

Suspensions of Russian Bounties Were Bolstered by Data on Financial Transfers

Analysts have used other evidence to conclude that the transfers were most likely part of an effort to offer payments to Taliban-linked militants to kill American and coalition troops in Afghanistan.



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American officials intercepted electronic data showing large financial transfers from a bank account controlled by Russia's military intelligence agency to a Taliban-linked account, evidence that supported their conclusion that Russia covertly offered bounties for killing U.S. and coalition troops in Afghanistan, according to three officials familiar with the intelligence.

Though the United States has accused Russia of providing general support to the Taliban before, analysts concluded from other intelligence that the transfers were most likely part of a bounty program that detainees described during interrogations.

Investigators also identified by name numerous Afghans in a network linked to the suspected Russian operation, the officials said — including, two of them added, a man believed to have served as an intermediary for distributing some of the funds and who is now thought to be in Russia.

The intercepts bolstered the findings gleaned from the interrogations, helping reduce an earlier disagreement among intelligence analysts and agencies over the reliability of the detainees. The disclosures further undercut White House officials' claim that the intelligence was too uncertain to brief President Trump. In fact, the information was provided to him in his daily written brief in late February, two officials have said.

Afghan officials this week described a sequence of events that dovetailed with the account of the intelligence. They said that several businessmen who transfer money through the informal “hawala” system were arrested in Afghanistan over the past six months and were suspected of being part of a ring of middlemen who operated between the Russian intelligence agency, known as the G.R.U., and Taliban-linked militants. The businessmen were arrested in what the officials described as sweeping raids in the north of Afghanistan as well as in Kabul.

A half-million dollars was seized from the home of one of the men, added a provincial official. The New York Times had previously reported that the recovery of an unusually large amount of cash in a raid was an early piece in the puzzle that investigators put together.

The three American officials who described and confirmed details about the basis for the intelligence assessment spoke on the condition of anonymity amid swelling turmoil over the Trump administration’s failure to authorize any response to Russia’s suspected proxy targeting of American troops and playing down of the issue after it came to light four days ago.

White House and National Security Council officials declined to comment, as did the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, John Ratcliffe. They pointed to statements late Monday from Mr. Ratcliffe; the national security adviser, Robert C. O’Brien; and the Pentagon’s top spokesman, Jonathan Hoffman. All of them said that recent news reports about Afghanistan remained unsubstantiated.

The White House press secretary, Kayleigh McEnany, berated The Times on Tuesday after this article was published, saying that reports based on “selective leaking” disrupt intelligence gathering. She did not address or deny the facts about the intelligence assessment, saying she would not disclose classified information.

On Monday, the administration invited several House Republicans to the White House to discuss the intelligence. The briefing was mostly carried out by three Trump administration officials: Mr. Ratcliffe, Mr. O’Brien and Mark Meadows, the White House chief of staff. Until recently, both Mr. Meadows and Mr. Ratcliffe were Republican congressmen known for being outspoken supporters of Mr. Trump.

That briefing focused on intelligence information that supported the conclusion that Russia was running a covert bounty operation and other information that did not support it, according to two people familiar with the meeting. For example, the briefing

focused in part on the interrogated detainees' accounts and the earlier analysts' disagreement over it.

Both people said the intent of the briefing seemed to be to make the point that the intelligence on the suspected Russian bounty plot was not clear cut. For example, one of the people said, the White House also cited some interrogations by Afghan intelligence officials of other detainees, playing down their credibility by describing them as low-level.

The administration officials did not mention anything in the House Republican briefing about intercepted data tracking financial transfers, both of the people familiar with it said.

Democrats and Senate Republicans were also separately briefed at the White House on Tuesday morning. Democrats emerged saying that the issue was clearly not, as Mr. Trump has suggested, a "hoax." They demanded to hear directly from intelligence officials, rather than from Mr. Trump's political appointees, but conceded they had not secured a commitment for such a briefing.

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Based on the intelligence they saw, the lawmakers said they were deeply troubled by Mr. Trump's insistence he did not know about the plot and his subsequent obfuscation when it became public.

"I find it inexplicable in light of these very public allegations that the president hasn't come before the country and assured the American people that he will get to the bottom of whether Russia is putting bounties on American troops and that he will do everything in his power to make sure that we protect American troops," said Representative Adam B. Schiff, Democrat of California and the chairman of the House Intelligence Committee.

He added: "I do not understand for a moment why the president is not saying this to the American people right now and is relying on 'I don't know,' 'I haven't heard,' 'I haven't been briefed.' That is just not excusable."

Mr. Ratcliffe was scheduled to go to Capitol Hill on Wednesday to meet privately with members of the Senate Intelligence Committee, an official familiar with the planning said.

The Times reported last week that intelligence officials believed that a unit of the G.R.U. had offered and paid bounties for killing American troops and other coalition forces and that the White House had not authorized a response after the National Security Council convened an interagency meeting about the problem in late March.

Investigators are said to be focused on at least two deadly attacks on American soldiers in Afghanistan. One is an April 2019 bombing outside Bagram Air Base that killed three Marines: Staff Sgt. Christopher Slutman, 43, of Newark, Del.; Cpl. Robert A. Hendriks, 25, of Locust Valley, N.Y.; and Sgt. Benjamin S. Hines, 31, of York, Pa.

Understand the Taliban Takeover in Afghanistan

Who are the Taliban? The Taliban arose in 1994 amid the turmoil that came after the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1989. They used brutal public punishments, including floggings, amputations and mass executions, to enforce their rules. Here's more on their origin story and their record as rulers.

On Monday, Felicia Arculeo, the mother of Corporal Hendriks, told CNBC that she was upset to learn from news reports of the suspicions that her son's death arose from a Russian bounty operation. She said she wanted an investigation, adding that "the parties who are responsible should be held accountable, if that's even possible."

Officials did not say which other attack was under scrutiny.

In claiming that the information was not provided to him, Mr. Trump has also dismissed the intelligence assessment as "so-called" and claimed he was told that it was "not credible." The White House subsequently issued statements in the names of several subordinates denying that he had been briefed.

Ms. McEnany reiterated that claim on Monday and said that the information had not been elevated to Mr. Trump because there was a dissenting view about it within the intelligence community.

But she and other administration officials demurred when pressed to say whether their denials encompassed the president's daily written briefing, a compendium of the most significant intelligence and analysis that the intelligence community writes for presidents to read. Mr. Trump is known to often neglect reading his written briefings.

Intelligence about the suspected Russian plot was included in the President's Daily Brief in late February, according to two officials, contrasting Mr. Trump's claim on Sunday that he was never "briefed or told" about the matter.

The information was also considered solid enough to be distributed to the broader intelligence community in a May 4 article in the C.I.A.'s World Intelligence Review, commonly called The Wire, according to several officials.

A spokesman for the Taliban has denied that they accepted Russia-paid bounties to carry out attacks on Americans and other coalition soldiers, saying that the group needed no such encouragement for its operations. But one American official said the focus had been on criminals closely associated with the Taliban.

In a raid in Kunduz City in the north about six months ago, 13 people were arrested in a joint operation by American forces and the Afghan intelligence agency, the National Directorate of Security, according to Safiullah Amiry, the deputy provincial council chief there. Two of the main targets of the raid had already fled — one to Tajikistan and one to Russia, Mr. Amiry said — but it was in the Kabul home of one of them where security forces found a half-million dollars. He said the Afghan intelligence agency had told him the raids were related to Russian money being disbursed to militants.

Two former Afghan officials said Monday that members of local criminal networks had carried out attacks for the Taliban in the past — not because they shared the Taliban's ideology or goals, but in exchange for money.

In Parwan Province, where Bagram Air Base is, the Taliban are known to have hired local criminals as freelancers, said Gen. Zaman Mamoza, the former police chief of the province. He said the Taliban's commanders are based in two districts of the province, Seyagird and Shinwari, and that from there they coordinate a network that commissions criminals to carry out attacks.

And Haseeba Efat, a former member of Parwan's provincial council, also said the Taliban have hired freelancers in Bagram District — including, in one case, one of his own distant relatives.

“They agree with these criminals that they won't have monthly salary, but they will get paid for the work they do when the Taliban need them,” Mr. Efat said.

Twenty American service members were killed in combat-related operations in Afghanistan last year, the most since 2014.

Reporting was contributed by Fahim Abed, Najim Rahim, Helene Cooper and Nicholas Fandos.