

The October silence: The questions we failed to ask about Khorasan?

By Lauren Schneider

The disease has spread. With the expansion of U.S. airstrikes into Syria in mid-September to “degrade and ultimately destroy” the “cancer” that is ISIS, said President Obama in a televised address to the nation, we have since been told that there is another entity which “poses a more direct and imminent threat to the United States,” according to a Sept. 10 Associated Press article; the Khorasan group. And so began a weeklong blitzkrieg, every major U.S. media organization injected the American public with this newly named group, Khorasan, and the supposed “more direct and imminent threat” that the government had claimed it to be. “(Khorasan’s) evolution from obscurity to infamy has been sudden,” said a New York Times article on Sept. 24, but then, just as sudden as the hype began, U.S. media fell silent. Why did the U.S. media botch the job of pursuing this proclaimed imminent threat?

In contrast to Islamic State, or ISIS, the Sunni extremist jihadi group reigning war in Iraq and Syria and instilling fear worldwide, Khorasan was presented by the U.S. government as a more imminent threat for their stated goal to create undetectable bombs intended for U.S. bound flights. And in the midst of the September weeklong media squall, the U.S. government issued 47 Syrian airstrikes focused specifically on Khorasan. Some reports said we had hit our intended targets and praised them as a success, while others said the U.S. was unsure of the result of the attacks. But by weeks end, the media flurry had ended and the American public was left guessing as to what the actual results were of the airstrikes, and more importantly, where we now stand in terms of the imminent threat level?

“What may be problematic is expecting media to tell a story with an ending,” says University of Texas professor Karin Wilkins, in an in-person interview. Wilkins is a professor of media studies in Radio-Television-Film and Director for the Center for Middle Eastern Studies. “In real life, there is no ending, there are transformative moments,” however the media has “a responsibility to go back and pay attention to things that were highlighted before ... I would think there would be an accountability.” So what is the level of accountability we should hold our media standards to in terms of this new group, Khorasan.

Granted this faction is a difficult entity to understand, with the limited amount of information available about them. From what we do know, they are an offshoot of al-Qaida, operating in Syria, while nested within another Syrian al-Qaida faction called Jabhat al-Nusra. Group membership was estimated around 20 to 50 people, with at least three named leaders: Muhsin al-Fadhli, the Kuwaiti-born reported leader of this faction; Abd al-Rahman Muhammad al Juhni (listed as number 47 on Saudi Arabia’s most wanted terrorists, according to CNN’s Sept. 23 article); and lastly, David Drugeon, the 24 year old French-born bomb maker.

Given Khorasan's primary objective, "(b)ombs on airplanes are a great threat to the United States," said Alan Kuperman, in an in-person interview, Associate Professor in the LBJ School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas. "(A)nd, if in fact we had intelligence of some kind of imminent use of these things then it would be in our interest...to try and surgically take out those experts. And that's what the U.S. government claims was the threat, and that's what the U.S. government claims it did, and it claims it has been effective, and there's zero way to verify that." Lack of information seems to be a key theme here.

It has now been almost three months since the initially proclaimed more imminent threat; three more airstrikes have been launched in November against this Khorasan group, but who knew? Moreover, what does that say about the level of actual threat posed, if we have only initiated three more airstrikes? The name Khorasan is sprinkled in with the news of airstrikes in Syria against ISIS and now only receives a paragraph or two in the media. And, with the exception of an NPR broadcast on Oct. 31, the major media fell silent for the entire month of October on the issue of Khorasan. Where does that leave the American public in the wake of this information gap? Why has the media been subdued in their reporting on this?

Rather than complacently accepting the U.S. government's claims about Khorasan and their threat, the media should have been adamant in their challenge of the government's use of the word, "imminent". If it was fear, fear of attack, that prompted the U.S. government to engage in airstrikes against this group, then we should be demanding knowledge on where we stand now in terms of the so-called imminent danger. We should be asking, what does imminent mean to the U.S. government: "I think they were playing with the term 'imminence' a little bit fast and loose," said Mark Mazzetti in a telephone conversation. Mazzetti is a New York Times reporter who has either authored or coauthored almost every article for the Times on the Khorasan issue. But if loose terminology such as this leads us rapidly into action, than shouldn't citizens demand a definition of said terms?

"What I think the public has a need and right to know is, whatever the government is saying about a threat to them, to try to dig into how realistic and how much of an 'imminent' threat it is. We can't just take what is said publically about threats and accept it, because then you get into this cycle of threat and response without anyone stepping back and saying what does 'threat' mean?" said Mazzetti.

"It's not something that we can sort of do immediately but you know, yeah, we need to keep following up on this issue of how big of a threat were they and how big of a threat do they continue to be?"

However, despite one mention of the fact that Khorasan's goal of attacking the U.S. was "aspirational" at best, according to Mazzetti's Sept. 24 article, even the New York Times has fallen short to provide the American public with an intelligent follow up on the discussion of threat.

Here's another question the media should be asking: Do the strikes against Khorasan align with America's intended goals for defeating ISIS? By striking the Khorasan group, we are essentially striking al-Nusra, a Syrian al-Qaida faction that is believed to house the Khorasan group within it. Al-Nusra is also believed to be largely popular with the Syrian people because of their staunch opposition to both ISIS and Bashar al-Assad's regime. The U.S. government is sabotaging their own stated goals and plans to train Syrians on the ground to tactically support the coalition-led airstrikes on ISIS. If we turn the anti-Assad Syrian people against us, who is left to serve as "boots on the ground"? Aren't we creating more enemies in a time when we claim to be focusing on eradicating a "cancer"? Where is the media on these apparent conflicting goals?

So what is the real takeaway after two months of haphazard media coverage of Khorasan?? Honestly, it's not much. The U.S. government continues to claim Khorasan poses a more direct threat to the U.S. than ISIS (we've conducted four series of airstrikes against Khorasan, and 1,006 as of Nov. 19 against ISIS, you tell me which seems more of a threat?) The U.S. government still can neither confirm nor deny the death of Muhsin al-Fadhli, or any of the other leaders within the group. As far as anyone can tell, the name itself, Khorasan, was only assigned by the U.S. government as a means of creating an avenue for discussing the group (if you ask anyone in Syria however, they will not have heard of the name, nor know what group you are talking about). And lastly, Khorasan is the supposed synonym of al-Qaida (why the need to name them something else remains yet another strong question to contend with).

The level of media's coverage should adequately represent the claims made. I just want answers. And I do not think I am alone in that.