

WOULD THE REAL ANSAR AL-SHARIA PLEASE STAND UP?

Back in September, when Republicans were hyperventilating over the former Gitmo detainee, Abu Sufyan bin Qumu, purportedly behind the Benghazi attack, Aaron Zelin patiently explained the difference between Ansar al-Sharia in Benghazi—which reportedly launched the attack—and Ansar al-Sharia in Derna—which Qumu leads.

Today, he walks CNN through the official Facebook postings of the latter group—showing that they immediately disclaimed credit for the attack—as a way of refuting the importance of emails (the Republicans’ latest topic of hyperventilation) describing Ansar al-Sharia Benghazi claiming credit.

The e-mail carried the subject line: “Update 2: Ansar al Sharia Claims Responsibility For Benghazi Attack.” The message said: “Embassy Tripoli reports the group has claimed responsibility on Facebook and Twitter and has called for an attack on Embassy Tripoli.”

[snip]

Sen. John McCain, R-Arizona, and two other Republicans in the Senate wrote Wednesday to Obama, saying: “These emails make clear that your Administration knew within two hours of the attack that it was a terrorist act and that Ansar al-Sharia, a Libyan militant group with links to Al-Qaeda, had claimed responsibility for it.”

However, an examination of the known Facebook and Twitter accounts of Ansar al-Sharia in Benghazi reveals no such claim of responsibility. Aaron Zelin, a research fellow at the Washington

Institute for Near East Policy, tracks dozens of jihadist websites and archives much of what they say. He told CNN he was unaware of any such claim having been posted on the official Facebook page or Twitter feed of Ansar al-Sharia in Benghazi.

Zelin, who said his RSS feed sends him any new statement from the group, provided CNN with a copy of that feed. It shows no Facebook update between September 8 and September 12, when a posting late that afternoon first referenced the attack. Zelin notes that the posting referred to a news conference the group had held earlier that day in Benghazi in which it denied any role in the assault on the consulate, while sympathizing with the attackers.

In a Tweet, Zelin explains that Ansar al-Sharia Derna—the one with ties to the Gitmo detainee—has no known online presence.

Given that so many people have apparently seen these emails, I'd be curious to learn a little more about who sent it. In any case, you can't expect people in Tripoli working on an evacuation and worrying about an attack on the Embassy itself, to offer the clearest analysis of the attack.

But that won't stop Republicans from treating it as such.