

OUR YEMENI “ALLIES” DID MORE DAMAGE THAN EDWARD SNOWDEN

The NYT reports that some counterterrorism analysts think the reports of the Ayman al-Zawahiri call with Nasir al-Wuhayshi have done more damage to our SIGINT collections than all of Edward Snowden’s leaking.

As the nation’s spy agencies assess the fallout from disclosures about their surveillance programs, some government analysts and senior officials have made a startling finding: the impact of a leaked terrorist plot by Al Qaeda in August has caused more immediate damage to American counterterrorism efforts than the thousands of classified documents disclosed by Edward Snowden, the former National Security Agency contractor.

Since news reports in early August revealed that the United States intercepted messages between Ayman al-Zawahri, who succeeded Osama bin Laden as the head of Al Qaeda, and Nasser al-Wuhayshi, the head of the Yemen-based Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, discussing an imminent terrorist attack, analysts have detected a sharp drop in the terrorists’ use of a major communications channel that the authorities were monitoring. Since August, senior American officials have been scrambling to find new ways to surveil the electronic messages and conversations of Al Qaeda’s leaders and operatives.

[snip]

The drop in message traffic after the

communication intercepts contrasts with what analysts describe as a far more muted impact on counterterrorism efforts from the disclosures by Mr. Snowden of the broad capabilities of N.S.A. surveillance programs. Instead of terrorists moving away from electronic communications after those disclosures, analysts have detected terrorists mainly talking about the information that Mr. Snowden has disclosed.

Reading between the lines, the story suggests one reason Snowden's leaks haven't hurt counterterrorism that badly is because they're targeted at (or most effective with) non-terrorist targets.

Senior American officials say that Mr. Snowden's disclosures have had a broader impact on national security in general, including counterterrorism efforts. This includes fears that Russia and China now have more technical details about the N.S.A. surveillance programs.

But I'm perhaps most interested in the way NYT points to McClatchy as the first report of the leak, not the NYT itself.

McClatchy Newspapers first reported on the conversations between Mr. Zawahri and Mr. Wuhayshi on Aug. 4. Two days before that, The New York Times agreed to withhold the identities of the Qaeda leaders after senior American intelligence officials said the information could jeopardize their operations. After the government became aware of the McClatchy article, it dropped its objections to The Times's publishing the same information, and the newspaper did so on Aug. 5.

Remember, whereas the NYT sourced this leak to US officials, McClatchy very clearly sourced it

to a Yemeni official. In fact, McClatchy's editor, James Asher, said that the reporter (Adam Baron) said the intercept was "common knowledge" known in Yemen.

Our story was based on reporting in Yemen and we did not contact the administration to ask permission to use the information. In fact, our reporter tells me that the intercept was pretty much common knowledge in Yemen.

None of this excuses the US officials who leaked this to brag about the NSA's capabilities at a politically sensitive time. (In fact, the intercept was discovered by an Air Force unit stationed at NSA's Fort Meade.)

But even before that, someone in Yemen was leaking broadly enough about this intercept that it was "common knowledge."

Which, given the divided loyalties of many within the Yemeni government may well mean AQAP got details of the intercept firsthand, not via McClatchy or NYT.

Those same Yemeni allies have long blabbed about our infiltration of AQAP. Now, apparently, they've alerted AQAP to the precise means of wiretapping them. Perhaps this should tell us something about those Yemeni allies?