WHAT "NOT SPECIFICALLY TARGETED" MEANS FOR ABDULRAHMAN AL-AWLAKI

A number of people are discussing the killing of Abdulraham al-Awlaki as if the government has claimed he was accidentally targeted.

That's not what the government has officially said. In his letter declassifying American drone deaths the other day, Eric Holder said Abdulrahman, Samir Khan, and Jude Kenan Mohammad were "not specifically targeted." Which is quite different from saying it was an accident.

Administration officials were quick to offer an explanation about one of these deaths, that of Mohammad: he died in a signature strike, officials said anonymously, but a former consultant also suggests he was on the kill list.

> American officials said on Wednesday that Mr. Mohammad had been killed with about 12 other insurgents in what the C.I.A. calls a "signature strike," an attack based on patterns of activity, such as men toting arms in an area controlled by extremist groups. Such strikes have prompted the sharpest divisions inside the Obama administration, with some officials questioning whether killing unidentified fighters is legally justified or worth the local backlash.
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> While Mr. Mohammad was not directly targeted, he had come under increasing scrutiny by American counterterrorism officials, who said he was involved in

> recruiting militants for Al Qaeda and the Pakistani Taliban, as well as making videos on YouTube to incite violence against the United States.
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> “He had risen to the top of the U.S. deck,” said Seth G. Jones, a senior political scientist at the RAND Corporation and former adviser to the military’s Special Operations Command. Mr. Jones said that while in Pakistan, Mr. Mohammad had made contact with five young Virginia men who disappeared from their homes around Thanksgiving in 2009 and turned up seeking to join militant groups. Instead they were arrested and remain in Pakistani custody.

But officials have been a lot more squirmy about Abdulrahman’s death.

At a pre-speech briefing yesterday, a senior Administration official was asked about Abdulrahman specifically. Between an unbelievable number of “ums,” he first tried to generalize about all three “not specifically targeted” individuals and then provided two possibilities: presence at “al Qaeda and associated facilities” or civilian accidents (neither of which incorporates the explanations provided the NYT for Mohammad’s death).

> I don’t want to get into the details of each of those instances. What I will say generally is that there are times when there are individuals who are present at al Qaeda and associated forces facilities, and in that regard they are subject to the lethal action that we take. There are other instances when there are tragic cases of civilian casualties and people that the United States does not in any way intend to target — because, again, as in any war, there are tragic consequences that come with the decision to use force, including civilian casualties.

The first of those – presence at an al Qaeda "facility" – is closer to what the Administration has said about Abdulrahman's death in the past, when they have claimed they were targeting Ibrahim al-Banna. Though AQAP reported that he was never at the site.

But here's what a former Obama official told Jeremy Scahill about Abdulrahman's killing.

> A former senior official in the Obama administration told me that after Abdulrahman's killing, the president was "surprised and upset and wanted an explanation." The former official, who worked on the targeted killing program, said that according to intelligence and Special Operations officials, the target of the strike was al-Banna, the AQAP propagandist. "We had no idea the kid was there. We were told al-Banna was alone," the former official told me. Once it became clear that the teenager had been killed, he added, military and intelligence officials asserted, "It was a mistake, a bad mistake." However, John Brennan, at the time President Obama's senior adviser on counterterrorism and homeland security, "suspected that the kid had been killed intentionally and ordered a review. I don't know what happened with the review."

In other words, it sounds like some in the Administration suspect that someone within the targeting chain of command may have invented the Ibrahim al-Banna presence as a way to get at Awlaki's son. (Note, elsewhere Scahill suggested that the Awlaki family suspects a teacher may have been trying to recruit Abdulrahman to help hunt down his father, which might give those recruiters reason to want to silence him after they did kill Awlaki.)

In a piece on the drone program yesterday, Daniel Klaidman revealed that some people within the Administration were trying to keep mention

of Abdulrahman and the two others out of Holder's letter from the other day.

> Officials tell The Daily Beast the original plan was to name only Anwar al-Awlaki, while referring to the other three anonymously. That changed when some officials at the Department of Justice argued that withholding the names would defeat the purpose of Obama's much-touted call for more openness.

If Abdulrahman was killed deliberately, via some kind of deceit, I can understand why the Administration was reluctant to make its role in his death official. John Brennan's report about it is presumably out there somewhere (though as a White House report, it would be harder to FOIA than a CIA IG Report).

Clearly, the Administration has made some effort to gain a greater understanding of how Abdulrahman was killed than the hemming and hawing official admitted to yesterday. Which suggests "not specifically targeted" might not even rule out "targeted in deceitful fashion."