

DEFINITION OF A “RADICALIZER:” A SUNNI OPPONENT TO UNCHECKED US POWER

As if on cue in response to my post noting that while the NSA may not be like the Stasi for most Americans, it may well be closer for Muslims, Glenn Greenwald teams up with HuffPo’s two Ryans to disclose that the NSA has been snooping on online porn habits.

The National Security Agency has been gathering records of online sexual activity and evidence of visits to pornographic websites as part of a proposed plan to harm the reputations of those whom the agency believes are radicalizing others through incendiary speeches, according to a top-secret NSA document.

Beyond the eye-popping lede, however, I find the underlying premise just as troubling.

The NSA calls the 6 targets it describes as “radicalizers.”

DNI flack Shawn Turner suggests these are valid terrorist targets.

“Without discussing specific individuals, it should not be surprising that the US Government uses all of the lawful tools at our disposal to impede the efforts of valid terrorist targets who seek to harm the nation and radicalize others to violence,” Shawn Turner, director of public affairs for National Intelligence, told The Huffington Post in an email Tuesday.

Former NSA GC Stewart Baker characterizes them as “trying to recruit folks to kill Americans.”

“If people are engaged in trying to recruit folks to kill Americans and we can discredit them, we ought to,” said Baker. “On the whole, it’s fairer and maybe more humane” than bombing a target, he said, describing the tactic as “dropping the truth on them.”

But consider the profile presented in the story and underlying documents. None have been tied to any terrorist plots.

None of the six individuals targeted by the NSA is accused in the document of being involved in terror plots.

The English speaking ones have minimal ties with people characterized even as extremist groups (which may be different than a terrorist group; and the Arab speakers do have such ties).

The NSA accuses two of the targets of promoting al Qaeda propaganda, but states that surveillance of the three English-speakers’ communications revealed that they have “minimal terrorist contacts.”

In particular, “only seven (1 percent) of the contacts in the study of the three English-speaking radicalizers were characterized in SIGINT as affiliated with an extremist group or a Pakistani militant group. An earlier communications profile of [one of the targets] reveals that 3 of the 213 distinct individuals he was in contact with between 4 August and 2 November 2010 were known or suspected of being associated with terrorism,” the document reads.

And the messages these so-called “radicalizers” promote range from 9/11 trutherism to intolerance for non-Sunni Muslims to justifying the killing of non-Muslim invaders.

One target's offending argument is that "Non-Muslims are a threat to Islam," and a vulnerability listed against him is "online promiscuity." Another target, a foreign citizen the NSA describes as a "respected academic," holds the offending view that "offensive jihad is justified," and his vulnerabilities are listed as "online promiscuity" and "publishes articles without checking facts." A third targeted radical is described as a "well-known media celebrity" based in the Middle East who argues that "the U.S perpetrated the 9/11 attack." Under vulnerabilities, he is said to lead "a glamorous lifestyle." A fourth target, who argues that "the U.S. brought the 9/11 attacks on itself" is said to be vulnerable to accusations of "deceitful use of funds."

And that well-known cleric who opposes Al Qaeda's targeting of civilians and approves killing invaders of his country even adopts a pragmatic approach to the Arab Spring – which is more than our Saudi allies can say.

While some of these 6 targets may count as extremist propagandists, several of them, at least, might better be described as outspoken opponents to unfettered American dominance.

And the NSA proposes not just to discredit these people with smut (a tactic they attempted to use, unsuccessfully, against Anwar al-Awlaki), but to accuse them of – gasp! – charging exorbitant speaking fees.

So, yeah, this does prove that the NSA is using its considerable resources to repeat J Edgar Hoover's tactics.

But it also shows that it is deploying such efforts against men who may not be the bogeymen NSA's apologists make them out to be.

Update: Juan Cole takes the same angle on this story I did.

Update: DNI flack's name corrected, thanks to SA.