

PANETTA: KILL 20 LEADERS, END THE WAR ON TERROR

Leon Panetta kicks off his new job as Secretary of Defense with a trip to Afghanistan. On the plane over there this morning, he told reporters that we just need to kill 10 or 20 leaders of al Qaeda and we will “strategically defeat” al Qaeda. (h/t Spencer)

Defense Secretary Leon Panetta declared Saturday that the United States is “within reach” of “strategically defeating” Al Qaeda as a terrorist threat, but that doing so would require killing or capturing the group’s 10 to 20 remaining leaders.

Heading to Afghanistan for the first time since taking office earlier this month, Panetta said that intelligence uncovered in the raid that killed Osama bin Laden in May showed that 10 years of U.S. operations against Al Qaeda had left it with fewer than two dozen key operatives, most of whom are in Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, and North Africa.

“If we can be successful at going after them, I think we can really undermine their ability to do any kind of planning to be able to conduct any kinds of attack on this country,” Panetta told reporters on his way to Afghanistan aboard a U.S. Air Force jet. “That’s why I think” that defeat of Al Qaeda is “within reach,” he added.

To kill or capture those 20 leaders, mind you, we’ve got 100,000 troops in Afghanistan—where none of these key al Qaeda leaders are, according to Panetta—and will have 70,000 there after we withdraw the surge troops. So I’m

guessing Panetta isn't really promising we'll end the war; we'll just have tens of thousands of troops in harms way to do ... something.

Compare Panetta's characterization of what we're up against with Charlie Savage's description of the government's justification for capturing Ahmed Abdulkadir Warsame. As you read this, remember that Warsame was captured on April 19, over a week before the government killed Osama bin Laden and started analyzing the intelligence at OBL's compound. Though, according to ProPublica, we already knew that OBL nixed a suggestion to make Anwar al-Awlaki the head of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula.

Savage suggests that we nabbed Warsame on his way back to Somalia from a meeting with al-Awlaki.

Meanwhile, new details emerged about Mr. Warsame's detention on a Navy ship after his capture in April aboard a fishing skiff between Yemen and Somalia, and about internal administration deliberations on legal policy questions that could have implications for the evolving conflict against Al Qaeda and its affiliates.

A senior counterterrorism official said Wednesday that Mr. Warsame had recently met with Anwar al-Awlaki, the American-born radical cleric now hiding in Yemen.

The Administration justified capturing Warsame based on an argument not that we're at war against al-Shabaab as a group, but that a handful of al-Shabaab leaders adhere to al Qaeda's ideology and "could" conduct attacks outside of Somalia.

While Mr. Warsame is accused of being a member of the Shabab, which is focused on a parochial insurgency in Somalia, the administration decided he could be lawfully detained as a wartime prisoner under Congress's authorization to use

military force against the perpetrators of the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, according to several officials who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss security matters.

But the administration does not consider the United States to be at war with every member of the Shabab, officials said. Rather, the government decided that Mr. Warsame and a handful of other individual Shabab leaders could be made targets or detained because they were integrated with Al Qaeda or its Yemen branch and were said to be looking beyond the internal Somali conflict.

“Certain elements of Al Shabab, including its senior leaders, adhere to Al Qaeda’s ideology and could conduct attacks outside of Somalia in East Africa, as it did in Uganda in 2010, or even outside the region to further Al Qaeda’s agenda,” said a senior administration official. “For its leadership and those other Al Qaeda-aligned elements of Al Shabab, our approach is quite clear: They are not beyond the reach of our counterterrorism tools.”

Now, logic dictates that this handful of leaders of a group that did not exist on 9/11 (and therefore couldn’t logically be included in the authorization of force against those who planned the attack) includes the Somalian al-Shabaab leaders included in Panetta’s 10-20 targets.

That is, among the 20 or so people we need to kill or capture to declare victory and ~~go home~~ try to invent some justification to keep 70,000 troops in Afghanistan, are people who simply “could” attack outside of Somalia, but may not have yet. And of course the nexus here seems to focus on al-Awlaki, a guy the Administration has declared a state secret, yet still feels free to leak details with impunity.

Don't get me wrong, if Panetta is preparing to declare victory and come home, I'm all for it (if the Secretary of Defense actually brings these men and women home, which there's no plan to do yet).

But there's something fishy underlying even his claim we need to get these 10-20 leaders.