

WHY WOULD THE UNDIEBOMBER MAKE A MARTYRDOM VIDEO IN ARABIC?

In his drone letter to Congress 11 days ago, Eric Holder quoted a recording Anwar al-Awlaki made – it was prominently reported across the US media in March 2010, not long after he was added to the drone kill list – calling on Americans to take up jihad.

In this role, al-Aulaqi repeatedly made clear his intent to attack U.S. persons and his hope that these attacks would take American lives. For example, in a message to Muslims living in the United States, he noted that he had come “to the conclusion that jihad against America is binding upon myself just as it is binding upon every other able Muslim.” But it was not al-Aulaqi’s words that led the United States to act against him: they only served to demonstrate his intentions and state of mind, that he “pray[ed] that Allah [would] destro[y] America and all its allies.” Rather, it was al-Aulaqi’s actions – and, in particular, his direct personal involvement in the continued planning and execution of terrorist attacks against the U.S. homeland – that made him a lawful target and led the United States to take action.

Though Holder doesn’t quote these bits, the same recording mentions Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab several times, boasting about how such attacks proved the futility of American security systems.

9/11, the war in Afghanistan and Iraq,

and then operations, such as that of our brother Omar al-Farouq which could have not cost more than a few thousand dollars, end up draining the US Treasury billions of dollars, in order to give Americans a false sense of security.

[snip]

Our brother Omar Farouq has succeeded in breaking through the security systems that have cost the US government alone over \$40 billion since 9/11.

[snip]

And after the operation of our brother Omar Farouq, the initial comments coming from the administration were looking the same: another attempt at covering up the truth. But Al-Qaida cut off Obama from deceiving the world again; by issuing their statement claiming responsibility for the operation.

[snip]

The operation of our brother Omar Farouq was in retaliation to American cruise missiles and cluster bombs that killed women and children in Yemen.

When the recording was originally released, American news outlets noted they had not confirmed the authenticity of the recording. Whether it is or not, the Administration has formally presented this release – as anonymous reporting had in the past – as proof that Awlaki was trying to reach out to American Muslims in early 2010, and therefore proof he could be killed.

If the government maintains that Awlaki would propagandize Abdulmutallab's attack in English, then why does it claim that Awlaki helped Abdulmutallab make his martyrdom video, which is in Arabic?

Here's how they describe that claim in the

narrative they submitted with Abdulmutallab's sentencing.

Awlaki told defendant that he would create a martyrdom video that would be used after the defendant's attack. Awlaki arranged for a professional film crew to film the video. Awlaki assisted defendant in writing his martyrdom statement, and it was filmed over a period of two to three days.

Why would al Qaeda's best English language propagandist set out to make a video with a man schooled in English about an attack targeting America, but make it in Arabic?

Prosecutor Jonathan Tukul seemed sort of sheepish when he pointed out the language of Abdulmutallab's video when he discussed it in opening arguments.

Okay. In the al-Qaeda video, al-Qaeda takes credit for the defendant's attack on Flight 253. They talk about how the bomb defeated western security at airports, and it talks about defendant's history and why he turned to jihad. And so then the defendant's martyrdom statement is a portion of the overall video, "America and the Final Trap."

Here's an interesting point about that video. Even though the defendant is a fluent English speaker, on the video he speaks in Arabic. He quotes the Koran, and he gives his reasons for – in part, he quotes the Koran, and he gives his reasons for why he engaged in the attack on Flight 253.

Here's an interesting fact. The video has English subtitles. Those English subtitles were put on by al-Qaeda, not by anyone else. That's the way it was released, in Arabic with English subtitles. Why? Because al-Qaeda wants the western world and the English

speaking world to understand exactly what they're saying because they wanted to terrorize, they want the world to know, they want the world to fear additional attacks.

Since only Abdulmutallab had been charged with conspiracy to commit terrorism, not (as far as we know) Awlaki, this oddity didn't harm the case Tukul was laying out at all. Because of the government's apparent decision never to add Awlaki's name to the conspiracy charge, Tukul wasn't tasked with proving the guilt of Awlaki, as well as Abdulmutallab. So he didn't even try to explain why two English speakers would make the video in Arabic only to add subtitles so it could reach its intended English-speaking audience.

I asked around why Abdulmutallab would make a video in Arabic, and some folks suggested it would add credibility to the video, particularly given his quotes from the Quran.

But there are plenty of martyrdom videos in English, including two of the major attacks on US targets since 9/11 (the Times Square bombing attempt and the Khost bombing – the latter was done by a native Arabic speaker, Humam al-Balawi), as well as the two biggest British attacks (the 7/7 London Underground bombing and the Liquids plot). While the American attacks post-date Abdulmutallab's attempt, the British ones preceded it. Indeed, they took place just before and while Abdulmutallab was in London for college, as he was becoming more extreme.

There's another detail that is strange for a video made by these two men, allegedly conspiring to attack the US. The video itself is addressed to "brothers in the Arabian peninsula," not Muslims generally, not those who would be most exposed to the spectacle of the (ultimately failed) attack.

Obviously, that's the defendant in the photograph, and then in the left is an

AK47 assault rifle, again, very common in martyrdom videos to reinforce the person who is speaking, their commitment to violent jihad.

And so what does the defendant say? In the bottom he says, "Oh, ye who believe, take not the Jews and the Christians for your allies and protectors. They are but allies and protectors to each other and he amongst you that turns to them is of them. Verily, Allah guides not a wrongdoing people." And then the defendant says, "My Muslim brothers in the Arabian Peninsula, you have to answer the call of jihad because the enemy is in your land along with their Jewish and Christian armies. Allah, the most high," he says, and here he begins quoting the Koran, "unless you go forth," meaning unless you go forth in jihad, "He," Allah, "will punish you with a grievous penalty and put others in your place. But him," the righteous person who goes forth in jihad, "you would not harm in the least." [my emphasis]

If this martyrdom video was meant to help recruiting, it was targeted at recruiting those who – for want of a Western visa – would be unable to attempt the attack Abdulmutallab had.

Tukel again provided a reason why this might be: because Abdulmutallab did not yet know the specific target he would hit.

By the way, there was no mention of Flight 253 in the martyrdom video. There couldn't be. Recall that he told the FBI that Abu-Tarak gave him the bomb on December 6th or 7th. His reservations for Flight 253 were made later.

It is true that the government claims Abdulmutallab did not know his specific target

until he bought the cheapest ticket to America he could get.

The official chronology, however, suggests the undiebomb part of the plot was chosen before Abdulmutallab made his martyrdom video. The sentencing memo, Holder's letter, and (as shown here) Obama's speech all suggest the mission came first, then the martyrdom video.

Awlaki hosted him, approved his suicide operation, and helped him tape a martyrdom video to be shown after the attack.

There's one more reason the Arabic-focused martyrdom video is so interesting in this case. A number of commentators envision there is – or at least was, at the time – an operational split within AQAP, with most of the group focused on attacks within Yemen, but with a small group focused on attacking international targets.

Awlaki is most likely part of a small AQAP cell – the Foreign Operations Unit –which specializes in international operations and keeps a certain distance to the rest of the organization. We are probably dealing with a classic case of functional separation of tasks: While most AQAP fighters are busy fighting Yemeni security forces and attacking Western targets in Yemen, the Foreign Operations Unit lies low and plans international operations slowly and carefully. The unit likely counts no more than 10 people and hides in a different physical location from that of the top AQAP leadership. This is why Awlaki appears only on the margins of the radar of those who follow the day-to-day operations of AQAP proper.

Indeed, this attack, and Awlaki's role in it, purportedly marked a strategic split from past practice. Here's how Mark Mazzetti described it

in *The Way of the Knife*, reflecting comments Brennan made at a briefing just after the attack.

John Brennan, who maintained close ties to Saudi intelligence officials and had already been running much of America's clandestine war in Yemen from the White House, believed that it was al-Awlaki who was principally responsible for a shift in the al Qaeda affiliate's strategy. While the group had long thrived globally, it had acted locally by focusing its attacks on the targets inside Saudi Arabia. But when bin Laden and his followers in Pakistan were under siege, AQAP saw the opportunity to pick up the mantle as America's chief tormenter. Brennan believed that al-Awlaki was pushing the group increasingly in this direction.

There are many possible explanations for why an operation headed by the separate external operations group – or even just an operation intended to test the concept of an external focus – would still use a martyrdom video effectively tailored to the Arabian peninsula focused plans and audience of the main branch of AQAP.

But at the very least, it deserves notice that the martyrdom video was that of the main branch, focused internally.