

One day after Russian asylum for Snowden

Obama administration launches terror scare

By Thomas Gaist
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Amid escalating denunciations and threats against both Edward Snowden, the National Security Agency (NSA) contractor-turned whistle-blower, and Russia, which granted Snowden temporary asylum on Thursday, the Obama administration on Friday issued a “global travel alert,” closing US embassies in Tripoli, Cairo, Tel Aviv, Baghdad, Riyadh and Doha based on supposed threats of Al Qaeda attacks.

In total, 22 embassies and consulates are to be closed, and a terror alert has been issued covering the entire Middle East. Official statements have asserted that a contact from Yemen—a country that has been under bombardment from US drones for years—gave information raising the possibility of terror attacks against US embassies.

All three major television networks led their evening news reports with the government’s claims, reporting them uncritically despite the lack of any substantiation or any specific purported threats. Terrorism “experts” were trundled out in the usual fashion to stoke up public alarm.

None of the government’s claims should be taken for good coin. They follow more evidence of broad popular support for Snowden, whom the Obama administration is witch-hunting and targeting for prosecution—or worse—for leaking details of secret surveillance programs that invade the privacy and violate the rights of every American and millions more people around the world.

On Thursday, a Quinnipiac poll was released showing that 55 percent of Americans believe Snowden is a whistle-blower, versus only 34 percent who buy the government line that he is a spy or traitor. Weeks of official statements from Obama, top intelligence officials and politicians of both parties claiming that the spying operations are needed to combat terror

threats have obviously fallen flat with the public. There is every reason to believe that Friday’s terror scare was launched in an attempt to sow disorientation and dissipate opposition to the illegal and unconstitutional spying programs.

The Obama administration has threatened to cancel a planned meeting between Obama and Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow following the upcoming G20 summit in St. Petersburg. This would be one form of retaliation for Moscow’s granting of temporary asylum to Snowden.

Russia’s decision to allow Snowden to leave the Moscow airport to which he had been confined for over a month and settle in Russia for at least a year provoked furious denunciations from the American political establishment. “Obviously this is not a positive development,” said White House Press Secretary Jay Carney on Thursday. “We are evaluating the utility of a summit.”

Democratic Senator Charles Schumer of New York called Snowden a “coward” and denounced Russia for “stabbing us in the back.” Republican Senator Tom Coburn of Oklahoma said Snowden was a “traitor to our country.”

“Any time our president is seen to be disrespected, it’s not good,” Republican Senator Lindsey Graham of South Carolina said in an interview. “Our foreign policy is not working. This is an example of it not working.”

Lon Snowden, father of Edward, told CBS in regard to the asylum decision, “It’s the honourable thing to do, and as not just a citizen of the United States, but a global citizen of this planet, an occupant of the Earth, I am so thankful for what they have done for my son.”

“As you know, he is receiving threats from the United States government every day,” said Anatoly

Kucherena, the Russian lawyer who facilitated Snowden's asylum request. "The situation is heating up."

"The personal safety issue is a very serious one for him," Kucherena added. Security concerns will constrain Snowden's movement, according to Kucherena, who said that he "can't go for a walk on Red Square or go fishing."

Friday's terror alert comes in the midst of a public relations campaign by the administration to portray the spying programs as legal and carefully monitored by Congress. This week, the Senate Judiciary Committee held a hearing to take testimony from top officials of the NSA and the Justice Department concerning the programs. Amid talk of the need for "transparency" and "accountability" from some of the senators on the committee, the hearing only underscored the absence of any serious or principled opposition in Congress and the complicity of both parties, the Congress and the courts in the buildup of the apparatus of a police state.

Congress was fully informed about the NSA programs for years before the *Guardian* published Snowden's leaked documents. Democratic Senators Mark Udall of Colorado and Ron Wyden of Oregon have been trumpeted as adversaries of the NSA surveillance and defenders of civil liberties. In fact, they make no serious challenge to either the programs or the spy agencies that carry them out.

Their supposed opposition is two-faced and cowardly. Neither of them even voted against the confirmation this week of a former Bush Justice Department official and supporter of torture and the NSA spying programs as the new Federal Bureau of Investigation director.

They propose token measures to provide a fig leaf of legality and constitutionality to programs that directly violate the Bill of Rights. In a recent meeting between congressional would-be opponents of surveillance and President Obama, Wyden proposed the addition of a "privacy and civil liberties advocate" to the secret court that reviews surveillance requests.

He claims to oppose NSA programs that collect the records of all US telephone calls, but adds caveats that would allow the government to continue to shred the Fourth Amendment's ban on warrantless searches and seizures. "I am open, for example, on areas like these emergency authorities to make sure that our

government is in a position to get information needed to protect the public," Wyden said after the meeting with Obama.

Neither Wyden nor any of the other congressional "critics" of the spying programs defend Snowden or other whistle-blowers who have exposed US government crimes, such as Bradley Manning and Julian Assange.

Meanwhile, virtually every day brings new revelations of pervasive spying programs. A CNET report released Friday stated that the FBI has been pressuring telecommunications providers to install "port reader software" that enables real-time interception of internet metadata, including IP addresses, e-mail addresses, identities of Facebook correspondents, and sites visited by government surveillance agencies. As CNET wrote: "The US government is quietly pressuring telecommunications providers to install eavesdropping technology deep inside companies' internal networks to facilitate surveillance efforts."

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