

IS THIS WHY THE PRESS FINALLY REVEALED THE SAUDI DRONE BASE?

In spite of all the furor over the way the NYT and WaPo sat on news of a Saudi drone base, the only explanation I know of for why they chose to reveal it now was this one.

So, what changed? Why did the New York Times decide to break the silence with a story last night including mention of the Saudi Arabia base? Managing Editor Dean Baquet told news hound-cum-New York Times Public Editor Margaret Sullivan that the decision was connected to the nomination of John O. Brennan to move to the directorship of the CIA; Brennan, after all, was a central figure in establishing the Saudi base.

There's more to it, notes Leonhardt:

Ultimately, we decided that naming the country did not present enough of a national-security risk to justify withholding the information. There are not many countries on the Arabian peninsula. Some Web reports had already made the connection. We were aware of no specific security risks or threats, and it is widely known that Saudi authorities are aggressively pursuing Qaeda militants in Yemen. The administration continued to object, but we notified them on Monday that we intended to include the location in an upcoming story, which we did.

Bold text added to highlight an interesting wrinkle: Sullivan's account

of the goings-on suggests that toward the end, the government didn't escalate the matter up the hierarchy at the New York Times:

Mr. Baquet said he had a conversation with a C.I.A. official about a month ago and, at that time, agreed to continue withholding the location, as it had done for many months. More recently, though, one of the reporters working on the story told the government that The Times would reveal the location and said officials should contact Mr. Baquet if they wanted to discuss it further.

"They didn't call this time," Mr. Baquet said.

The depiction of continued Administration opposition is a bit rich.

After all, as the NYT presented the story, the Saudi drone base played a role in both Anwar al-Awlaki and Said al-Shihri's deaths.

The strikes have killed a number of operatives of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, the terrorist network's affiliate in Yemen, including Said Ali al-Shihri, a deputy leader of the group, and the American-born cleric Anwar al-Awlaki.

[snip]

Not long afterward, the C.I.A. began quietly building a drone base in Saudi Arabia to carry out strikes in Yemen. American officials said that the first time the C.I.A. used the Saudi base was to kill Mr. Awlaki in September 2011.

Since then, officials said, the C.I.A. has been given the mission of hunting

and killing “high-value targets” in Yemen – the leaders of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula who Obama administration lawyers have determined pose a direct threat to the United States. When the C.I.A. obtains specific intelligence on the whereabouts of someone on its kill list, an American drone can carry out a strike without the permission of Yemen’s government.

[snip]

Although most Yemenis are reluctant to admit it publicly, there does appear to be widespread support for the American drone strikes that hit substantial Qaeda figures like Mr. Shihri, a Saudi and the affiliate’s deputy leader, who died in January of wounds received in a drone strike late last year.

The claim that Shihri (a former Gitmo detainee who had ties to a Saudi Gitmo deradicalized double agent) was killed by a drone is not at all clear. The Yemenis say only he died in a counterterrorism incident in November.

The Yemeni government reported the death Thursday of a top leader of al Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula, who died as a result of wounds suffered in a November “counter-terrorism operation” in the northern province of Saada.

[snip]

His death has been reported erroneously multiple times – most recently, he defiantly reappeared via an audio statement after being reported killed last September – and al Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula hasn’t yet released a statement confirming his death. In contrast to the September report, however, state-owned media in Saudi Arabia have reported Shihri’s death, quoting family members of the militant

leader.

The Saudis, however, say Shihri was originally injured in December.

According to an Al Arabiya correspondent, Shahri's family said he was severely injured after a joint Yemeni-U.S. operation targeting al-Qaeda members in Yemen in the second week of December, 2012.

After falling into a coma, Shahri was later declared dead and was buried in Yemen.

Whichever it is – no one seems to know – close drone watchers in Yemen had a hard time matching any drone strike with the time al-Shihri was allegedly injured.

But now, in conjunction with the revelation of the base, anonymous US sources are claiming the base was responsible for Shihri's reported death.

Meanwhile, the WaPo used the story to depict how Brennan's close relationship with the Saudis enabled us to get the base and (the implication is) Awlaki.

The only strike intentionally targeting a U.S. citizen, a 2011 attack that killed al-Qaeda operative Anwar al-Awlaki, was carried out in part by CIA drones flown from a secret base in Saudi Arabia.

The base was established two years ago to intensify the hunt against al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, as the affiliate in Yemen is known. Brennan, who previously served as the CIA's station chief in Saudi Arabia, played a key role in negotiations with Riyadh over locating an agency drone base inside the kingdom.

Maybe if we needed a CIA base to permit us to bypass the Yemeni government to kill Awlaki (which I do believe to be the case), Brennan shouldn't have endlessly repeated that the Yemenis were cooperating?

Anyway, the news that Brennan's close ties with the Saudis led to the deaths of Awlaki and maybe Shihri might serve to compensate for the recently reported news that we're engaging in signature strikes in Yemen that even Brennan knows to be unwise because someone Brennan knows well from his Riyadh days – and this drone base story makes it far more likely it's the Saudis than the Yemenis – asked him nicely.

Then, in the spring of 2012, with Yemen falling into chaos and AQAP gaining more and more territory, Yemeni officials—with whom Brennan had close ties going back to his days as a CIA station chief in the region—beseeched Brennan to help. The Yemeni Army was collapsing under the brutal assault; soldiers were being crucified and beheaded by the jihadis. By April 2012, Brennan and Obama finally relented and permitted signature strikes in the country.

Those who defend this decision point out that it would have been a catastrophe for U.S. security if significant parts of the country had fallen to AQAP, which was intent on attacking the American homeland. Yet some inside the administration were critical. Says one senior administration official of Brennan's history in Yemen: "He responded to the personal appeals because he has a long history with these guys." In other words: Brennan's lawyerly preference for rules and constraints may sometimes have taken a backseat to emotion.

Plus, Michael Scheuer has been running around

airing gripes (which led to at least one question from Saxby Chambliss at the confirmation hearing) about Brennan's failures to help the Bin Laden unit before 9/11.

1996: When, in December, 1995, the Agency set up a unit to dismantle al-Qaeda and capture or help the U.S. military kill Osama bin Laden, one of that unit's first actions was to ask Mr. Brennan—who was then what George Tenet has described as “CIA's senior officer on the Arabian Peninsula”—to secure from the Saudi intelligence service some very basic information and documents about bin Laden. The Saudis did not respond, and so the bin Laden unit sent frequent messages to Mr. Brennan asking him to secure the data. When we finally received a response from Mr. Brennan, it was to tell us that he would no longer pass the bin Laden unit's requests to the Saudis because they were annoyed by them. DCI George Tenet backed Mr. Brennan's decision, and when I resigned from CIA in November 2004, the Saudis had not delivered the requested data.

Comment: I speak on this from firsthand experience, as I was the chief of the bin Laden unit at the time. The messages from Mr. Brennan refusing to push the Saudis on bin Laden are in the archives of several government agencies, but, more important, they are in the archive of the 9/11 Commission. (NB: I know the documents are there because I supplied them to the Commission.) In the latter archive, the messages have been fully redacted to protect the CIA sources and methods and so ought to be easily available to the Senators and to the media via a Freedom of Information request.

2) May, 1998: For most of the year between May, 1997, and May, 1998, the

bin Laden unit—with fine support from too few other Intelligence Community agencies—prepared an operation to capture Osama bin Laden using CIA assets. During the preparatory work, none of the bin Laden’s unit’s bin-Laden-specific information requests to the Saudis were answered, and given Mr. Brennan’s above-noted attitude, the unit was not ever sure the requests were passed to the Saudi intelligence service. Just before the capture operation was to be attempted, Mr. Brennan convinced Wyche Fowler—then U.S. ambassador in Riyadh—and DCI George Tenet that the U.S. government should cancel the capture operation. Although the Saudis had yet to lift a finger to assist U.S. efforts to counter bin Laden and al-Qaeda, and because it is the merest commonsense to know that Afghans never obey orders from any foreigner, Mr. Brennan, Ambassador Fowler, and DCI Tenet all assured then-National Security Adviser, Mr. Sandy Berger, that the capture operation should be canceled. Mr. Berger cancelled the operation, only to demand—through his assistant for terrorism Richard Clarke—that the operation immediately be restarted 75 days later when bin Laden’s al-Qaeda destroyed the U.S. embassies in Nairobi and Tanzania.

Comment: I also speak on this issue from first-hand experience, as I was the chief of the bin Laden unit at the time, and also traveled in early May 1998, with DCI Tenet and the then-chief of CIA’s Near East Division to hear Mr. Brennan explain why this ludicrous reliance on the thoroughly unhelpful and often obstructive Saudis was a better way to protect Americans than by using CIA’s capabilities.

In other words, one reason why the Administration may have been happy to see the drone base story published now may be to counteract very real questions about Brennan's ties to the Saudis.

But there's something else.

Today, Reuters is reporting that the UAE will purchase an unspecified number of Predator drones as part of a \$1.4 billion deal.

The UAE's armed forces also agreed to buy an undisclosed number of Predator drones, or unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), from privately-owned U.S. firm General Atomics in a deal worth 722 million dirhams.

"UAVs are significant for any armed forces in present times. There is a lot of demand for these," Major General Obeid al-Ketbi told reporters at the largest arms exhibition in the Middle East, held in Abu Dhabi.

The UAE awarded the contract to purchase the drones to a local company, International Golden Group, which will buy them from the U.S. firm. The deal marks General Atomics' first sale of an unarmed version of its Predator drones in the Middle East

[snip]

General Atomics' export-variant Predator will have no "hard points" to attach missiles and would be deliberately engineered to make adding new weaponry impossible, the company said last year.

If I'm doing the math right, this works out to be about 20 drones, a pretty significant purchase for a little emirate.

As Reuters points out – and as I've reported before – the Saudis have been pressuring us for drones for at least 3 years to, among other

things, hunt Houthis in northern Yemen. And while UAE and the Saudis generally get along, they don't always. What are the chances that we'd sell drones – even unarmed ones – to UAE without also selling them or making them available in some form to the Saudis?

Is that base on the border of Yemen a CIA base, or is it a Saudi one?