

The Political Uses of the Latest “Terror Plot”

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One day after publicly announcing that the CIA had foiled an Al Qaeda plot to bomb a commercial airliner, US officials revealed Tuesday that the would-be bomber was in fact an informant working for the CIA and Saudi intelligence.

This turn of events is in line with so many domestic terror plots “disrupted” by federal authorities, which—in the overwhelming majority of cases—have featured confidential informants acting as agent provocateurs, instigating stage-managed plots and providing targeted patsies with money, dummy bombs and fake weapons before they are rounded up.

The account given for this latest operation is decidedly murky. Officials have claimed that the plot originated with the infiltration of a group affiliated to the Yemen-based Al Qaeda of the Arabian Peninsula by the CIA-Saudi double agent. Why the US government would choose to expose such a seemingly valuable mole by making the supposed plot public is unclear to say the least.

It is impossible to sort fact from fiction in the versions being reported by the media. A highly skeptical attitude toward the most basic claims about this episode is more than warranted. However, the saturation news coverage is itself an unmistakable indication that, with less than six months to go before the US presidential election, elements within the Obama administration and the state apparatus want to move the “war on terror” to the front burner of American politics.

A key motivation for this was made clear Wednesday by the Washington Post, which published an editorial entitled “The US is right to strike hard at terrorists in Yemen.” The Post cites the alleged bomb plot to retroactively justify the Obama administration’s sharp escalation in US drone strikes against Yemen, with more missiles fired from the pilotless aircraft at targets in the country in the first four months of this year than in all of 2010 and 2011 combined.

The editorial went on to praise White House counterterrorism advisor John Brennan for delivering a speech last week defending drone attacks as both legal and “ethical.” Brennan argued that the strikes were sanctioned by the Authorization of the Use of Military Force passed by Congress in September 2001 and used to justify both the Afghanistan and Iraq wars.

As the media provided wall-to-wall coverage of the alleged terror plot, virtually no attention was given to the announcement Tuesday by the Pentagon that US special forces “trainers” have been sent back into Yemen to aid troops of the country’s US-backed dictatorship in an ongoing civil war. They had been withdrawn during the mass uprisings that toppled dictator Ali Abdullah Saleh, who ruled Yemen for 33 years, only to see him replaced by his deputy.

The Pentagon also revealed that an amphibious assault battle group, including some 2,000 Marines, has been deployed off Yemen's coast in the Gulf of Aden.

Thus, the "war on terror", in the form of the reported bomb plot, is being utilized to justify yet another US war, this time in Yemen. The country is of great strategic concern to the US, as it commands the choke point between the Red and Arabian Seas, a key oil shipping route, and borders Saudi Arabia, the world's largest oil producer.

There are doubtless political calculations in making the bomb plot public as well. Obama launched his re-election campaign by glorifying his role as the man who ordered the assassination of Osama bin Laden. He appears determined to make it impossible for the Republicans to attack him from the right on the "national security issue" by touting his record as the most militarist president in the country's history.

Finally, aside from immediate foreign policy and political objectives, publicizing the purported bomb plot serves an institutional purpose, providing a justification for the perpetuation of a massive apparatus of military aggression and domestic repression.

In Congressional testimony on Wednesday, FBI chief Robert Mueller cited the plot to call for swift renewal of provisions granting the US government sweeping authority to spy on electronic communications. The provisions are set to expire at the end of the year.

CNN commentator Fareed Zakaria pointed to this side of the issue in an online column posted this week, noting that Washington remains "firmly committed to the war on terror at home" and to the "expansion of federal bureaucracies to tackle this war."

"Since September 11, 2001, the US government has created or reconfigured at least 263 organizations to tackle some aspect of the war on terror," he writes. "Thirty-three new building complexes have been built for the intelligence bureaucracies alone, occupying 17 million square feet—the equivalent of 22 US Capitols or three Pentagons. The largest bureaucracy after the Pentagon and the Department of Veterans Affairs is now the Department of Homeland Security, which has a workforce of 230,000 people."

Zakaria notes that the vast powers of this intelligence apparatus "now touch every aspect of American life", with "some 30,000 people, for example ... now employed exclusively to listen in on phone conversations and other communications within the United States."

After more than a decade of first the Bush administration and then that of Obama attempting to terrorize the American people with the supposedly ubiquitous threat of terrorism, the breathless announcement of new "bomb plots" appears to be producing diminished returns.

The overwhelming majority of the American people are opposed to war and have seen again and again how the "war on terror" has been used to justify military aggression abroad. Moreover, millions of working people in the United States and around the world are confronting far more immediate threats in the form of mass unemployment, declining living standards, the lack of a future for the youth and the destruction of public education and basic social services.

The 2012 election contest between the Democratic and Republican parties will offer no opportunity to vote for or against the continued buildup of the US military and intelligence apparatus and the threat it poses to the democratic rights and very lives of working people

on a world scale. Nor will it allow the people to vote for or against the assault on jobs, wages and social conditions in the interest of the banks and the financial elite. Both parties are fully committed to these policies.

None of this can be opposed within the framework of the capitalist two-party system. Such a struggle can be waged only by means of the independent political mobilization of the working class on the basis of a socialist program to put an end to the profit system.

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