

HOW TO EVALUATE THE HIG? EXPLOITATION? DEAD BODIES?

Carrie Johnson uses the arraignment of Abu Anas al-Libi as an opportunity to consider the success of the High Value Interrogation Group. She weighs the following details:

- There haven't been that many cases
- Some governments refuse access to HIG
- The group lacks leadership
- The clean team model has problems

But I think we need to take a step back.

First, while Johnson gives a list of some of the interrogations conducted by HIG, it's not comprehensive (for example, it doesn't include Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, with whom HIG was used in an ad lib capacity – it had just started; and it doesn't include Manssor Arbabsiar). And it's not clear we would know every time HIG gets used. For example, there were unnamed officials present at Ibragim Todashev's death; given that we know HIG was used from the start with Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, it's fair to at least ask whether any HIG members were present, and whether they remained in the room when Todashev was killed.

That expanded list of HIG interrogees quickly gets you to the question of consequences for HIG interrogees. Just from this possible list, you get questions such as,

- If HIG was present at Todashev's interrogation did they have a role in his killing?

- Al-Libi was brought to New York because of health problems attributed to his choice to stop eating and drinking; did HIG use any food manipulation before this?
- While I expect him to lose, Abdulmutallab's appeal on competency grounds remains active; did HIG-induced solitary tip Abdulmutallab over the edge, as his appeal claims (he was reportedly not-altogether there when first detained)?

And these issues, plus the refusal of lawyers for Dzhokhar all could endanger convictions – and certainly, death penalties (which has already been taken off the table in al-Libi's case) – in these cases.

Then there's the question of what we're after: the truth, or exploitation?

I've written about exploitation and HIG here, and Jason Leopold and Jeff Kaye showed how that – not necessarily truthful intelligence – was the goal of the torture program.

Exploitation is the use of interrogations not just to get intelligence, but also to support propaganda and/or generate informants. If exploitation is HIG's goal, we might raise questions about whether both Abdulmutallab and Tsarnaev really implicated Anwar al-Awlaki of their own accord. In the former case, both non-HIG confessions did not implicate Awlaki as anything but an inspiration. In the latter, we know Tamerlan was also influenced by right wing propaganda. If exploitation is the goal, should we really believe the government story about the Scary Iran Plot, particularly given that most

details of the “plot” – such as the restaurant targeted in Georgetown – came from our informant in the first place?

I don’t know the answer to these questions. But they seem to be ones we need to answer whether HIG works or not – to say nothing of whether a Democratic society should embrace HIG or not.