

DID NSA AND JSOC TEAM UP TO GAME OBAMA AND MONACO ON YEMEN TERROR ALERT?

NBC published a fascinating article yesterday that provided new and interesting details on the events surrounding the escalation of drone strikes in Yemen that took place in response to the “intercepted conference call” that wasn’t a conference call. Matthew Cole, Richard Esposito and Jim Miklaszewski report on the personnel and policy changes that were taking place in the Obama administration as these events unfolded and how these changes had led to a decrease in drone strikes:

Obama announced that he had chosen Lisa Monaco to replace Brennan as his top counterterrorism official on January 25, and she officially assumed the role of Homeland Security Advisor on March 8. The U.S. launched four strikes on Yemen between January 19 and January 23, just before Obama’s announcement about Monaco, but didn’t launch another until April 17.

“With Brennan going over to CIA and Monaco replacing him, it took time,” said a senior counterterrorism official. “This was a while coming. JSOC (the Pentagon’s Joint Special Operations Command) was pushing for more strikes and more operations but the White House slowed everything down.”

Those three strikes in mid-April were followed by another lull in strikes until mid-May, when there were two strikes just before Obama’s drone policy speech:

In tandem with the drone speech, the President issued new internal guidance

to officials that tightened controls on what targets could be hit and who could make the decision to launch a drone.

What followed, sources said, was more frustration from Defense Department officials, and a third, seven-week-long interruption in drone strikes that led to a backlog of identified militant targets in Yemen.

But the “targeting” done by JSOC in Yemen isn’t of the same quality as the information prepared for targeting by the CIA for strikes in Pakistan, according to the NBC report:

In May, around the time of Obama’s speech, senior military officials prepared “targeting packages” for Monaco, with a roster of suspected militants in Yemen that they wanted to eliminate. The “targeting packages” contain background information on the identified targets. The CIA’s packages for Pakistan are often very detailed, while the Defense Department’s research on Yemeni targets was sometimes less detailed.

In fact, the JSOC apparently even admitted that some of these recent targeting packages pertained to lower level targets, but in an apparent use of pre-cogs, they claimed these were going to be important al Qaeda figures in the future and the administration had to deal with the question of “pain now, or pain later” in their recommendation to take out these lower level operatives.

Keep in mind that these meetings to discuss drone targets, also known as “Terror Tuesday” meetings, are populated by high level security personnel from many agencies. Both JSOC, as the target developer for drone strikes in Yemen, and NSA, as the purveyor of information gleaned from surveillance, would of course be present.

As @pmcall noted to me on Twitter, the “intercept” then magically appeared and opened the floodgates for strikes:

@JimWhiteGNV Let's see military frustrated no drone strikes approved & all of a sudden a magic message intercepted. Full speed ahead again
— pmcall (@pmcall) August 16, 2013

Here's how the NBC article described that:

The targets had already been identified, said senior defense department officials, but the strikes were caught in a national security bottleneck after a change in policy this spring “slowed everything down.” The bottleneck vanished and the strikes were suddenly carried out after the U.S. intercepted communications in late July in which two al Qaeda leaders said they wanted to do “something big.”

/snip/

A senior administration official denied that there had been any shift in policy. “This threat has changed the conditions on the ground,” said the official. “It’s not a change in guidance.”

Isn't that interesting and convenient? At the same time as NSA was under tremendous pressure over Edward Snowden's revelations, an “intercept” comes through that allows folks like Lindsey Graham and Saxby Chambliss to say the equivalent of “See, it works!” and also frees JSOC of those meddlesome barriers to strikes that Obama and Monaco had erected. Note also that it seems very likely that JSOC used the “evacuation” of the Yemen embassy to also bring in more troops and equipment.

But Graham and Chambliss weren't the only ones jumping on the propaganda wagon surrounding the accelerated Yemen strikes. Back on Tuesday, we

heard from Brian “Bentonite in the Anthrax” Ross on the wonderful success of one of these strikes:

An American drone strike has killed four suspected al Qaeda militants associated with the latest threat that prompted the closing of U.S. embassies across the Middle East and North Africa, according to a senior U.S. official.

“We got the operational guys we were after,” the official said, referring to the four men killed in Yemen.

As is almost always the case when Brian Ross breaks important news on ongoing matters of high significance in national security, he got it completely wrong again (while serving the interests of the most militant parts of the security apparatus). Going back to the NBC article:

The strikes, which began on July 27 and have so far killed three dozen suspected militants, are not retaliatory and so far have not eliminated the threat that led to the temporary closure of U.S. diplomatic posts across the Middle East, said officials.

Ross wants us to believe that we got the four operational guys behind the Yemen threat and yet we learn from NBC that the threat has in no way been neutralized.

When @pmcall tweeted to me about the power of the magic intercept to open the floodgate for the strikes, it reminded me of Jack Goldsmiths’ quote of David Addington regarding the FISA court. Just as JSOC was bothered by those pesky criteria set up by Obama and Monaco on Yemen drone strikes, Addington saw the NSA being pestered by the FISA court:

[Goldsmith] shared the White House’s concern that the Foreign Intelligence

Surveillance Act might prevent wiretaps on international calls involving terrorists. But Goldsmith deplored the way the White House tried to fix the problem, which was highly contemptuous of Congress and the courts. **"We're one bomb away from getting rid of that obnoxious [FISA] court,"** Goldsmith recalls Addington telling him in February 2004.

What a difference nine years make. Now those bombs that can remove obnoxious legal barriers need only to be threatened.