

UNDIEBOMB 2.0'S HANDLER

In honor of the Queen's Jubilee, the Times of London's paywall is down today (with free registration). So now's a good time to read the paper's good coverage on Yemen from Iona Craig and others (see her description of one of the civilians injured in Jaar; her description of Brennan's visit in Yemen just as our Special Forces (and Marines) ramped up the fight in Yemen; or her description of how the local tribe in Lawder is taking on AQAP).

But I wanted to take a look at this story on UndieBomb 2.0 by two other reporters, with some of the more extensive comments about the UndieBomber's handler. Note, much of the article generally—including some details on how UndieBomber 2.0 infiltrated AQAP—relies on Mustafa Alani, last seen at this blog both pushing the AQAP threat as well as boasting of the important Saudi role in collecting HUMINT on it.

About a year ago [UndieBomber 2.0] moved to Yemen and, like Abdulmutallab before him, enrolled at an Islamic or Arabic language school in Sana'a, the capital, in the hope of being "talent-spotted" by AQAP. He was accompanied by a handler at the school, who briefed Saudi intelligence on a daily basis.

Within three months, Alani said, the organisation had taken the bait – and he was soon being trained at a network of safe houses.

"He received instruction on how to avoid detection at the airport, how to behave," Alani said. "He was able to convince Al-Qaeda he was genuinely ready to carry out the mission."

The agent never met Asiri, but the device he described to his handler

pointed to a more advanced version of the “underpants” bomb.

[snip]

The agent was entrusted with the bomb and told by AQAP to reserve a seat on a transatlantic flight. The booking was never made. Instead, he and his handler were whisked out of Yemen and the device was handed over to the CIA on about April 20.

Now, Alani is supposed to be tied closely to Saudi intelligence services. If this story is correct, it’s a remarkably, willful, on-the-record exposure of how the Saudis managed the operation out of a language school in Sanaa. If it is true, it would indicate one of the reasons this leak (which of course was substantially confirmed, at least, by foreign sources) was so damaging: because it exposed the UndieBomber, but also exposed the handler in Yemen.

If it is true, then consider the timeline: UndieBomber and his handler were “whisked out of Yemen” on about April 20. Robert Mueller went for a 45 minute meeting in Yemen having little to do with his core authorities on April 24, suggesting he obtained the UndieBomb and ferried it back to the States. Fahd al-Quso was killed (reportedly netting UndieBomber a \$5 million reward) on May 6. The White House informed the AP that some security concerns had been resolved on May 7, which led to their story preempting the White House announcement on May 8.

That is, if the timeline laid out in this story (presumably largely by Alani) is true, then the handler was removed well before the story came out, and we succeeded in targeting Quso over two weeks after UndieBomber and his handler were removed. None of that tells us whether we might have gotten bombmaker Ibrahim al-Asiri had the role of the Saudi infiltrator not been exposed, in part by foreign sources, on May 8.

But it provides one narrative of what happened.