

MAYBE THE GIMMICK IS IN THE TIMING OF LEGION OF DOOM?

In my first post on this Yemen scare – which I will henceforth call “Legion of Doom” in honor of the Daily Beast source’s use of the term – I suggested the big part of the plot might have already transpired.

There’s the increased drone activity in Yemen. Who knows! Maybe, like last year, the plot has already been rolled up and we’re just waiting to confirm one of the several recent drone strikes have taken out our target?

I made that suggestion because of evidence that the US rolled up UndieBomb 2.0 on April 20-24 of last year, and **only then** deployed a bunch of Air Marshals and fear-mongering about Ibrahim al-Asiri for the days leading up to the May 1 anniversary of Osama bin Laden’s killing. They eliminated the threat (which was minimal in any case, since the bomber was a British-Saudi-US mole), then rolled out fear-mongering about it, as if the threat still existed. Fairly clearly, the White House planned a big press conference on their operation once they killed Fahd al-Quso, and thus got furious when the AP managed to scoop their theater.

I increasingly think that may be the case. Whether or not there was ever a real threat, I suspect it may have partly passed before the big rollout of it last Friday (though the targeting of a top AQAP member, the presence of additional JSOC forces, or all the drone strikes may have increased the risk for Americans in Yemen).

Consider: back when Pentagon stenographer Barbara Starr was among the first to discuss the intercepts behind Legion of Doom, she suggested very fresh SIGINT chatter and a warning from President Abdo Rabi Mansour Hadi delivered on

July 31 or August 1 had led the US to close a bunch of embassies (though even there, they waited a few days to start closing embassies).

Fresh intelligence led the United States to conclude that operatives of al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula were in the final stages of planning an attack against U.S. and Western targets, several U.S. officials told CNN.

The warning led the U.S. State Department to issue a **global travel alert** Friday, warning al Qaeda may launch attacks in the Middle East, North Africa and beyond in coming weeks. The U.S. government also was preparing to close 22 embassies and consulates in the region Sunday as a precaution.

The chatter among al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula operatives had gone on for weeks but increased in the last few days, the officials said.

Taken together with a warning from Yemeni officials, the United States took the extraordinary step of shutting down embassies and issuing travel warnings, said the officials, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

While the specific target is uncertain, U.S. officials are deeply worried about a possible attack against the U.S. Embassy in Yemen **occurring through Tuesday**, the officials said.

[snip]

Yemeni intelligence agencies alerted authorities of the threat two days ago, when the Yemeni president was in Washington, said the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity. [my emphasis]

And the original and an update to the NYT's original story on Legion of Doom says the intercept between Zawahiri and Wuhayshi came

sometime last week.

The intercepted conversations last week between Ayman al-Zawahri, who succeeded Osama bin Laden as the head of the global terrorist group, and Nasser al-Wuhayshi, the head of the Yemen-based Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, revealed what American intelligence officials and lawmakers have described as one of the most serious plots against American and Western interests since the attacks on Sept. 11, 2001.

But the latest AP version of the intercept call says it was picked up “several weeks ago.”

A U.S. intelligence official and a Mideast diplomat said al-Zawahri’s message was picked up several weeks ago and appeared to initially target Yemeni interests. The threat was expanded to include American or other Western sites abroad, officials said, indicating the target could be a single embassy, a number of posts or some other site. Lawmakers have said it was a massive plot in the final stages, but they have offered no specifics.

Perhaps the discrepancy comes from confusion about two different Zawahiri-Wuhayshi intercepts. In its conference call report, the Daily Beast reports that authorities picked up a communication, via courier, between Zawahiri and Wuhayshi “last month.”

An earlier communication between Zawahiri and Wuhayshi delivered through a courier was picked up last month, according to three U.S. intelligence officials.

That earlier conversation may simply have been Zawahiri naming Wuhayshi his deputy, but the role of a courier in the interception suggests

they may have gotten far more intelligence – perhaps not just intelligence tipping the US off to whatever conference call protocol AQ was using, but also to the location of Wuhayshi and other figures.

Now consider the drone strikes. After a lapse of 6 weeks (and an overall quiet back to the Brennan confirmation), there have been 5 6 attacks reported as drone strikes in the last several weeks. One would hope the intensity of the drone strikes represents some kind of new intelligence. But if it does, it represents intelligence dating back to before July 28, the date of the first strike in this series. That would coincide between with the AP's timing and/or the timing of the capture of the courier.

Finally, consider Iona Craig's fact check from Saturday of this Guardian article. She notes that while the Guardian bylines the article from Sanaa, the reporter is actually elsewhere. She notes several errors in the description of a clash that took place on Friday, and notes the British warning to leave Yemen has been in place since March 2011.

It's this item, though, I find most interesting. The Guardian quotes an anonymous "security source" saying that a recent IED explosion at a checkpoint led security forces to believe someone was testing security on approaches to the British and US embassies.

A security source in Sana'a said: "After an improvised explosive device (IED) exploded at a checkpoint in Al-Hasabah [a district in the capital] a week ago, more IEDs were discovered in and around the capital at checkpoints that lead to and from the embassies of the UK and the US. This prompted the capital's security forces to think their security protocol was being 'tested' for a larger attack."

But Craig notes,

The explosion in Hasaba was a month ago.
Not a week ago.

The blast was reported on July 8 – which was the first day of Ramadan – but it appears the blast took place 2 days earlier, on July 6. The story itself contributes nothing to the actual news (or that being treated as news) about Legion of Doom. But it reveals that either the Guardian is very confused (which certainly seems possible), and/or a security source is trying to suggest the origin of Yemeni threat intelligence relating to perceived IED threats at checkpoints is more recent than it really is, the last week rather than the entire month of Ramadan.

This is all, obviously, wildarsed speculation based on some pretty crazy reporting.

Whatever the timing of whatever the big news, it seems clear the US is settling in for a larger operation in Yemen, which will likely further obscure what is really going on.

But given the precedent of UndieBomb 2.0, in which the government pretty demonstrably carried out a fear-mongering campaign after the threat had already been thwarted, I'll raise again the possibility that these events actually could mean to obscure big news that has already occurred.

Update: Restructured original post somewhat.

July, unknown date: Communication between Ayman al-Zawahiri and Nasir al-Wuhayshi via courier picked up

July 8: Ramadan begins

July 16: AQAP confirms death of Said al-Shihri, reportedly in fourth drone strike that targeted him

July 19: Spokesperson for Yemeni Embassy tweets, "With the death of #AQAP cofounder Saeed alShihri & **the absence of #alQaeda's Emir Nasir**

alWehayshi, who is running the #AQ network in Yemen;" John Pistole ratchets up Ibrahim al-Asiri fear-mongering again

July 21: Abu Ghraib prison break

July 23: Abdulelah Haider Shaye released

July 23: Hadi in Qatar

"Several weeks ago:" per the AP when communication between Zawahiri and Wuhayshi intercepted

July 24: Hadi leaves for the US

July 25: Hadi visit to DC formally announced (see discussion of whether it was planned in advance)

July 28: Drone strike # 1, Abyan, kills 6; report Ibrahim al-Asiri killed in drone strike (his escape announced August 3)

July 29: Hadi meets with John Kerry and John Brennan; drone strike in Waziristan, including possible high profile figure

July 30: Hadi meets with Jacob Lew and Chuck Hagel; Pakistani prison break; Drone strike #2, Shabwa, kills 3, potentially including Al Khidr Husayn al Ja'dani

July 31 – August 1: Hadi delivers intelligence on threat

August 1: Hadi meets Obama; Drone strike #3, Hadramout, kills 5

August 2: US announces Embassy closures; reported date of Tor compromise

August 3: Saudi King Abdullah hosts Hadi; Yemeni Embassy promises "major development" to be announced (a Saudi "suicide bomber" captured in Yemen just before the meeting)

August 4: Intercepted date planned for attack, Embassy closures start; first reports of Tor compromise

August 5: Yemen offers rewards for 25 AQAP

operatives

August 6: Yemen Foreign Minister says Embassy shutdowns help extremists; US “evacuates” staff; Drone strike #4, Marib, kills 4

August 7: 15 year anniversary of African Embassy bombings, Ramadan ends; Drone strike #5, Shabwa, kills 7; Update: and Strike #6, details to come