

DID THE SAUDIS OR THE YEMENIS EXPOSE THE INVOLVEMENT OF A DOUBLE AGENT?

There's a remarkable moment in this CNN story reporting on the concern within the US that someone leaked the fact that a double agent was involved in foiling the UndieBomb plot. After quoting Peter King saying "a major investigation" would be launched to find the source, the CNN cites what must be a Saudi source confirming the double agent story.

The mole, who volunteered as a suicide bomber for the terrorist group, was actually working as an intelligence agent for Saudi Arabia, **a source in the region familiar with the operation** told CNN.

The man left Yemen, traveled through the United Arab Emirates and gave the bomb and information about al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula to the CIA, Saudi intelligence and other foreign intelligence agencies, the source said.

The agent works for Saudi intelligence, which has cooperated with the CIA for years, the source said.

"Indeed, we always were the ones managing him," the source told CNN. [my emphasis]

After all, a "source in the region familiar with the operation" who asserts "we always were the ones managing him" would seem to have to be Saudi, given that the Saudis were running him.

Now there seem to be two things going on. If I'm not mistaken, King was calling for an investigation into the source who leaked the

news of the foiled plot more generally. That's suspect because of who had that story first: the AP. In other words, Peter King, a good buddy of Ray Kelly and a big booster of the NYPD's efforts to profile Muslims wants to know who Adam Goldman and Matt Apuzzo's sources are.

Right.

Note, too, that whereas the AP reported that the Administration planned to announce the foiled plot,

The AP learned about the thwarted plot last week but agreed to White House and CIA requests not to publish it immediately because the sensitive intelligence operation was still under way. Once officials said those concerns were allayed, the AP decided to disclose the plot Monday despite requests from the Obama administration to wait for an official announcement Tuesday.

The LAT quotes US intelligence officials suggesting they weren't going to make it public.

U.S. intelligence officials had planned to keep the bomb sting secret, a senior official said, but the Associated Press learned of the operation last week. The AP delayed posting the story at the request of the Obama administration, but then broke the news Monday.

"When the AP got it and started talking about it, it caused all kinds of problems with the operation," said a U.S. official who would not be quoted by name discussing the classified operation. "The investigation never went to its full conclusion."

AP spokesman Paul Colford said the news agency held off publishing until U.S. officials told the AP that security concerns were allayed.

"We were told on Monday that the

operation was complete and that the White House was planning to announce it Tuesday," he said.

Which suggests that the focus on the source of the leak may have elicited a revisionist story from the Administration.

Now the focus has shifted to the source who exposed the role of the double agent—a potentially far bigger secret. A lot of people have treated the LAT as the first story for the double agent story. But that's not true—that article credits ABC with breaking the story.

The disclosure that a double agent had infiltrated an Al Qaeda bomb cell in Yemen, which was first reported by ABC News, could endanger future counter-terrorism operations, U.S. officials said.

While the ABC story cites US officials, among others, it also cites an "international intelligence official" as well as "officials" and "authorities" named generically (as well as John Brennan on the record, rather uncharacteristically trying to protect "the equities that are involved with it").

In a stunning intelligence coup, a dangerous al Qaeda bomb cell in Yemen was successfully infiltrated by an inside source who secretly worked for the CIA and several other intelligence agencies, **authorities** revealed to ABC News.

The inside source is now "safely out of Yemen," according to **one international intelligence official**, and was able to bring with him to Saudi Arabia the bomb al Qaeda thought was going to be detonated on a U.S.-bound aircraft.

[snip]

And what Brennan knows and did not say,

according to **officials**, is that several other elements of the plot were under investigation, including possible additional bombers and other kinds of bombs.

In other words, in spite of the fact that there appears to be a hunt for the **US** based sources that leaked this information, it is possible if not likely that ABC got it from foreign sources first, and only after that got US officials (which could include members of Congress and others outside of the Executive Branch) to comment. Note, however, that in the video above, Nic Robertson seems to suggest even the Saudi quoted in the CNN article didn't confirm the story for him until after ABC and others had already reported it.

That's relevant because of what happened with Jabir al-Fayfi, who tipped Saudis off to the toner cartridge plot in October 2010. The Saudis didn't hide Fayfi's return, sending a plane to pick him up in Sanaa, and then boasting that he had turned himself in.

Saudi Arabia's intelligence chief, Prince Muhammad bin Nayef, tipped off the US about the attempted attack. The Saudi newspaper al-Watan reported that Saudi security officials had given US investigators the tracking numbers of the packages.

Saudi Arabia announced earlier this month that al-Fayfi had turned himself in. He had previously been captured by US forces in Afghanistan following the 2001 invasion and held at Guantánamo Bay until early 2007, when he was released to Saudi Arabia.

There, he was put through the kingdom's rehabilitation program for militants. But soon after his release from the programme, he fled to Yemen and joined al-Qaida there, according to the Saudi

interior ministry.

In September, he contacted Saudi authorities saying he wanted to turn himself in. A private jet was sent to the Yemeni capital, San'aa, to retrieve him, Saudi security officials told the Saudi-owned daily al-Hayat at the time.

Then the Yemenis announced very publicly that Fayfi was the source of the information on the plot, concluding he was a double agent.

Yemen has revealed that a former Guantánamo Bay detainee who fled to the country from Saudi Arabia after his release by the US tipped off authorities about the plot to send bombs on cargo planes.

[snip]

The Yemeni security officials said they suspected the Saudis had planted al-Fayfi in al-Qaida in Yemen as a double agent.

In short, both the Yemenis and the Saudis seemed to want to get Fayfi's story out there, in part or in its entirety.

There are several reasons they might do this.

Whoever it was—thought particularly if it was a Yemeni source—leaking this might reflect a desire to protect AQAP. Note the LAT mentions Inspire's report that AQAP was able to upgrade its bomb lab thanks to supplies seized from military depots in the last year. As Jeremy Scahill reported earlier this year, AQAP managed to seize Zinjibar last May—along with a tanks, artillery, and ammunition—at a minimum through neglect, if not outright sabotage.

"Saleh himself actually handed over Zinjibar to these militants," asserts Abdul Ghani al Iryani, a well-connected political analyst. "He ordered his

police force to evacuate the city and turn it over to the militants because he wanted to send a signal to the world that, without me, Yemen will fall into the hands of the terrorists." That theory, while unproven, is not baseless. Since the mujahedeen war against the Soviets in Afghanistan in the 1980s and continuing after 9/11, Saleh has famously milked the threat of Al Qaeda and other militants to leverage counterterrorism funding and weapons from the United States and Saudi Arabia, to bolster his power within the country and to neutralize opponents.

A Yemeni government official, who asked to remain anonymous because he is not authorized to speak publicly about military issues, admitted that troops from the US-trained and -supported Republican Guard did not respond when the militants entered the town. Those forces are commanded by Saleh's son, Ahmed Ali. Neither did those forces loyal to one of the most powerful military figures in the country, Gen. Ali Mohsen, commander of the 1st Armored Division, move in. Two months before Zinjibar was seized, Mohsen had defected from the Saleh regime and was supporting his overthrow.

So the same people who let Zinjibar be taken (some of them are out of power) might want to make sure AQAP remains a threat that will force the US to spend money there.

Then there's the issue of Ibrahim al-Asiri. You have to ask how we had a double agent—probably at least the second one—receiving a bomb first or second hand from Asiri. And yet as far as we know he hasn't been killed in a drone strike. How is it that we didn't collect the intelligence to target Asiri as part of this operation?

It may be that whoever leaked all this wants to protect Asiri. But it may also be that the "officials" who told the ABC that "several other elements of the plot were under investigation," might have been leaking in response to the earlier leak to the AP (and to the Administration's plans to announce the foiled plot publicly). That is, if someone like the Saudis feel the CIA leaked the foiled plot story or the Administration planned to announce it to grab credit for themselves, they might in turn not only want to clarify that they were in charge of the op, but make it clear that all the publicity has ruined follow-on operations like killing Asiri.

It's all a big mess.

But it seems likely that this leak involved multiple sources, with multiple motives. And it seems at least possible that some of those leaking—our foreign "partners"—may not be motivated by protecting the US in the least.