

THE UNDIEBOMBER'S SIGNATURE TIMING

As I suggested yesterday, I think the the Administration's decision to use signature strikes in Yemen may be tied more closely to the double agent UndieBomb attack revealed in the last two days.

After all, the plot didn't just happen yesterday. As the NYT reports, the CIA has known about it for weeks.

The bombing plot was kept secret for weeks by the C.I.A. and other agencies because they feared retaliation against the agent and his family – not, as some commentators have suggested, because the Obama administration wanted to schedule an announcement of the foiled plot, American officials said.

If the CIA has known about the plot for two weeks, they would have learned about it on or before April 24. That just happens to be the day FBI Director Robert Mueller made an unannounced visit to Yemen. Reports of the meeting have him discussing things that wouldn't fall in FBI's mandate, even broadly defined. But the NYT description makes it sound like the double agent "handed over" the UndieBomb to the FBI directly.

He also handed over the bomb, designed by the group's top explosives expert to be undetectable at airport security checks, to the F.B.I., which is analyzing its properties at its laboratory at Quantico, Va.

And the AP—which first broke news of the plot—found out about it last week, though held the story to allow "sensitive intelligence operations"—presumably the killing of Fahd al-Quso on Sunday—to play out.

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.

So if the Saudis and CIA learned about the plot at least early enough to get Robert Mueller on a plane to act as a courier for the bomb (it's not clear that's what he was doing, of course), it might well coincide with the timing of the decision to use signature strikes.

Greg Miller first reported on the possibility on April 18. He stated that the idea had been presented to the National Security Council, but no decision had been reached. Though the White House and CIA were a bit more coy about matters.

U.S. officials said that the CIA proposal has been presented to the National Security Council and that no decision has been reached. Officials from the White House and the CIA declined to comment.

Also remember that Miller—as distinct from later reporting on the signature strikes—portrays the decision as being pushed by CIA alone, not CIA and JSOC.

Here's what Miller had to say about the kinds of intelligence that went into signature strikes in Pakistan.

The CIA began flying armed drones over Yemen last year after opening a secret base on the Arabian Peninsula. The agency also has worked with the Saudi and Yemeni intelligence services to build networks of informants — much the way it did in Pakistan before ramping up

drone strikes there.

[snip]

A former senior U.S. intelligence official said the CIA became so adept at this that it could tell what was happening inside an al-Qaeda compound – whether a leader was visiting or explosives were being assembled, for example – based on the location and number of security operatives surrounding the site.

When the WSJ announced that the Administration had decided to use signature strikes on April 25, it mentioned “several direct threats to the US”–though it also cited an April 22 strike that sounded like it could have been a signature strike (though when asked to comment on it, US sources said the target had been in their cross hairs).

U.S. counterterrorism officials said they are currently tracking several direct threats to the U.S. connected to AQAP. The officials wouldn’t provide further details because that information is classified.

“This was an interagency decision made based on deliberations about the growing threat from AQAP and concerns about the safe haven,” a senior Obama administration official said. The White House is “broadening the aperture” for CIA and JSOC strikes, the official added.

The frequency of U.S. strikes in Yemen is expected to increase with the changes. On Sunday, a CIA-piloted drone hit a vehicle believed to be carrying AQAP militants. Intelligence analysts are working to identify those killed.

And note most of the reporting on the signature

strikes talk about better intelligence we've developed, with frequent mention of informants.

Now, the chronology shows only estimated dates. But it sure seems possible that the "direct threats to the US" cited when justifying the signature strikes may well be the UndieBomb plot we're only now just learning about.

Update: This, from the LAT, appears to confirm Obama learned of the bomb before approving signature strikes.

U.S. officials said President Obama was informed of the bomb in early April and was assured that it did not pose a threat to the public.

18: Greg Miller reports on possible use of signature strikes in Yemen; the decision has been presented but the decision has not, apparently, been made

April 24: Robert Mueller makes an unannounced trip to Yemen

April 25: WSJ announces the Administration has decided to use "signature lite" strikes

Week of April 30: AP learns about the UndieBomber plot

May 6: Fahd al-Quso killed in drone strike assisted by intelligence from the Saudi double agent

May 7: AP reveals UndieBomb plot

May 8: Multiple sources reveal the UndieBomber was a double agent