

THE THINGS OUR ALLIES TELL US — OR DON'T

On Friday, the NYT reported that the US was surprised that the Nusra Front attacked Division 30, which is what they're now calling the group of US-trained "moderate rebels" who've only recently been inserted in Syria.

In Washington, several current and former senior administration officials acknowledged that the attack and the abductions by the Nusra Front took American officials by surprise and amounted to a significant intelligence failure.

While American military trainers had gone to great lengths to protect the initial group of trainees from attacks by Islamic State or Syrian Army forces, they did not anticipate an assault from the Nusra Front. In fact, officials said on Friday, they expected the Nusra Front to welcome Division 30 as an ally in its fight against the Islamic State.

"This wasn't supposed to happen like this," said one former senior American official, who was working closely on Syria issues until recently, and who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss confidential intelligence assessments.

As Moon of Alabama snarked, this would mean the entire national security elite is *shocked*, *shocked* that people we've been bombing might not welcome us afterwards.

Given how quickly the US responded to the kidnapping by promising air cover for the Division — which is all but guaranteed to suck the US far more deeply into Syria's civil war — I don't rule out the very cynical possibility that some within the US recognized the

likelihood our rebels would be attacked, but took that as acceptable price to force the US to engage more directly.

If that's not the case, given how unlikely it is that the entirely intelligence establishment is so stupid so as to have missed the very obvious risk to our rebels, I think it's quite likely that the US got affirmative HUMINT from one of our partners in the region that Nusra Front would not attack. Both the Saudis and Israelis are real possibilities to have provided this intelligence, given that we rely on the Saudis for a lot of our intelligence on Sunni terrorist groups and the Israelis have been cozying up to the group. And I'm frankly agnostic whether that intelligence would have been offered cynically – again, as a ploy to suck the US further into Syria – or in good faith.

But I do think one possible explanation for the seemingly impossible claim that this attack took the US by surprise to be that we had intelligence telling us this wouldn't happen.

Meanwhile, in another corner of the Middle East, consider the first line of this FP story revealing the intelligence community learned the Houthis were launching scud missiles into the Saudi Arabia via Twitter.

The U.S. intelligence community first learned that Yemen's Houthi rebels had launched a Scud missile toward Saudi Arabia on June 30 not from spies on the ground or satellites in the skies, but instead from a more modern form of information gathering: Twitter.

"The first warning of that event: 'hashtag scudlaunch,'" Marine Lt. Gen. Vincent Stewart, the head of the Pentagon's Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), said at a gathering of intelligence contractors just outside Washington on Thursday night. "Someone tweeted that a Scud had been launched,

and that's how we started to search for this activity."

This *also* means that the intelligence community – including the CIA led by the former Station Chief to Riyadh – did not learn the Houthis were mounting a counterstrike into KSA from our close allies the Saudis. Yet the likelihood of that was readily available, even to me, via Twitter.

Again, this suggests that the intelligence we may be getting from one of our most trusted allies on the ground may not be all that useful, though in this case I think it possible the Saudis themselves have been delusional about any risk the Houthis might pose.

Whether these two incidents stem from intelligence sharing with our allies, the effect of our ignorance on both counts is that we're going to be sucked more deeply into the region.