

THE (FORMER) RIYADH STATION CHIEF DEFENDS HIS SAUDI FRIENDS FROM CHARGES OF TERRORISM

On Sunday, former CIA Riyadh Station Chief John Brennan had a remarkable appearance on Meet the Press. A big part of it – the second to last thing he and Chuck Todd discussed – was Brennan’s argument against the release of the 28 pages (“so-called,” Brennan calls them) showing that 9/11 was facilitated by at least one Saudi operative.

Brennan opposes their release in three ways. First, he falsely suggested that the 9/11 Commission investigated all the leads implicating the Saudis (and also pretends the “so-called 28 pages” got withheld for sources and methods and not to protect our buddies).

JOHN BRENNAN:

Those so-called 28 pages, one chapter in this joint inquiry that was put out in December of 2002, was addressing some of the preliminary findings and information that was gathered by this joint commission within the Congress. And this chapter was kept out because of concerns about sensitive source of methods, investigative actions. The investigation of 9/11 was still underway in late 2002.

I’m quite puzzled by Senator Graham and others because what that joint inquiry did was to tee up issues that were followed up on by the 9/11 Commission, as well as the 9/11 Review Commission. So these were thoroughly investigated and reviewed. It was a preliminary

review that put information in there that was not corroborated, not vetted and not deemed to be accurate.

The 9/11 Commission didn't even look at NSA for intercepts Thomas Drake has said were there. Nor did it adequately investigate what now appears to be a Sarasota cell. How can Brennan claim the Commission investigated all these leads?

Brennan then slightly misstates how absolute was the 9/11 Commission judgement on Saudi involvement, such as it was.

CHUCK TODD:

The information in those 28 pages, you think, are inaccurate information? Everything that's in there is false?

JOHN BRENNAN:

No, I think there's a combination of things that is accurate and inaccurate. And I think the 9/11 Commission took that joint inquiry, and those 28 pages or so, and followed through on the investigation. And they came out with a very clear judgment that there was no evidence that indicated that the Saudi government as an institution, or Saudi officials individually, had provided financial support to Al Qaeda.

The 9/11 Commission report judged,

It does not appear that any government other than the Taliban financially supported al Qaeda before 9/11, although some government's may have contained al Qaeda sympathizers who turned a blind eye to al Qaeda's fundraising activities. Saudi Arabia has long been considered the primary source of al Qaeda funding, but we have found no evidence that the Saudi government as an institution or senior Saudi officials individually funded the organization.

(This conclusion does not exclude the likelihood that charities with significant Saudi government sponsorship diverted funds to al Qaeda.)

That is, Brennan's comment overstates whether *any* Saudi officials funded the attack, which the 9/11 Commission did not comment on (and the key paragraphs in underlying documents also remain classified).

Ultimately, though, the (former) Riyadh Station Chief argues it would be "very, very inaccurate" if anyone were to suggest the Saudis were involved in 9/11.

CHUCK TODD:

Are you concerned that the release of those pages will unfairly put the relationship in a damaged position?

JOHN BRENNAN:

I think some people may seize upon that uncorroborated, un-vetted information that was in there, that was basically just a collation of this information that came out of F.B.I. files, and to point to Saudi involvement, which I think would be very, very inaccurate.

Remember, for at least 8 years after 9/11 (including in the 9/11 report), it was the judgement of the intelligence community that Saudis were still the biggest funders for Al Qaeda. But the (former) Riyadh Station Chief argues it would be very, very inaccurate to suggest *any* Saudi involvement in the attack.

The whole thing was pathetic enough – *Meet the Press* propaganda worthy of Dick Cheney's best exploitation of the form.

But it is all the more remarkable, coming as it did, after Brennan transitioned seamlessly from a victory lap about killing Osama bin Laden to "this new phenomenon of ISIL."

CHUCK TODD:

You know, five years ago, I remember going to the White House and hearing cheers, hearing people gather in the streets of Washington, and it was happening in other cities. And there was a sense of relief. It was like this moment of, "Wow. Is this the end? Have we won whatever this was we were fighting, this war with Al Qaeda? Have we won?" Boy, it doesn't feel that way five years later.

JOHN BRENNAN:

I remember that same evening. When I left that White House about midnight, it was as bright as day outside, and the chants of "U.S.A., U.S.A," and, "C.I.A., C.I.A." It was the culmination of a lot of very hard work by some very good people at C.I.A. and other agencies. And we have destroyed a large part of Al Qaeda. It is not completely eliminated, so we have to stay focused on what it can do. But now, with this new phenomenon of ISIL, this is going to continue to challenge us in the counterterrorism community for years to come.

I noted on Twitter during CIA's propagandistic Twitter reenactment of their version of the bin Laden killing that, five years later, we're still fighting the war against bin Laden. But Brennan wants you to forget that war, and pretend it's all just ISIL.

And in doing so, he tacitly admits that ISIL arose among the chaos in Iraq, but emphasizes the later events in Syria to discuss ISIL's rise, which is anachronistic, but convenient if you're trying to help the Saudis overthrow Bashar al-Assad.

CHUCK TODD:

The failure to see ISIS, the rise of ISIS, as quickly, was it an intelligence failure? And I ask it this way. Remember, the president one time referred to them as the JV team. And obviously they're not the JV team anymore, and that's since been a remark I think that he regrets, and he says it was taken a little bit out of context. But was that because the intelligence he was getting seemed to downplay the importance of ISIS at the time?

JOHN BRENNAN:

Well, ISIS comes from Al Qaeda in Iraq, which has been around for the last ten, 15 years. And what we need to do is to understand that ISIL took advantage of a lot of opportunities inside of both Iraq and Syria. The fact that—

CHUCK TODD:

Are they opportunities that we gave them?

JOHN BRENNAN:

Well, I think they're opportunities that presented themselves inside of both of those countries. When we see that President Bashar Assad was carrying out these horrific attacks against his citizens as part of this Arab Spring, and was using chemical weapons, this is something that extremists and terrorists seized upon.

So I think ISIS was able to use those instances, whether it be in Syria, or Iraq, and abuses and corruption on the part of these governments to appeal to a broad swath of people. And so it gained strength very quickly, quicker than we thought.

I especially like Brennan's mention of Assad using chemical weapons, the intelligence on

which Brennan's nominal boss James Clapper reportedly admitted was not a "slam dunk."

The ISIL discussion is what led Todd (without the obvious context) to ask Brennan about the Saudis. Amusingly, Todd mentions that "this was part of your portfolio many times," but doesn't raise the publicly known fact that Brennan is—er, was—the Riyadh Station Chief in the 1990s.

CHUCK TODD:

Let me ask you about Saudi Arabia. This was part of your portfolio many times and various times that you've been in government, and you were actually just there with the president as director of the C.I.A. Before, you were there a lot as chief advisor to president for homeland security. What is the state of our relationship? How fractured is it?

JOHN BRENNAN:

We have a very strong relationship with Saudi Arabia, and it's on the economic front, the political front, military security, and intelligence; across the board. I have very close relations with my Saudi counterparts.

The non-mention of Brennan's service as Riyadh Station Chief is all the more interesting given that Brennan has been faulted by the bin Laden team members for thwarting attempts to pressure the Saudis during that period, as Saxby Chambliss addressed in his CIA confirmation hearing.

CHAMBLISS: Mr. Brennan, the 9/11 commission report describes a canceled 1998 CIA operation to capture Osama bin Laden using tribal groups in Afghanistan. The former head of CIA's bin Laden unit told staff that you convinced Director Tenet to cancel that operation. He says that following a

meeting you had in Riyadh with Director Tenet, the bin Laden unit chief and others that you cabled National Security Adviser Sandy Berger, saying the operation should be canceled in favor of a different approach, described by the 9/11 Commission as a, quote, "an all-out secret effort to persuade the Taliban to expel bin Laden." Now, as we know, bin Laden was not expelled. Three months later the bin Laden wrath was unleashed with the attack on our embassies. Did you advise senator – Director Tenet and National Security Adviser Berger against this operation? And if so, why?

BRENNAN: I had conversation with George Tenet at the time. But I must point out – out, Senator, that every single CIA manager – George Tenet, his deputy, the head of the director of operations at the time, and other individuals, the chief of the counterterrorism center – argued against that operation, as well, because it was no well-rounded in intelligence, and its chance of success were minimal – minimal. And it was likely that other individuals were going to be killed. And so when I was involved in those discussions, I provided the director and others my professional advice about whether or not I thought that that operation should go forward. I also was engaged in discussions with Saudi – the Saudi government at the time and encouraged certain actions to be taken so that we could put pressure on the Taliban as well as on bin Laden.

CHAMBLISS: So I'm taking it that your answer to my question is you did advise against – in favor of the cancellation of that operation?

BRENNAN: Based on what I had known at the time, I didn't think that it was a worthwhile operation and it didn't have

█ a chance of success.

Note, Brennan's role in this discussion – which he got downright stammering about in the hearing – is not mentioned in the 9/11 Report (PDF 128ff); he is only mentioned in the report in his function as head of the Terrorist Threat Integration Center who would lead the new approach to terrorism going forward.

Incidentally, a number of us were trying to figure out whether Brennan was on the President's trip to Saudi Arabia (which Brennan pitched as far, far more successful than it was). So Todd did commit a teeny tiny bit of journalism along with setting Brennan up to spew propaganda.

But mostly Todd just offered a platform for an American official on to engage in propaganda for a foreign government that has facilitated terrorism around the world, including – the "so-called" 28 pages reportedly show – in the US.