DNI and telephony intelligence, which were often the first tippers or reporting that we received in the field. A combination of NSAW tippers, CIA cable traffic, and front-end analysis in the SAO all contributed to a successful capture operation.



*(S//SI) The original NSA SIGINT Fusion Cell at Station Islamabad.
The author is third from the right.*

*Notes:

(S) The term "Station" refers to a CIA operations center located

within a US Embassy abroad.

(U) Watch for the conclusion of this article, coming soon...

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