

YEMEN'S HEAD OF AL QAEDA SCRAMBLES TO MAKE ANWAR AL-AWLAKI AL QAEDA'S #3

✖ It's now a perennial joke. Every time we kill the next Number Three in al Qaeda, we joke about how no one wants to take that guy's place.

Which was my first impression when I read this bit from ProPublica's review of what the intelligence from Osama bin Laden's compound has thus far revealed.

Bin Laden also managed to retain authority over al Qaeda's affiliates in Yemen, North Africa and Iraq, the U.S. official said.

"It was not the same degree of detailed involvement, but he played a huge role in leadership," the U.S. official said.

[snip]

Intelligence gathered months before the raid revealed a tell-tale exchange with the al Qaeda leader in Yemen. The leader, a Yemeni, wrote to bin Laden with a surprising proposal: He suggested that he step down as chief of the affiliate in favor of Anwar al-Awlaki, a Yemeni-American ideologue. Awlaki's influence has been revealed in a string of recent plots against the U.S., including the attempted Christmas bombing on a Detroit-bound flight in 2009.

The leader explained that naming Awlaki as his replacement would be a propaganda coup. It would take advantage of the cleric's popularity among Westerners, especially Americans, and have a strong impact on recruitment, according to the

counterterror official.

The leader in Pakistan rejected the proposal, however, according to the official. "Bin Laden's message was essentially, I know you. I trust you. Let's keep things the way they are." [my emphasis]

Note, though, that *this intelligence didn't come from the raid*, though it appears to have been leaked by the same "US official" (who is not a counterterrorism official) leaking the findings of the raid.

The report is interesting for a number of reasons.

First, because, aside from the raid, where were we getting intelligence on OBL's reported letter-based exchanges? Where were we getting both sides of written exchanges between Yemen and OBL "months before the raid"?

Then there's this bit, from a "senior intelligence official" who rolled out the OBL home movies last week. After being asked, for a second time, whether the cache at OBL's compound revealed anything about al-Awlaki, he made what I assume to be a very odd misstatement—or a remarkable truth.

Q: And is Awlaki a possible successor as part of that?

SR. INTEL OFFICIAL: I think we addressed Awlaki before, but—

(Cross talk.)

Q: — to bin Laden? Is that shown in the records?

SR. INTEL OFFICIAL: I can't say specifically at this point whether that's in the records, per se, or in the documents, but, you know, it would be highly unsurprising if bin Laden didn't know about Anwar al-Awlaki.

Let's unpack the grammar of this, the official transcript: It would be highly unsurprising (meaning, it would not be surprising, meaning it would be likely) if bin Laden didn't (that's "did not") know about Anwar al-Awlaki. It would be likely that bin Laden did not know about al-Awlaki.

That can't be right. That can't be what the SIO meant to say. Obviously, OBL at least knew about al-Awlaki. I mean, we saw him watching the tellie, right? Al-Awlaki's all over the tellie.

But of course, the ProPublica exchange, from intelligence collected months before the raid and offered in support of the assertion that "Bin Laden also managed to retain authority over al Qaeda's affiliates in Yemen but without "the same degree of detailed involvement" shows that OBL doesn't care all that much—or doesn't trust—Anwar al-Awlaki. Indeed, elsewhere the ProPublica report describes OBL's criticism of Inspire magazine, produced by an American in Yemen. That is, OBL made what ProPublica rightly suggests are rather incredible complaints about a magazine that filled the same niche al-Awlaki does: popularized outreach to English speakers.

It seems like OBL doesn't care that much for the Americans waging jihad, in English, in Yemen.

All of which brings us to the reason so many journalists are asking these questions about al-Awlaki.

You know, the drone strike targeting an American citizen? The drone strike launched just days after OBL's death, which led a lot of people to believe it was a direct response to something we found in OBL's compound? The drone strike on a guy that this US official at least suggests OBL doesn't trust all that much?

That drone strike?

But then there's the final implication of all this. People within al Qaeda are feeding into the notoriety we're according al-Awlaki for trying to bomb him so much. The insiders appear

to not trust him. But they recognize that he's a great figure for propaganda.

At least partly because we made him one.

There's something very hinky with the intelligence on al-Awlaki we found—or didn't find—in OBL's compound. Charitably, this "US official" who spoke to ProPublica might just be feinting, discussing outdated information to lead al-Awlaki to let his guard down (though if that's true, shouldn't we assume everything else he said is propaganda, too?). More likely, he's answering the umpteenth question about any ties between intelligence we found at OBL's compound and our attempt to assassinate al-Awlaki last week, with no due process.

And the best explanation he can offer is months old intelligence, showing that OBL doesn't trust al-Awlaki.