

WHAT WAS THE EVIDENCE SUPPORTING THE FIRST STRIKE ON ANWAR AL-AWLAKI?

According to the William Webster report, the FBI's understanding about Anwar al-Awlaki's operational role developed only after the UndieBomb attack.

As of January 7 and June 16, 2009, the FBI knew anwar al-Aulaqi was an anti-American, radical Islamic cleric and the subject of a Tier <redacted> FBI counterterrorism investigation. San Diego believed [<redacted> that Aulaqi was [developing ambitions beyond radicalization] <redacted>. WFO viewed him at that time as merely inspirational. The FBI's full understanding of Aulaqi's operational ambitions developed only after the attempted bombing of Northwest Airlines Flight 253 on Christmas Day 2009. [72; emphasis mine]

On December 24, 2009—the day before FBI began to understand Awlaki's operational ambitions—a JSOC strike in Yemen missed Anwar al-Awlaki.

Dana Priest's report revealing Awlaki was subsequently added to a JSOC kill list, published three days before Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab started cooperating again with the FBI, claims Awlaki was not the target of that December 24, 2009 strike.

As part of the operations, Obama approved a Dec. 24 strike against a compound where a U.S. citizen, Anwar al-Aulaqi, was thought to be meeting with other regional al-Qaeda leaders. Although he was not the focus of the strike and was not killed, he has since

been added to a shortlist of U.S. citizens specifically targeted for killing or capture by the JSOC, military officials said. The officials, like others interviewed for this article, spoke on the condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the operations. [my emphasis]

But Ali Abdullah Saleh, speaking with David Petraeus three weeks before Priest's report, sure seemed to treat Awlaki as one of two targets of the strike.

Saleh praised the December 17 and 24 strikes against AQAP but said that "mistakes were made" in the killing of civilians in Abyan. The General responded that the only civilians killed were the wife and two children of an AQAP operative at the site, prompting Saleh to plunge into a lengthy and confusing aside with Deputy Prime Minister Alimi and Minister of Defense Ali regarding the number of terrorists versus civilians killed in the strike. (Comment: Saleh's conversation on the civilian casualties suggests he has not been well briefed by his advisors on the strike in Abyan, a site that the ROYG has been unable to access to determine with any certainty the level of collateral damage. End Comment.) AQAP leader Nassr al-Wahishi and extremist cleric Anwar al-Awlaki may still be alive, Saleh said, but the December strikes had already caused al-Qaeda operatives to turn themselves in to authorities and residents in affected areas to deny refuge to al-Qaeda. [my emphasis]

Given that we blamed Saleh for the strike, you have to assume he knew who the targets were. And he seems to suggest that both Wuhayshi and Awlaki were the intended targets.

Which would suggest the US targeted Awlaki before the FBI, at least, believed him to be operational.

Now, perhaps Saleh was wrong and Priest's sources were right. Or perhaps JSOC had intelligence they didn't share with FBI. Perhaps one of our partners in the region—either Yemen or Saudi Arabia—shared evidence we used to target Awlaki (presumably that partner was the same one that led us to believe that just an AQAP operatives' wife and kids—and not an entire clan of Bedouins—had died in the al-Majala attack). Perhaps someone at NSA saw the electronic communication mentioning a Nigerian who might work with Awlaki to attack, and shared it with DOD but not FBI.

Or perhaps we didn't have any intelligence that Awlaki was operational when we first targeted him.

One more thought. If that's the case—if JSOC targeted Awlaki before they had intelligence he was operational—then it is not insignificant that David Petraeus, then the head of CentCom, now heads the CIA, which refuses to release any details about when it had information supporting Awlaki's killing (remember that JSOC responded to ACLU's FOIA by noting that everything they did would have been at the direction of CentCom). That is, if we did target Awlaki before we had evidence he was operational, then the guy at the heart of the Administration's stonewalling on drone killing was the guy in charge of that earlier attempting killing.

Update, August 17: The assessment of FBI (and the Intelligence Community more generally) learning that Awlaki was operational after the Abdulmutallab attack is repeated, in more clear terms, after 1:50 in the testimony of Mark Giuliano to the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Homeland Security on August 1.