

UNITED STATES COURT OF APPEALS
FOR THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA CIRCUIT

No. 24-5165
(C.A. No. 14-01589)

ROGER ARONOFF, Appellant,)
)
 v.)
)
 CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY, et. al., Appellees.)
)
 _____)

UNDERLYING DECISIONS APPEALED

Appellant attaches the following underlying decisions from which this
appeal arises:

- (1) November 28 2022 *Order and Memorandum Opinion*, Judge Emmet G. Sullivan, ECF Nos. 92-93; adopting
- (2) August 27, 2020, *Report and Recommendation*, Magistrate Judge Deborah A. Robinson, ECF No. 83; and
- (3) April 26, 2024 *Order and Memorandum Opinion*, Judge Loren L. AliKhan, ECF Nos. 103-04.

Date: August 5, 2024.

Respectfully submitted,

/s/ John H. Clarke

John H. Clarke Bar No. 388599

1629 K Street, NW

Suite 300

Washington, DC 20006

(202) 344-0776

john@johnhclarkelaw.com

CERTIFICATE OF SERVICE

I HEREBY CERTIFY that on this 5th day of August, 2024, I have caused the foregoing to be served on Appellees' counsel by filing it in the Court's CM/ECF system. Counsel is a registered user.

/s/ John H. Clarke

**UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
FOR THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA**

ACCURACY IN MEDIA, INC., *et al.*,

Plaintiffs,

v.

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE, *et al.*,

Defendants.

Civil Action No. 14-1589
EGS/DAR

REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION

This case arises from a number of requests made pursuant to the Freedom of Information Act (“FOIA”), 5 U.S.C. § 552, for information related to the 2012 attack on the United States Embassy in Benghazi, Libya. *See* Am. Compl., ECF No. 31. This action was referred to the undersigned United States Magistrate Judge for full case management. *See* 01/07/2019 Referral; *see also* 01/07/2019 Minute Order. Pending for consideration by the undersigned are Defendants’ Motion for Summary Judgment, Plaintiffs’ Cross Motion for Summary Judgment, and Plaintiffs’ Motion for Leave to Propound Interrogatory to the Department of Defense. ECF Nos. 68, 71, 73. Upon consideration of the motions, and the memoranda and attachments in support thereof and in opposition thereto, the undersigned will recommend that Defendants’ Motion for Summary Judgment be granted and that Plaintiffs’ Cross Motion for Summary Judgment be denied. The undersigned will also recommend that Plaintiffs’ Motion for Leave to Propound Interrogatory to the Department of Defense be denied.

I. BACKGROUND

This case involves more than 40 FOIA requests related to the 2012 attack on the United States Embassy in Benghazi, Libya. Plaintiffs, Accuracy in Media, Inc., and seven individuals,¹ directed these requests towards Defendants, the United States Department of Defense (“DoD”), Department of State, Federal Bureau of Investigation (“FBI”),² and Central Intelligence Agency (“CIA”). *See* Am. Compl. ¶¶ 1-16.

Plaintiffs allege that Defendants failed to conduct a reasonable search for some documents, and improperly held certain responsive documents. Pls.’ Opp., Cross-Mot. Summ. J., Mot. Discovery (“Pls.’ Mem.”), ECF No. 71. Defendants maintain that they reasonably searched for responsive records and withheld only those records which are exempt under FOIA. Defs.’ Mem. Supp. Defs.’ Mot. Summ. J. (“Defs.’ Mem.”), ECF No. 68-2.

During the pendency of this action, the parties narrowed the number of issues in dispute.³ The remaining issues raised in the instant motions are (1) whether the searches for responsive documents regarding initial communications and orders from DoD leadership to military components abroad conducted by the DoD were reasonable; (2) whether the DoD permissibly

¹ These individuals are Roger Aronoff, Captain Larry Bailey (Ret.), Lieutenant Colonel Kenneth Benway (Ret.), Colonel Richard Brauer (Ret.), Claire Lopez, Admiral James Lyons (Ret.), and Kevin Michael Shipp. Mr. Lyons has since passed. Joint Status Report, ECF No. 81 ¶ 1.

² The Department of Justice is responsible for the FBI’s compliance with FOIA and is properly named as a Defendant. The undersigned will nonetheless directly refer to the FBI herein.

³ Therefore, though argued in the initial motions for summary judgment, the following documents are no longer in dispute: “Plaintiffs do not challenge (1) withholdings of confidential sources under Exemption 7(D), (2) information protected by privacy afforded by Exemptions 6 and 7(C), (3) the search for records responsive to the portion of plaintiffs’ FOIA request to the State Department cited in ¶ 116(6) of the Second Amended Complaint, (4) whether the State Department properly withheld in full or part a call log and three interview summaries, (5) the CIA’s *Glomar* assertion in response to plaintiffs’ request for records of Gaddafi’s expressed interest in a truce and possible abdication and exile out of Libya, (6) the CIA’s search for records in response to the request for all records of CIA Director Petraeus’s and Deputy Director Morell’s actions and communications for the 24-hour period beginning when first notified, and (7) the DIA’s withholding of four September 12, 2012, records—three intelligence reports and one situation report.” Joint Status Report, ECF 81, ¶ 3. Additionally, the government has produced 54 video clips depicting the United States Consulate in Benghazi, Libya between September 10, 2012, and September 12, 2012, which resolves this initially disputed issue. Joint Status Report, ECF No. 81 ¶ 2.

withheld information concerning military assets available to deploy in Benghazi; (3) whether the CIA permissibly redacted information responsive to the Plaintiffs' requests regarding the CIA Inspector General's investigation of the Benghazi attack, and (4) whether the FBI's *Glomar* response to requests for reports and notes of interviews the FBI allegedly conducted following the Benghazi attack was permissible. *See* ECF No. 65 at 3-6; Joint Status Report ¶ 3. Plaintiffs also moved for leave to propound an interrogatory to the DoD related to the DoD's initial orders and communications immediately following the attack. ECF No. 73.

II. APPLICABLE STANDARDS

A. Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 56

Summary judgment is appropriate where “there is no genuine issue as to any material fact and the moving party is entitled to judgment as a matter of law.” Fed. R. Civ. P. 56(a). “A genuine issue of material fact is one that would change the outcome of the litigation.” *Anderson v. Liberty Lobby, Inc.*, 477 U.S. 242, 248 (1986) (“Only disputes over facts that might affect the outcome of the suit under the governing law will properly preclude the entry of summary judgment.”).

Courts typically decide FOIA cases on motions for summary judgment. *See Brayton v. Office of U.S. Trade Rep.*, 641 F.3d 521, 527 (D.C. Cir. 2011). Where the action is a challenge to an agency's withholding of certain records, “the agency is entitled to summary judgment if no material facts are in dispute and if it demonstrates that each document that falls within the class requested . . . is wholly exempt from [FOIA's] disclosure requirements.” *Shapiro v. DOJ*, 34 F. Supp. 3d 89, 94 (D.D.C. 2014). A court may grant summary judgment based solely on information provided in an agency's affidavits or declarations when those affidavits or

declarations “describe the justifications for nondisclosure with reasonably specific detail, demonstrate that the information withheld logically falls within the claimed exemption, and are not controverted by either contrary evidence in the record nor by evidence of agency bad faith.” *Larson v. Dep’t of State*, 565 F.3d 857, 862 (D.C. Cir. 2009) (citation omitted); *see also Hayden v. NSA*, 608 F.2d 1381, 1386-87 (D.C. Cir. 1979). “Generally, agency’s justification for invoking a FOIA exemption is sufficient if it appears logical or plausible.” *Shapiro v. DOJ*, 893 F.3d 796, 799 (D.C. Cir. 2018) (citation and internal quotation marks omitted).

After a party has moved for summary judgment, the nonmovant may show by affidavit or declaration that it lacks essential facts to respond in opposition to the motion. Fed. Civ. P. 56(d). If the nonmoving party makes a sufficient showing, a court may “(1) defer considering the motion or deny it; (2) allow time to obtain affidavits or declarations or to take discovery; or (3) issue any other appropriate order.” *Id.* An affidavit or declaration offered in support of a Rule 56(d) request must meet three requirements: “(1) [I]t must outline the particular facts [the non-movant] intends to discover and describe why those facts are necessary to the litigation, (2) it must explain why [the non-movant] could not produce the facts in opposition to the motion for summary judgment, . . . and (3) it must show the information is in fact discoverable[.]” *U.S. ex rel. Folliard v. Gov’t Acquisitions, Inc.*, 764 F.3d 19, 26 (D.C. Cir. 2014) (citations and internal quotation marks omitted).

B. The Freedom of Information Act

FOIA generally provides for the disclosure of federal government records to anyone who requests them. 5 U.S.C. § 552. “Congress enacted the FOIA in order to ‘pierce the veil of administrative secrecy and to open agency action to the light of public scrutiny.’” *Morley v.*

CIA, 508 F.3d 1108, 1114 (D.C. Cir. 2007) (quoting *Dep't of Air Force v. Rose*, 425 U.S. 352, 361 (1976)) (internal quotation marks omitted). Certain agency documents are exempt from FOIA requests pursuant to nine statutory exemptions, but generally, “FOIA mandates a ‘strong presumption in favor of disclosure.’” *ACLU v. DOJ*, 655 F.3d 1, 5 (D.C. Cir. 2011) (quoting *Nat'l Ass'n Home Builders v. Norton*, 309 F.3d 26, 32 (D.C. Cir. 2002)). FOIA also requires that “[a]ny reasonably segregable portion of a record shall be provided to any person requesting such record after deletion of the portions which are exempt.” 5 U.S.C. § 552(b). “The court has an affirmative duty to ensure that this requirement is satisfied, even if it must do so *sua sponte*.” *Roseberry-Andrews v. DHS*, 299 F. Supp. 3d 9, 19 (D.D.C. 2018); *Morley*, 508 F.3d at 1123. FOIA contains nine exemptions to disclosure. 5 U.S.C. § 552. Exemptions 1, 3, and 7 are at issue here.

1. Exemption 1

Exemption 1 protects from disclosure any information classified “under criteria established by an Executive order to be kept secret in the interest of national defense or foreign policy and . . . are in fact properly classified pursuant to such Executive order[.]” 5 U.S.C. § 552(b)(1). The current, operative Executive Order is Executive Order 13,526, which allows classification if the following conditions are met:

- (1) an original classification authority is classifying the information;
- (2) the information is owned by, produced by or for, or is under the control of the United States Government;
- (3) the information falls within one or more of the categories of information listed in section 1.4 of this order; and
- (4) the original classification authority determines that the unauthorized disclosure of the information reasonably could be expected to result in damage to the national security, which includes defense against transnational terrorism, and the original classification authority is able to identify or describe the damage.

§ 1.1(a).

Section 1.4 lists categories of classified information, including “(a) military plans, weapons systems, or operations; (b) foreign government information; (c) intelligence activities (including covert action), intelligence sources or methods, or cryptology; (d) foreign relations or foreign activities of the United States, including confidential sources; (e) scientific, technological, or economic matters relating to the national security . . . (g) vulnerabilities or capabilities of systems, installations, infrastructures, projects, plans, or protection services relating to the national security; or (h) the development, production, or use of weapons of mass destruction.”

Under Exemption 1, an agency “bears the burden of proving the applicability of claimed exemptions.” *Am. Civil Liberties Union v. DoD* (“*ACLU I*”), 628 F.3d 612, 619 (D.C. Cir. 2011). In the national security context, a court “must accord substantial weight to an agency’s affidavit concerning the details of the classified status of the disputed record.” *Id.* (quoting *Wolf v. CIA*, 473 F.3d 370, 374 (D.C. Cir. 2007)). Courts in this Circuit “have consistently deferred to executive affidavits predicting harm to the national security, and have found it unwise to undertake searching judicial review.” *Ctr. for Nat. Sec. Studies v. DOJ*, 331 F.3d 918, 927 (D.C. Cir. 2003). Accordingly, an agency will be entitled to summary judgment if the agency submits an affidavit or declaration that “describes the justifications for withholding the information with specific detail, demonstrates that the information withheld logically falls within the claimed exemption, and is not contradicted by contrary evidence in the record or by evidence of the agency’s bad faith.” *Id.* (citing *Larson v. Dep’t of State*, 565 F.3d 857, 865 (D.C. Cir. 2009)). These justifications will be upheld if “logical or plausible.” *Shapiro*, 893 F.3d at 799 (citations omitted).

2. Exemption 3

Exemption 3 protects from disclosure any information “specifically exempted from disclosure by statute.” 5 U.S.C. § 552(b)(3). An agency invoking Exemption 3 must meet two requirements. *See CIA v. Sims*, 471 U.S. 159, 167-68 (1985). First, the invoked statute must qualify as an exempting statute under Exemption 3. *See id.* To qualify as an exempting statute under Exemption 3, a statute must be one which “(i) requires that the matters be withheld from the public in such a manner as to leave no discretion on the issue; or (ii) establishes particular criteria for withholding or refers to particular types of matters to be withheld.” 5 U.S.C. § 552(b)(3)(A). Second, the withheld material must be the kind of material covered by the statute. *See Sims*, 471 U.S. at 167-68.

3. Exemption 7

Exemption 7 protects from disclosure certain records “compiled for law enforcement purposes.” 5 U.S.C. § 552(b)(7). In determining the threshold question of whether the records were compiled for law enforcement purposes, the “focus is on how and under what circumstances the requested files were compiled, and whether the files sought relate to anything that can fairly be characterized as an enforcement proceeding.” *Jefferson v. DOJ*, 284 F.3d 172, 176-77 (D.C. Cir. 2002) (citations and internal quotations omitted). If an agency satisfies that threshold question, the agency must demonstrate that a subsection of Exemption 7 applies.

Exemption 7(A) protects records which “could reasonably be expected to interfere with enforcement proceedings.” 5 U.S.C. § 552(b)(7)(A). Under 7(A), an agency must “show that the material withheld ‘relates to a concrete prospective law enforcement proceeding.’” *Juarez v.*

DOJ, 518 F.3d 54, 58 (D.C. Cir. 2008) (quoting *King v. DOJ*, 830 F.2d 210, 217 (D.C. Cir. 1987).

Exemption 7(D) protects records compiled for law enforcement purposes if release of the records “could reasonably be expected to disclose the identity of a confidential source, including a State, local, or foreign agency or authority or any private institution which furnished information on a confidential basis.” 5 U.S.C. § 552(b)(7)(D). This exemption applies to both the identity and identifying information of a confidential source in addition to information from a confidential source. *See Roth v. DOJ*, 642 F.3d 1161, 1185 (D.C. Cir. 2011). An agency invoking Exemption 7(D) must demonstrate that a source, in either express or implied terms, expected confidentiality. *See id.* at 1184.

III. MOTIONS FOR SUMMARY JUDGMENT

Considering each Defendant in turn, the undersigned concludes that Defendants acted consistently with FOIA’s requirements. Specifically, the undersigned finds that (1) the DoD conducted an adequate search and properly withheld records of available military assets pursuant to Exemption 1; (2) the CIA properly redacted CIA Inspector General files pursuant to Exemptions 1, 3, 6, and 7, and (3) the FBI properly issued a *Glomar* response after receiving a request for witness interview reports of U.S. personnel following the Benghazi attack pursuant to Exemption 7(A).

A. The Department of Defense Conducted an Adequate Search for Records and Properly Withheld Records Related to Military Assets

1. The Department of Defense Conducted an Adequate Search

An agency that has received a FOIA request must “conduct a search reasonably calculated to uncover all relevant documents.” *Truitt v. Dep’t of State*, 897 F.2d 540, 542 (D.C. Cir. 1990) (quoting *Weisberg v. DOJ*, 705 F.2d 1344, 1351 (D.C. Cir. 1983)) (noting that the actual recovery of every existing document is not significant; the relevant issue is “whether the government’s search for responsive documents was adequate”). An adequate search is one that is reasonable, and the agency must demonstrate that its search was reasonable “beyond material doubt.” *Id.* For a court to grant an agency’s motion for summary judgment, “the agency must show that it made a good faith effort to conduct a search for the requested records, using methods which can be reasonably expected to produce the information requested.” *Oglesby v. Dep’t of Army*, 920 F.2d 57, 68 (D.C. Cir. 1990) (holding that the agency is not required to search every record system, but must search the systems “likely to turn up the information requested”). “There is no requirement that an agency search every record system[;]” however, an agency is required to “explain in its affidavit that no other record system was likely to produce responsive documents.” *Id.* To meet this standard, an agency can produce “[a] reasonably detailed affidavit, setting forth the search terms and the type of search performed, and averring that all files likely to contain responsive materials (if such records exist) were searched.” *Reporters Comm. for Freedom of Press v. FBI*, 877 F.3d 399, 402 (D.C. Cir. 2017) (quoting *Oglesby*, 920 F.2d at 68). An agency meeting this burden is “accorded a presumption of good faith, which cannot be rebutted by purely speculative claims about the existence and discoverability of other documents.” *SafeCard Servs., Inc. v. SEC*, 926 F.2d 1197, 1200 (D.C. Cir. 1991) (citation and quotation marks omitted).

The DoD is entitled to such a presumption because it submitted a “reasonably detailed” declaration from Mark Herrington, the Associate Deputy General Counsel in the DoD Office of

General Counsel, explaining how the searches for responsive records were conducted. *Id.*; *see* Herrington Decl., ECF No. 68-4. As is relevant for the instant motions, Mr. Herrington details how, after the Defense Intelligence Agency (“DIA”), European Command (“EUCOM”), Navy, and Marine Corps received FOIA requests related to “[a]ll communications with, and orders to . . . personnel to get ready to deploy, and if applicable, to deploy” in the wake of the Benghazi attack, those components searched all relevant databases and offices for those records.⁴ *See id.* ¶¶ 8-15 *see also* Herrington Decl, Ex. 1, at 1 (requesting such communications and orders from the Navy). These DoD components collectively searched Record Message Traffic databases, safes, email accounts, network shared drives, offices, sub-offices, and shared portals with, where applicable, reasonable search terms and date ranges. *See id.* The DoD subsequently found and partially released an Execution Order (“EXORD”), which is “the initial written order directing EUCOM to execute an action” as well as “Fragmentary Orders, which are written orders issued after the initial EXORD” and a “two-page timeline of DoD actions[.]” *Id.* ¶¶ 17-19.

Africa Command (“AFRICOM”), in response to Plaintiffs’ requests for records from March 2011 related to “Colonel Muammar Gaddafi’s expressed interest in a truce and possible abdication and exile out of Libya,” directed various, relevant personnel to search electronic and paper files in specific AFRICOM offices using various search terms and different spellings for “Gaddafi.” Herrington Decl. ¶¶ 25-26; Herrington Suppl. Decl., ECF No. 77-1 ¶¶ 1-13. Specifically, the search included the paper and electronic files of all AFRICOM’s then-Commander, General Carter Ham, and an unsuccessful attempt to locate the files of Colonel Brian Linvill, who at one point served as the defense attaché at the United States Embassy in Tripoli, Libya. Herrington Suppl. Decl. ¶¶ 1-13. Ultimately, AFRICOM released some records

⁴ Plaintiffs also requested “OPREP-3 PINNACLE report(s)” from DIA. *See id.* ¶ 8.

as a result of its search, but none reference the kind of truce offer that Plaintiffs believe took place. *Id.*; Pls.’ Mem. at 31-32.

In an effort to overcome the presumption of good faith owed to these “reasonably detailed” declarations, Plaintiffs offer “purely speculative claims about the existence and discoverability of other documents.” *Reporters Comm. for Freedom of Press*, 877 F.3d at 402 (citation omitted); *SafeCard Servs.* 926 F.2d at 1200.

a. Plaintiffs Fail to Rebut a Presumption of Good Faith Accorded to AFRICOM’s Search for Gaddafi-Related Records

Plaintiffs’ concerns about AFRICOM’s search have less to do with the adequacy of the search and more to do with AFRICOM’s failure to produce records which would substantiate Plaintiffs’ beliefs. Pls.’ Mem. at 31-32 (detailing purported conversations between Libyan officials and AFRICOM). As this Circuit has repeatedly held, “the adequacy of a search is determined not by the fruits of the search, but by the appropriateness of [its] methods.” *Reporters Comm. for Freedom of Press*, 877 F.3d at 408 (citations and internal quotation marks omitted). Here, the DoD explained in great detail how the search for records related to Plaintiffs’ request took place. After Plaintiffs argued that the DoD’s declaration was insufficient, the DoD filed a supplemental declaration addressing some of those issues, which Plaintiffs do not appear to dispute. *Compare, e.g.*, Pls.’ Mem. at 31-33 (stating that the DoD did not “relate whether it searched General Carter Ham’s records”) with Herrington Suppl. Decl. ¶ 11 (affirming that General Ham’s records were searched); *see generally* Pls.’ Reply, ECF No. 80 (declining to dispute the supplemental declaration).

Plaintiffs offer an affidavit which includes the affiant’s belief about Gaddafi’s willingness to negotiate a truce, as well as certain conversations and actions that occurred within

AFRICOM. Pls.’ Mem. at 31-33. Even if the undersigned took everything in this affidavit as true,⁵ Plaintiffs still do not call into question the DoD’s “methods” but instead state disbelief at the “fruits of the search[.]” *Reporters Comm. for Freedom of Press*, 877 F.3d at 408 (citations omitted). This affidavit is therefore insufficient to overcome a presumption of good faith here.⁶

The undersigned can find only one issue that Plaintiffs raise about the methods of the DoD’s search that was not addressed in the DoD’s supplemental declaration—the DoD’s failure to use the search term “CIA.” Pls.’ Mem. at 32. One extra search term may have produced more responsive records, but this contention is “speculative.” *SafeCard Servs.*, 926 F.2d at 1200. While Plaintiffs believe that the CIA was involved in a truce negotiation attempt, it stands to reason that a search involving the terms “Gaddafi” and the others that the DoD used would “turn up” those records. Herrington Decl. ¶ 26; Herrington Suppl. Decl. ¶ 13; *Oglesby*, 920 F.2d at 68. The undersigned therefore recommends granting Defendants’ motion as it relates to the adequacy of the DoD’s search for these records.

b. Congressional Testimony Does Not Rebut the Presumption of Good Faith

⁵ Defendants submit that these affidavits do not conform with Rule 56(c) and therefore should be stricken at least in part. The undersigned does not need to reach this question, however, because, if fully credited and based on personal knowledge, these affidavits offer no real material facts tending to undercut the reasonableness of DoD’s search. *See* Kubic. Aff., ECF No. 71-3 ¶¶ 3-9 (stating only that the affiant had several conversations, not that any records were created). In the alternative, the undersigned would recommend striking paragraphs three through nine because the affiant relies on hearsay, states facts that are not based on the affiant’s personal knowledge, and provides information that is not relevant. *See id.*; *Hall v. CIA*, 538 F. Supp. 2d 64, 72 (D.D.C. 2008) (granting motion to strike paragraphs of certain affidavits because the statements were conclusory and contained no foundation). As explained later in this Report and Recommendation, the affidavit of retired Admiral James Lyons also has no impact on the court’s weighing of the material facts here because he merely states his opinion, instead of any facts, about current national security risks. *See* Lyons Aff., ECF No. 71-2 ¶ 2 (“The sole purpose of this affidavit is to set forth my opinion . . .”); *Waldie v. Schlesinger*, 509 F.2d 508, 510 (D.C. Cir. 1974) (holding that a court may not rely on affidavits consisting of “conclusory opinions” in summary judgment context). In the alternative, the undersigned recommends striking Admiral Lyons’ opinions because they are not based on personal knowledge and are not relevant. Lyons Aff. ¶¶ 2-5.

⁶ For the same reason, the existence or non-existence of a “PINNACLE OPREP-3” Report, a version of which was actually released to Plaintiff, is beside the point and does not overcome a presumption of good faith here. *See* Pls.’ Mem. at 30-31.

Plaintiffs also challenge the adequacy of the DoD's search for responsive documents related to initial orders and communications from DoD leadership to DoD components abroad following the attack because "the DoD's unequivocal position is that the records do not exist, even while it has a history of unequivocally representing to Congress, and to the public, that the records do exist." Pls.' Mem. at 4. In reviewing the testimony, the undersigned does not find grounds to overcome the presumption of good faith accorded to the DoD.

Former Secretary of Defense, Leon Panetta, testified before a House Select Committee that he received word of the attack in Benghazi around 4:32 pm EST on September 11, 2012. *See* Clarke Decl., ECF No. 71-1, Ex. 3 ("Panetta Test.") at 12. After speaking to President Obama in the Oval Office and returning to the Pentagon for further informational meetings, Secretary Panetta issued orders to "not only prepare to deploy but deploy." *See id.* at 15. He testified that these orders were verbal and later released in the written EXORD, the first written order, at 3:00 am. *Id.* 15-16. Defendants released the EXORD record as well as a timeline of all communications following the initial knowledge of the attack. *See* Herrington Decl. ¶ 18.

Plaintiffs insist that there must have been earlier written orders and communications, but this contention is speculative. Secretary Panetta conveyed his initial orders verbally, and it appears likely that he did not immediately reduce them to written form. *See* Panetta Test. at 12. Any gap in time between these verbal orders and the creation of the EXORD record that the DoD released may have simply been the result of administrative delay. *See id.* at 45 ("[M]y view was, 'Go,' and I assumed that they were moving as expeditiously as they could."); *see also* Clarke Decl., Ex. 4 ("Select Committee Report") at 56 ("During those crucial hours between the Secretary's order and the actual movement of forces, no one stood watch to steer the Defense Department's bureaucratic behemoth forward to ensure the Secretary's orders were carried out

with the urgency demanded by the lives at stake in Benghazi.”). Secretary Panetta’s testimony and the timeline of communications provided by the DoD to Plaintiffs all support the idea that no written records or communications were created prior to the 3:00 a.m. EXORD. *See* Herrington Decl. ¶ 18. (“This EXORD that EUCOM produced to Plaintiffs is the first written order.”); *see* Clarke Decl., Ex. 1 at 3 (explaining that at approximately 6:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m. “Secretary Panetta directs (provides verbal authorization) for the following actions: [to direct forces and assets to prepare to deploy]” and that the EXORD was issued at approximately 3:00 a.m.).

Plaintiffs’ main contention is that this official timeline of events is doubtful; however, the undersigned finds that this contention is of little significance. *See, e.g.,* Pls.’ Mem. at 14 (expressing skepticism that Secretary Panetta could have travelled from a meeting in the White House to the Pentagon in 30 minutes). Plaintiffs must instead point to concrete evidence of the existence of particular records that the DoD failed to produce. *See SafeCard Servs.*, 926 F.2d at 1200. Setting aside Plaintiffs’ argument that the DoD’s timeline is inaccurate, the undersigned can only find two allegations of specific, actual records which, according to Plaintiffs, must exist.⁷ *See* Pls.’ Mem. at 6-7 (referencing an “Ops Alert” and a record of a conference call). Even if there were an “Ops Alert” from the State Department in writing and in the DoD’s possession,⁸ Plaintiffs do not show how this record would be responsive to Plaintiffs’ request for “communications with, and orders to . . . personnel to get ready to deploy, and if applicable, to deploy” if the record is an inter-agency communication describing the attack rather than a communication with personnel about deployment. *See* Herrington Decl, Ex. 1, at 1. Plaintiffs’

⁷ Plaintiffs allege certain other orders and communications but, even if they existed in some sense, Plaintiffs do not point to evidence of records that would exist in the physical possession of the DoD. *See e.g.,* Pls.’ Mem. at 30-32 (alleging stand down orders that were relayed over the phone).

⁸ To be clear, Plaintiffs do not specifically allege, and the record does not establish, that the Ops Alert was in writing and in DoD’s possession.

allegation of a record from a conference call fares little better because Plaintiffs do not point to any concrete evidence suggesting that a record memorializing the call was created. Thus, assertions that these records exist amount to “purely speculative claims about the existence and discoverability of other documents.” *SafeCard Servs.* 926 F.2d at 1200.

Moreover, even if some records of earlier initial orders or communications exist, there is no evidence that the DoD failed to search for them in good faith. *See* Herrington Decl. ¶ 18; *see* Pls.’ Mem. at 4 (noting that “plaintiffs are not in a position to dispute the particulars of the DoD’s search”). FOIA requires only that agencies reasonably search for responsive records, but “[a]n agency’s ‘failure to turn up a particular document or mere speculation that as yet uncovered documents might exist,’ . . . does not undermine the determination that the agency conducted an adequate search for the requested records.” *Bigwood v. DoD*, 132 F. Supp. 3d 124, 143 (D.D.C. 2015) (citation omitted). Thus, the undersigned finds that the DoD’s search was reasonable and therefore adequate.

2. The DoD Properly Withheld Records Related to Military Assets Pursuant to Exemption 1

Plaintiffs challenge the DoD’s decision to withhold records of DoD assets that were available to deploy to Benghazi. In the course of the parties’ briefing, Plaintiffs narrowed their challenge to the DoD’s withholding of “[m]aps depicting all assets that could have been dispatched to the Benghazi mission or the CIA annex facility on September 11th and 12th, 2012[.]” *See* Defs.’ Mem. at 2; Pls.’ Mem. at 2 n.7, 27-28 (citation omitted). These maps include “the numbers and locations of ships, submarines, response forces, and aircraft surrounding Benghazi, Libya” as well the “numbers of military personnel located in particular countries during that time” and “the transit time required for each available asset to reach

Benghazi.” Malloy Decl., ECF No. 69-1 ¶ 9. The DoD explains that this information remains classified at the “Secret” level because, “[e]ven with the passage of time, how the DoD’s forces are positioned at a particular time could provide potentially damaging and/or threatening insight to adversaries.” *Id.* ¶ 11. The DoD classified the maps pursuant to Sections 1.4(a), 1.4(d), and 1.4(g) of Executive Order 13,526 because the information in the maps includes “military operations conducted overseas, describes foreign activities of the United States, and provides transit times and a list of assets that demonstrate the capabilities of the DoD’s plans and infrastructure.” *Id.* ¶ 10.

The undersigned must give this explanation “substantial weight.” *ACLU I*, 628 F.3d at 619 (citation omitted). In doing so, the undersigned finds that the application of Exemption 1 to these maps is both “logical” and “plausible.” *Shapiro*, 893 F.3d at 799 (citation omitted). There is no reason to doubt that past maps of military assets “could provide potentially damaging and/or threatening insight to adversaries regarding the DoD’s interests, intent, and potential operations in these volatile regions of the world.” Malloy Decl, ¶ 11. In the national security context, where courts “lack the expertise necessary to second-guess such agency opinions[,]” “searching judicial review” of this potential future harm is inappropriate. *ACLU I*, 628 F.3d at 619 (citation omitted); *Ctr. for Nat. Sec. Studies*, 331 F.3d at 927.

Plaintiffs’ argument that these maps should no longer be classified is unavailing. Relying on an affidavit from retired Admiral Lyons, Plaintiffs argue that information about military assets in 2012 no longer poses national security concerns because the location and number of military assets have changed since then. *See* Pls.’ Mem. at 27-30. However, the Lyons Affidavit fails to create a genuine dispute of material fact regarding whether these maps fall under Exemption 1. Admiral Lyons was retired for several years prior to submitting his affidavit, so his opinion about

the nature of current or future military assets is limited at best. *See Lyons Aff.*, ECF No. 71-2 ¶ 1. As Admiral Lyons effectively acknowledged, he offered an “opinion” based on his experience, but this opinion is not based on personal knowledge of these records or the present risks to the military, so the undersigned accords these opinions little weight.⁹ *See id.* ¶ 2 (“The sole purpose of this affidavit is to set forth my opinion”); *Waldie*, 509 F.2d at 510 (holding that a court may not rely on affidavits consisting of “conclusory opinions” in summary judgment context).

Plaintiffs’ argument that these maps should not be confidential because some information is in the public domain fares little better. Pls.’ Mem. at 29-30 (referencing some, limited public information about aircraft in Europe). This Circuit “has repeatedly rejected the argument that the government’s decision to disclose some information prevents the government from withholding other information about the same subject.” *ACLU I*, 628 F.3d at 625. Plaintiffs do not attempt to demonstrate, as this Circuit requires under these circumstances, that the following criteria is satisfied: “(1) the information requested must be as specific as the information previously released; (2) the information requested must match the information previously disclosed; and (3) the information requested must already have been made public through an official and documented disclosure.” *Id.* at 620-21 (citations omitted). In any event, as Plaintiffs point out, the DoD has steadfastly resisted release of this information, so the third prong of this test cannot be satisfied. *See* Pls.’ Mem. at 29-30 (noting that the DoD did not cooperate with the Select Committee in its requests for information about available military assets). Thus, the undersigned recommends granting Defendants’ motion with respect to the DoD.¹⁰

⁹ As previously discussed, the undersigned alternatively recommends striking this declaration instead of according it little weight.

¹⁰ While Plaintiffs do not challenge the DoD’s segregability analysis, the undersigned has “an affirmative duty to ensure that this requirement is satisfied, even if it must do so *sua sponte*.” *Roseberry-Andrews*, 299 F. Supp. 3d at

B. The CIA Properly Withheld CIA Inspector General Files

Plaintiffs challenge the CIA's redaction of records related to a complaint sent to the CIA Inspector General David Buckley ("IG") following the Benghazi attack. The CIA has released 25 redacted pages of responsive records (the "IG Files") about the complaint, starting with an email to the CIA IG stating that "the CIA has not been provided fulsome details regarding" the Benghazi attack. *See* Clarke Decl., Ex. 8 ("IG Files") at 82. These records also include an email from the IG to other CIA personnel summarizing some of the information, which was "second and third hand[,]" and an interview report. *Id.* at 85-94.

The CIA contends these redactions were proper pursuant to Exemptions 1, 3, 6, and 7, and that it has disclosed all other reasonably segregable portions of the IG Files to Plaintiffs. *See* Shiner Decl., ECF 68-5 ¶ 1. Plaintiffs emphasize that they do not seek identifying information of any CIA personnel, but instead seek the "specific subject matter" underling the complaints, which, according to Plaintiffs, the CIA is required to provide by law. Pls.' Mem. at 37.

Plaintiffs' main contention fails on multiple fronts. The law which Plaintiffs cite as imposing this requirement¹¹ applies to "operational files," a status that the CIA has never asserted for the records in question. 50 U.S.C. § 3141(c)(3); *see* Shiner Suppl. Decl., ECF No. 77-2 ¶¶ 4-5. Further, to the extent that FOIA broadly imposes an obligation to produce non-exempt portions of records like the subject matter of a record, the subject matter of these records is apparent from the face of them. These records reveal a complaint to the CIA IG concerning an

19. The undersigned finds that the DoD has fulfilled this requirement because of the classified nature of the map and the fact that a map is not as readily segregable as other kinds of records. *See also* Malloy Decl. ¶ 12 (affirming that the DoD reviewed the maps for segregable, non-exempt information).

¹¹ Plaintiffs cite 50 U.S.C. § 431, which has since been re-codified at 50 U.S.C. § 3141.

individual's belief that the CIA did not have accurate and full information about the Benghazi attack. Plaintiffs, by their own admission, instead seek the "details" of the IG Files which, as the undersigned will now explain, are protected from disclosure by Exemptions 1, 3, and 7. *See* Pls.' Reply at 3-4 ("What 'fulsome details' had Director Petraeus not been told?").

1. The CIA Properly Withheld Portions of the IG Files Pursuant to Exemption 1

The CIA has adequately demonstrated that some information in the IG Files is protected pursuant to Exemption 1 because the CIA has proffered "a plausible assertion that information is properly classified." *Morley*, 508 F.3d at 1124. The CIA has offered the affidavit of its Information Review Officer, Antoinette B. Shiner, which includes the explanation that Section 1.1(a) of Executive Order 13,526 is satisfied because Ms. Shiner is qualified to classify information, the information is owned and controlled by the federal government, and that Section 1.4(c) of Executive Order 13,526 is satisfied because the "Secret" information concerns "intelligence activities (including covert action), [or] intelligence sources or methods," which "could reasonably be expected to result in serious damage to the national security" should the information be released. Shiner Decl. ¶ 34. Specifically, the redacted information contains "code words, locations, names of covert personnel, as well as references to classified Agency programs, functions, assets, and activities unrelated to the September 2012 attacks." *Id.* ¶ 35. Such disclosure can "permit foreign intelligence services and other groups to fit disparate pieces of information together to discern or deduce the identity of the source or nature of the project or location for which the code word stands," thereby injuring national security interests. *Id.* ¶ 37. The undersigned finds that the CIA has "describe[d] the justifications for withholding the information with specific detail [and] demonstrate[d] that the information withheld logically falls

within the claimed exemption[.]” *Ctr. for Nat. Sec. Studies*, 331 F.3d at 927 (citation omitted). Moreover, Plaintiffs point to no “evidence in the record or . . . evidence of the agency’s bad faith.” *Id.* Thus, while Plaintiffs assert that the substance of the IG Files cannot be protected under FOIA, the undersigned finds that, to the extent the CIA withheld substantive information concerning “programs, functions, assets, and activities[.]” such information is classified and protected under Exemption 1. Pls.’ Mem. at 37; Shiner Decl. ¶ 35. The undersigned therefore recommends granting Defendants’ motion as it relates to the CIA’s Exemption 1 withholdings.

2. The CIA Properly Withheld Identifying Information and Code Words Pursuant to Exemption 3

Plaintiffs agree with Defendants that disclosure of identifying information of CIA personnel would damage national security. Pls.’ Mem. at 37. Additionally, Plaintiffs no longer dispute “privacy”-related withholdings pursuant to Exemption 6. Joint Status Report, ECF No. 81 ¶ 2. The extent to which Plaintiffs concede the similar applicability of Exemption 3 is unclear. Nonetheless, in fully reviewing the CIA’s withholdings pursuant to Exemption 3, the undersigned finds that the CIA offers plausible explanations.

To support its withholdings under Exemption 3, the CIA must first point to a statute which “(i) requires that the matters be withheld from the public in such a manner as to leave no discretion on the issue; or (ii) establishes particular criteria for withholding or refers to particular types of matters to be withheld.” *Id.* § 552(b)(3)(A); *Sims*, 471 U.S. at 167-68. The CIA asserts that two such statutes apply: Section 6 of the Central Intelligence Agency Act of 1949 (the “CIA Act”) and Section 102A(i)(1) of the National Security Act of 1947. Shiner Decl. ¶¶ 41, 43. The undersigned finds, and Plaintiffs do not dispute, that these are exempting statutes under

Exemption 3. *See, e.g., Halperin v. CIA*, 629 F.2d 144, 147 (D.C. Cir. 1980) (noting that this Circuit has “consistently held” that both are exempting statutes which the CIA can invoke).

Section 6 of the CIA Act, 50 U.S.C. § 3507, provides that the CIA shall be exempt from the provisions of “any other law which require the publication or disclosure of the organization, functions, names, official titles, salaries, or numbers of personnel employed by the Agency.” 50 U.S.C. §3507. Thus, “[t]he CIA Act does not protect *all* information about CIA functions generally; it more narrowly protects information that would reveal that a given function is one “of personnel employed by the Agency.” *Nat’l Sec. Counselors v. CIA* (“*Nat’l Sec. Counselors IP*”), 960 F. Supp. 2d 101, 179-80 (D.D.C. 2013). Here, the undersigned is satisfied that the CIA’s withholdings comport with the narrow scope of the CIA Act because, pursuant to this law, the CIA has only withheld “information concerning the organization, names, or official titles of personnel employed by the CIA[.]” Shiner Decl. ¶ 41.

Under the National Security Act, the Director of National Intelligence “shall protect intelligence sources and methods from unauthorized disclosure.” 50 U.S.C. § 3024(i)(1). Courts in this Circuit construe this provision broadly to protect information that “*relates* to intelligence sources and methods” and information which “can reasonably be expected to lead to unauthorized disclosure of intelligence sources and methods.” *Leopold v. Cent. Intelligence Agency*, 380 F. Supp. 3d 14, 28 (D.D.C. 2019) (“*Leopold IP*”) (citations and internal quotation marks omitted). This provision grants the CIA “very broad authority to protect all sources of intelligence information from disclosure.” *Sims*, 471 U.S. at 168-69. It is a “near-blanket FOIA exemption” which covers public and non-public information because “bits and pieces of data may aid in piecing together bits of other information even when the individual piece is not of obvious importance in itself.” *Leopold v. Cent. Intelligence Agency*, 106 F. Supp. 3d 51, 57-58

(D.D.C. 2015) (“*Leopold I*”) (citing *Whalen v. U.S. Marine Corps*, 407 F. Supp. 2d 54, 59 n. 5 (D.D.C. 2005)). The CIA has invoked the National Security Act to protect the same “code words and names of covert personnel” for which the CIA has also invoked Exemption 1. Shiner Decl. ¶ 44. This information easily qualifies as “intelligence sources and methods” under the National Security Act. 50 U.S.C. § 3024(i)(1). Thus, the undersigned recommends granting Defendants’ motion as it relates to the CIA’s withholdings pursuant to Exemption 3.

3. The CIA Properly Invoked Exemption 7 to Protect the Substance of the IG Files

Exemption 7(D) authorizes the withholding of information compiled for law enforcement purposes if release of the information “could reasonably be expected to disclose the identity of a confidential source, including a State, local, or foreign agency or authority or any private institution which furnished information on a confidential basis.” 5 U.S.C. § 552(b)(7)(D). Here, this exemption applies to both the identity and identifying information of the confidential source in addition to information from the confidential source. *See Roth*, 642 F.3d at 1185. The information here relates to “an investigation pertaining to the September 2012 attacks in Benghazi, Libya.” Shiner Decl. ¶ 54. The source was a “confidential source” because the CIA offered explicit or implicit assurances that his or her identity would not be revealed. *See id.*; *Roth*, 642 F.3d at 1184. The underlying subject matter of the initial complaint would tend to provide enough information to reveal the identification of the reporting individual, which is why the CIA has a policy of refusing to disclose both identification of the individual and the substance of their statements. *See id.* Thus, not only is the identification of the source of the complaint to the IG protected, the information provided is also covered by Exemption 7(D) because the information would tend to reveal a confidential source’s identity. The undersigned

recommends granting Defendants' motion as it related to the CIA's withholdings pursuant to Exemption 7(D).¹²

C. The FBI Fails to Adequately Explain its “Glomar Response” But Has Not Officially Acknowledged Witness Interview Reports

Through a “*Glomar* response,” an agency “neither confirms nor denies the existence of the requested records.” *Roth*, 642 F.3d at 1171. FOIA typically requires that an agency “acknowledge the existence of information responsive to a FOIA request and provide specific, non-conclusory justifications for withholding that information[.]” *Id.* at 1178 (citation omitted). A *Glomar* response is allowed only if “confirming or denying the existence of records would itself cause harm cognizable under an FOIA exception[.]” *Id.* (citation and internal quotation marks omitted). A party can challenge a *Glomar* response either by challenging the agency's contention that “confirming or denying the existence of records would cause harm under the FOIA exception invoked by the agency[.]” or by demonstrating that the agency has already “officially acknowledged the existence of the record[.]” *James Madison Project v. DOJ*, 302 F. Supp. 3d 12, 20 (D.D.C. 2018) (citation omitted); *Moore v. CIA*, 666 F.3d 1330, 1333 (D.C. Cir. 2011) (citation omitted).

At issue here is the FBI's response that, pursuant to Exemption 7(A), the FBI will neither confirm or nor deny the existence of responsive records regarding certain witness interview reports that Plaintiffs allege were created during witness interviews of United States personnel in Germany following the Benghazi attack. Hardy Decl., ECF No. 68-7 ¶¶ 13-16. These reports,

¹² Beyond asserting that the substance of the IG Files is subject to disclosure, Plaintiffs do not otherwise challenge the CIA's segregability analysis. Nonetheless, the undersigned has “an affirmative duty to ensure that this requirement is satisfied, even if it must do so *sua sponte*.” *Roseberry-Andrews*, 299 F. Supp. 3d at 19. In reviewing the IG Files, the undersigned finds that the CIA has partially released all reasonably segregable information. *See also* Shiner Decl. ¶ 49 (affirming that the CIA reviewed the IG Files for segregable, non-exempt information).

known as “FD-302s” or 302 reports, are forms used by FBI agents “to record information which they obtain through witness interviews, . . . grand jury subpoenas, proffer agreements and immunity statements, and from other federal agencies.” *Citizens for Resp. and Ethics in Wash. v. DOJ*, 746 F.3d 1082, 1089 (D.C. Cir. 2014). The FBI explains that it is “actively investigating the Benghazi attacks” and that confirming or denying the existence of these records “undermines the integrity of the ongoing investigations.” Hardy Decl. ¶¶ 13-16. Thus, according to the FBI, confirming or denying the existence of these records “could reasonably be expected to interfere with enforcement proceedings.” 5 U.S.C. § 552(b)(7)(A).

Plaintiffs do not contest that these 302 reports would be compiled for a law enforcement purpose, and that the enforcement proceedings are ongoing. Plaintiffs challenge this *Glomar* response by arguing that witness accounts are already public and that the targets of any investigation already have the information within the 302 reports. Pls.’ Mem. at 42-45. It is unclear whether Plaintiffs assert that the FBI’s acknowledgement or denial would not “cause harm under the FOIA exception invoked by the agency” or that the FBI has already “officially acknowledged the existence of the record[.]” *James Madison Project*, 302 F. Supp. 3d at 20 (citation omitted); *Moore*, 666 F.3d at 1333 (citation omitted). Regardless, “the burden is on the agency to sustain its action,” so the undersigned must determine whether the FBI’s explanation of its *Glomar* response is “logical or plausible.” *Am. Civil Liberties Union v. CIA*, (“*ACLU IP*”) 710 F.3d 422, 427 (D.C. Cir. 2013) (citations and internal quotation marks omitted).

1. While the FBI Explains Harms That Would Result from the Disclosure of 302 Reports, the FBI Fails to Explain Harms That Would Result From Not Issuing a *Glomar* Response

The FBI offers reasonably detailed potential harms that would result from disclosing any substance associated with the 302 reports. Specifically, a witness or survivor may face retaliation or harassment if a witness has or has not cooperated with the FBI. Hardy Decl. ¶ 16. Moreover, disclosure of any information related to the “direction, scope, pace, particular witness statements and focus of the investigations” would harm “the integrity of the ongoing investigations.” *Id.* ¶ 15. To be sure, these are harms that are recognized under Exemption 7(A). *Manning v. DOJ*, 234 F. Supp. 3d 26, 36 (D.D.C. 2017) (holding that such harms are covered under Exemption 7(A)); *see also Tipograph v. DOJ*, 83 F. Supp. 3d 234, 239 (D.D.C. 2015) (holding that the 7(A) exemption protects against “destruction of evidence, chilling and intimidation of witnesses, and revelation of the scope and nature of the Government’s investigation).

It does not necessarily follow, however, that “confirming or denying the existence of records would itself cause harm” that is protected by Exemption 7(A). *ACLU II*, 710 F.3d at 426 (quoting *Roth*, 642 F.3d at 1178). The FBI maintains that confirming or denying the existence of 302 reports would confirm or deny whether specific witnesses participated. Hardy Decl. ¶ 16. All of the FBI’s predictions of harm seem to share this premise. *See id.* ¶¶ 13-16 (stating, *inter alia*, that “the FBI can neither confirm nor deny the existence of any specific witness accounts”). It does not appear that Plaintiffs requested the 302 report associated with any particular witness. *See Am. Compl.* at 50 (requesting “September 15th or 16th FBI 302 Interview Reports, and corresponding handwritten notes, of interviews conducted in Germany of United States personnel who had been in the Benghazi mission and the Benghazi CIA annex during the September 11th and 12th attacks on those facilities”). The premise that acknowledging the existence of any 302 report would necessarily reveal the existence of specific 302 reports may

well be true, but it is unexplained. The undersigned is mindful that the FBI's predictions of harm are owed significant deference, but the undersigned cannot ignore this gap in the FBI's explanation. Thus, the undersigned recommends denying Defendants' motion without prejudice with respect to the FBI's *Glomar* response so that Defendants can offer a more "logical or plausible" explanation. *ACLU II*, 710 F.3d at 427 (citation omitted); *see Santos v. DEA*, 357 F. Supp. 2d 33, 38 (D.D.C. 2004) (ordering supplementation where previous agency affidavit did not provide sufficient explanation).

2. The FBI Has Not Officially Acknowledged the 302 Reports

Plaintiffs' other challenge to the FBI's *Glomar* response—that the FBI has already officially acknowledged the 302 reports in question—is unconvincing. "[T]o overcome an agency's *Glomar* response when relying on an official acknowledgement, 'the requesting plaintiff must pinpoint an agency record that both matches the plaintiff's request and has been publicly and officially acknowledged by the agency.'" *James Madison Project*, 302 F.Supp.3d at 21 (quoting *Moore*, 666 F.3d at 1333). For this "official acknowledgement" doctrine to apply, this Circuit requires that: "(1) the information requested must be as specific as the information previously released; (2) the information requested must match the information previously disclosed; and (3) the information requested must already have been made public through an official and documented disclosure." *ACLU I*, 628 F.3d at 620-21 (citations omitted).

There is no indication that the 302 reports in question "have been made public through an official and documented disclosure." *Id.* The FBI asserts that it has "never acknowledged the existence of the alleged FBI 302s, which are the subject of Plaintiffs' request. Nor has the FBI ever made the alleged FBI 302s or the information purportedly contained therein available to the

public.” Hardy Decl. ¶ 7. The closest that Plaintiffs get to official acknowledgement is a reference to FBI interviews in a Senate Committee Report:

On September 15th and 16th, officials from the FBI conducted face-to face interviews in Germany of the U.S. personnel who had been on the compound in Benghazi during the attack. The U.S. personnel who were interviewed saw no indications that there had been a protest prior to the attack. Information from those interviews was shared on a secure video teleconference on the afternoon of the 16th with FBI and other IC officials in Washington; it is unclear whether the question of whether a protest took place was discussed during this video conference.

“Flashing Red: A Special Report On The Terrorist Attack At Benghazi,” United States Senate Committee On Homeland Security And Governmental Affairs (“Senate Committee Report”) 28 (Dec.30, 2012). A footnote reveals that the Report’s authors obtained this information from a “Committee member briefing[.]” *Id.* There is no indication that this briefing was open to the public, so any interviews could not have been “publicly and officially acknowledged by the agency.” *Moore*, 666 F.3d at 1333. Plaintiffs’ reference to a book-turned-movie concerning the Benghazi attack is even less compelling because there is no indication that the FBI itself released anything through the book or movie. *See Wolf*, 473 F.3d at 378 (“An agency’s official acknowledgment of information by prior disclosure, however, cannot be based on mere public speculation, no matter how widespread.”).

Even if the FBI had acknowledged the existence of some interviews, confirming or denying the existence of the 302 reports would still not “match the information previously disclosed[.]” *ACLU I*, 628 F.3d at 620-21. There is a difference between acknowledging the existence of interviews and acknowledging the existence of 302 reports about the same interviews. “This is not hair-splitting” because courts in this Circuit must have an “insistence on exactitude” in this context. *James Madison Project*, 302 F. Supp. 3d at 29; *Wolf*, 473 F.3d at 378. In *Nat’l Sec. Counselors v. CIA* (“*Nat’l Sec. Counselors I*”), 898 F. Supp. 2d 233 (D.D.C.

2012), the court was faced with a similar question—whether an agency could issue a *Glomar* response for “processing notes” that were associated with “referral memoranda and correspondence” for the same practice. *Id.* at 289. The court concluded that even if the agency acknowledged “referral memoranda and correspondence,” the agency could issue a *Glomar* response for the “processing notes” even if both sets of documents related to the same underlying information because these were still “separate documents.” *Id.* Thus, there is no “match” here because a Congressional briefing which references interviews is “separate” from any possible 302 reports about interviews. *ACLU I*, 628 F.3d at 620-21; *Nat’l Sec. Counselors I*, 898 F. Supp. 2d at 289. For the same reasons as discussed above, there is even less of a “match” between a book-turned-movie about the Benghazi attacks and any possible 302 reports. *ACLU I*, 628 F.3d at 620-21. Thus, while undersigned recommends denying Defendants’ motion as it relates to the FBI’s *Glomar* response, the undersigned does not recommend the official acknowledgment doctrine as a basis for doing so.

IV. MOTION TO PROPOUND INTERROGATORY TO DOD

“It is well established that discovery is rare in FOIA cases.” *Cole v. Rochford*, 285 F. Supp. 3d 73, 76 (D.D.C. 2018). Discovery is only appropriate if a FOIA plaintiff “raises a sufficient question as to the agency’s good faith in searching for or processing documents” or “agency affidavits do not provide information specific enough to enable [the plaintiff] to challenge the procedures utilized.” *Id.* (citations and internal quotation marks omitted) If a FOIA plaintiff rests its request for discovery on “highly speculative criticism” of an agency’s search, the request must be denied. *Accuracy in Media, Inc. v. Nat’l Park Serv.*, 194 F.3d 120, 125 (D.C. Cir. 1999). In the rare event that discovery is appropriate, courts limit such discovery

to the adequacy of an agency's search. *See Landmark Legal Found. v. EPA*, 959 F. Supp. 2d 175, 184 (D.D.C. 2013) (approving "limited" discovery into whether agency excluded agency leaders from search); *Bangoura v. Dep't of Army*, Civ. No 05-0311, 2006 WL 3734164, at *6 (approving "limited discovery regarding the adequacy of Defendant's search"); *Citizens for Responsibility & Ethics in Washington v. DOJ*, Civ. No. 05-2078(EGS), 2006 WL 1518964, at *6 (D.D.C. June 1, 2006) (approving "limited discovery" including depositions of those involved in processing the request at issue). Thus, even where a FOIA plaintiff demonstrates bad faith, the scope of discovery is limited to "the actions of the individuals who conducted the search." *In re Clinton*, No. 20-5056, -- F.3d --, 2020 WL 4745104, at *6 (D.C. Cir. Aug. 14, 2020).

In addition to moving for summary judgment on all issues, Plaintiffs have moved for leave to propound the following interrogatory to the DoD pursuant to Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 56(d):

State the times of all electronic, verbal, and written, communications, from 3:32 p.m., through 3:00 a.m., by and among all DoD components, the total number of individuals on the communication, their titles and locations, and the substance of that communication. Include in your answer a description of all records, in any form, containing, reflecting, or otherwise corroborating, that communication.

See Pls.' Mem. at 35.

Plaintiffs do not deny that the affidavits submitted by the government were lacking in any detail regarding the sufficiency of the DoD's search for responsive records. *Id.* at 33. Instead, Plaintiffs contend that "plaintiffs have not been allowed to discover the facts of when, and by what means, communications with assets were first made." *Id.*

The undersigned has already concluded that the DoD is entitled to "presumption of good faith" because of its detailed explanation of its search and withholdings. *Reporters Comm. for Freedom of Press*, 877 F.3d at 402 (citation omitted). In addition, the undersigned has

concluded that Plaintiffs have not overcome this presumption of good faith. In the discovery context, Plaintiffs' contentions fare no better, particularly because Plaintiffs concede that they do not "dispute the particulars of the DoD's search[.]" Pls.' Mem. at 4. This concession alone is fatal to Plaintiffs' discovery request because it shows that regardless of Secretary Panetta's actions or the exact timeline of events following the Benghazi attack, Plaintiffs do not "raise[] a sufficient question as to the agency's good faith in *searching for or processing documents*" or provide any basis to conclude that "agency affidavits do not provide information specific enough to enable [the plaintiff] to *challenge the procedures utilized.*" *Cole*, 285 F. Supp. 3d at 76 (citations omitted) (emphasis added).

Moreover, to the extent that Plaintiffs allege that the DoD acted in bad faith as a general matter, these claims are "highly speculative." *Accuracy in Media*, 194 F.3d at 125. It is unclear whether Plaintiffs actually allege bad faith issue because the words "bad faith" do not appear anywhere in Plaintiffs' briefing. Plaintiffs nonetheless come close in doubting the DoD's official version of events. As the undersigned has observed, "[f]ew cases in this Circuit address what is sufficient to demonstrate 'bad faith.' Many more cases address what is not bad faith." *Khatchadourian v. Def. Intelligence Agency*, No. 1:16-CV-311-RCL/DAR, -- F. Supp. 3d --, 2020 WL 1309941, at *42 (D.D.C. Mar. 19, 2020) (collecting cases).

Plaintiffs' contentions about the DoD's inaccurate timeline of events do not meet this Circuit's standard because Plaintiffs' claims amount to a "mere allegation of agency misrepresentation[.]" *Id.* (quoting *Hayden v. NSA/Cent. Sec. Serv.*, 608 F.2d 1381, 1387 (D.C. Cir. 1979)). According to Plaintiffs, Secretary Panetta and others must have given orders prior to 3:00 am, and these orders must have been in writing. ECF No. 75 at 2-3. Plaintiffs' assertion rests on the assumption that, when Secretary Panetta said that his orders were later reduced to

writing, he could not have been referencing the EXORD record that Plaintiffs have already received. *Id.* Thus, according to Plaintiffs, there are “orders and communications that the DOD now claims never existed” and these orders and communications must be in writing. *Id.*; Pls.’ Mem. at 4. In the absence of specific evidence to the contrary, Plaintiffs’ insistence that their assumptions and speculative assertions are true cannot rebut a presumption of good faith. *Accuracy in Media*, 194 F.3d at 125. The undersigned notes that Plaintiffs’ version of events is particularly speculative because, even according to Plaintiffs’ account, many orders prior to the EXORD were not in written form. *See e.g.*, Pls.’ Mem. at 30-32 (alleging stand-down orders that were relayed over the phone). Thus, the undersigned recommends denial of Plaintiffs’ Rule 56(d) request because Plaintiffs have not pointed to concrete evidence of “bad faith or illegality with regard to the underlying activities which generated the documents at issue” or bad faith “in searching for or processing documents[.]” *Khatchadourian*, 2020 WL 1309941, at *42 (quoting *Jones v. FBI*, 41 F.3d 238, 242 (6th Cir. 1994)).

Even if Plaintiffs could demonstrate that some discovery is appropriate here, Plaintiffs’ proposed interrogatory is not “limited discovery regarding the adequacy of Defendant’s search[.]” *Bangoura*, 2006 WL 3734164, at *6. Plaintiffs do not seek relevant information concerning “the actions of the individuals who conducted the search.” *In re Clinton*, 2020 WL 4745104, at *6. Instead, Plaintiffs seek the same information they sought in their prior FOIA requests, in addition to information concerning “verbal” communications. Pls.’ Mem. at 35. With respect to all information that Plaintiffs sought through their original requests, this discovery would be inappropriate because “courts must not grant FOIA plaintiffs discovery that would be tantamount to granting the final relief sought.” *Tax Analysts v. I.R.S.*, 410 F.3d 715, 722 (D.C. Cir. 2005) (citation and internal quotation marks omitted). Discovery regarding verbal

communications would be especially inappropriate because FOIA does not require agencies to create records of verbal communications. *Wilson v. Dep't of Transp.*, 730 F. Supp. 2d 140, 150 (D.D.C. 2010) (“FOIA does not require agencies to create or retain documents.”). Thus, even if some discovery were appropriate, the undersigned would nonetheless recommend denial of Plaintiffs’ Rule 56(d) request.

V. CONCLUSION

It is therefore, on this 27th day of August, 2020,

RECOMMENDED that Defendants' Motion for Summary Judgment (ECF. No. 68) be **DENIED WITHOUT PREJUDICE** with respect to the FBI's *Glomar* Response, and **GRANTED** in all other respects; and it is

FURTHER RECOMMENDED that Plaintiffs' Cross Motion for Summary Judgment (ECF No. 71) be **DENIED** with respect to all issues except the FBI's *Glomar* Response; and it is

FURTHER RECOMMENDED that Defendants be **ORDERED** to produce a supplemental declaration explaining the basis of the FBI's *Glomar* Response; and it is

FURTHER RECOMMENDED that Plaintiffs' Motion to Propound Discovery (ECF No. 73) be **DENIED**.

DEBORAH A. ROBINSON
United States Magistrate Judge

Within fourteen days, any party may file written objections to this report and recommendation. The objections shall specifically identify the portions of the findings and recommendations to which objection is made and the basis of each such objection. In the absence of timely objections, further review of issues addressed herein may be deemed waived.

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
FOR THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

ACCURACY IN MEDIA, *et al.*,

Plaintiffs,

v.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE, *et al.*,

Defendants.

Civ. Action No. 14-1589
(EGS/DAR)

MEMORANDUM OPINION

I. Introduction

Plaintiffs Accuracy in Media, Inc.; Roger L. Aronoff; Captain Larry W. Bailey, USN (Ret.); Lieutenant Colonel Kenneth Benway, USA (Ret.); Colonel Richard F. Brauer, Jr., USA (Ret.); Clare M. Lopez; Admiral James A. Lyons, Jr., USN (Ret.); and Kevin Michael Shipp (collectively, "Plaintiffs") have made a series of requests for information related to the 2012 attack on the United States Embassy in Benghazi, Libya. See generally Am. Compl., ECF No. 31.¹ They now sue U.S. Department of Defense and its components ("DOD"); U.S. Department of State ("State

¹When citing electronic filings throughout this Opinion, the Court refers to the ECF page numbers, not the page numbers of the filed documents.

Department"); U.S. Department of Justice ("DOJ") and its component the Federal Bureau of Investigation ("FBI"); and the Central Intelligence Agency ("CIA") (collectively, "Defendants") under the Freedom of Information Act ("FOIA"), 5 U.S.C. § 552, to obtain that information. See *id.*

Pending before the Court are Defendants' Motion for Summary Judgment, see Defs.' Mot. for Summ. J., ECF No. 68; and Plaintiffs' Cross-Motion for Summary Judgment, see Pls.' Opp'n Defs.' Mot. Summ. J., Cross-Mot. for Summ. J., & Mot. Leave Propound Interrog. to DOD, ECF No. 71. Also pending before this Court is Plaintiffs' Motion for Leave to Propound Interrogatory to DOD. See *id.*; ECF No. 73. On January 7, 2019, the Court referred the case to a magistrate judge for a Report and Recommendation ("R. & R.") on these pending motions, and the case was randomly referred to Magistrate Judge Deborah A. Robinson. See generally Docket for Civ. Act. No. 14-1589. On August 27, 2020, Magistrate Judge Robinson issued her R. & R. recommending that the Court grant in part and deny in part Defendants' Motion for Summary Judgment, ECF No. 68; grant in part and deny in part Plaintiffs' Cross-Motion for Summary Judgment, ECF No. 71; and deny Plaintiffs' Motion for Leave to Propound Interrogatory to DOD, ECF No. 73. See R. & R., ECF No. 83 at 33.

Plaintiffs raise several objections to Magistrate Judge Robinson's R. & R. See generally Pls.' Obj. Magistrate Judge's R. & R. ("Pls.' Objs."), ECF No. 87. Upon careful consideration of the R. & R., the objections and opposition thereto, the applicable law, and the entire record herein, the Court hereby **ADOPTS** Magistrate Judge Robinson's R. & R., ECF No. 83; **GRANTS IN PART** and **DENIES IN PART** Defendants' Motion for Summary Judgment, ECF No. 68; **GRANTS IN PART** and **DENIES IN PART** Plaintiffs' Cross-Motion for Summary Judgment, ECF No. 71; and **DENIES** Plaintiffs' Motion for Leave to Propound Interrogatory to DOD, ECF No. 73.

II. Background

A. Factual

In 2014, Plaintiffs submitted over 40 separate FOIA requests to Defendants to obtain records related to the 2012 attack on the United States Embassy in Benghazi, Libya. See generally Am. Compl., ECF No. 31. Plaintiffs initiated this litigation on September 19, 2014 to resolve those FOIA requests, see Compl., ECF No. 1; and on March 2, 2018, the parties agreed to narrow the issues, see Joint Mot. to Amend Briefing Schedule, ECF No. 65.

The Court briefly recounts the FOIA requests that are currently at issue below.

1. DOD

Plaintiffs sent two letters to the Defense Intelligence Agency ("DIA") on April 7, 2014 and May 28, 2014. See Pls.' Counter-Statement of Material Facts as to Which There is a Genuine Issue ("SOMF"), ECF No. 71-5 ¶ 2. The first letter requested "records of (1) maps depicting all assets within fifteen hundred miles of Benghazi, Libya on September 11 and 12, 2012; (2) DOD assets that were pre-positioned off the coast of Tripoli on October 18, 2011; and (3) records in calendar year 2012 of the threat to U.S. personnel because of al-Quaida or Ansar al-Shariah or other belligerent build-up in Benghazi." *Id.* ¶ 31. The second letter requested "(1) OPREP-3 PINNACLE report(s) used to provide any DOD division with notification of, or information about, the September 11 and 12, 2012 attacks on the U.S. facilities in Benghazi, Libya"; and (2) "records of all directives, orders, and other communications regarding the readiness status of United States armed forces on the anniversary of the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center" between July 1, 2012 and September 30, 2012. *Id.* ¶ 32.

The DIA conducted two searches of its Record Message Traffic database. *Id.* ¶ 8. The agency identified 148 responsive records, referred 92 records to other agencies for review, and determined that it would withhold 25 records in part and 30 records in full pursuant to various FOIA exemptions. *Id.* ¶¶ 33-

34. The DIA's process included an unfruitful search for the OPREP-3 PINNACLE reports, even though it "is not the unit responsible for issuing" the requested reports. *Id.* ¶¶ 6-7.

On March 31, 2014, Plaintiffs sent a FOIA request to the Navy, Marine Corps, and European Command ("EUCOM") for "orders to, NAVSTA Rota personnel to get ready to deploy, and if applicable, to deploy"; "orders [to an airborne special operations unit in Croatia] to deploy to NAS Sigonella"; and "orders to, NAS Sigonella personnel to get ready to deploy, and if applicable, to deploy." *Id.* ¶ 4. On October 1, 2014, Plaintiffs sent a FOIA request to the African Command ("AFRICOM") for "records of all communications generated in March of 2011, regarding Gaddafi's expressed interest in a truce and possible abdication and exile out of Libya." *Id.* ¶ 5.

These DOD units conducted extensive searches for responsive records. *See id.* ¶¶ 12-24. As relevant here, EUCOM produced a redacted copy of the Executive Order ("EXORD") from 3:00 A.M. September 12, 2012, which "is the initial written order directing EUCOM to execute an action in response to the September 11, 2012 attack on the United States mission in Benghazi, Libya." *See id.* ¶¶ 24-25. DOD also located 12 pages of maps responsive to Plaintiffs' April 7, 2014 request, but determined that it would withhold these records in full pursuant

to Executive Order 13,526 and FOIA Exemption 1. See *id.* ¶¶ 38-40.

2. CIA

On February 24, 2014 and October 1, 2014, Plaintiffs submitted two FOIA requests to the CIA. *Id.* ¶ 41. The CIA conducted extensive searches for responsive records. See *id.* ¶¶ 46-59. As relevant here, the CIA determined that several records from the Inspector General ("IG") were responsive to Plaintiffs' October 2014 request. *Id.* ¶ 55. The agency concluded that it could redact certain information in those IG files pursuant to Section 6 of the Central Intelligence Agency Act of 1949 and Section 102(A)(i)(1) of the National Security Act of 1947. *Id.* ¶ 57. It also withheld information pursuant to various FOIA exemptions. See *id.* ¶¶ 56-59.

3. FBI

On February 21, 2014, Plaintiffs requested from the FBI accounts from survivors about the September 11, 2012 attack in Benghazi, including the FBI's 302 Interview Reports. See *id.* ¶ 81. The FBI has never made these alleged reports public. *Id.* ¶ 83.

B. Procedural

On May 10, 2018, Defendants moved for summary judgment. See Defs.' Mot. for Summ. J., ECF No. 68. Plaintiffs filed their opposition to Defendants' Motion for Summary Judgment as well as

their Cross-Motion for Summary Judgment on June 25, 2018. See Pls.' Opp'n Defs.' Mot. Summ. J., Cross-Mot. for Summ. J., & Mot. Leave Propound Interrog. to DOD, ECF No. 71. Defendants filed a brief in response on July 27, 2018, see Defs.' Reply Supp. Defs.' Mot. Summ. J. & Opp'n Pls.' Cross-Mot. Summ. J., ECF No. 77; and Plaintiffs filed their reply on August 27, 2018, see Pls.' Mem. Reply Defs.' Opp'n Pls.' Mot. Summ. J., ECF No. 80.

Plaintiffs also moved for leave to propound an interrogatory to DOD. See Pls.' Opp'n Defs.' Mot. Summ. J., Cross-Mot. for Summ. J., & Mot. Leave Propound Interrog. to DOD, ECF No. 71. Defendants filed a brief in opposition on July 9, 2018, see Defs.' Opp'n Pls.' Mot. Leave Propound Discovery Against Def. DOD, ECF No. 74; and Plaintiffs filed their reply on July 16, 2018, see Pls.' Reply Def. DOD Opp'n Mot. Leave Propound Interrog., ECF No. 75.

On January 7, 2019, the Court referred the case to a magistrate judge for a Report and Recommendation ("R. & R.") on these pending motions, and the case was randomly referred to Magistrate Judge Deborah A. Robinson. See *generally* Docket for Civ. Act. No. 14-1589. On August 27, 2020, Magistrate Judge Robinson issued her R. & R. recommending that the Court grant Defendants' Motion for Summary Judgment except as to the FBI's

Glomar response and deny Plaintiffs' motions except as to the *Glomar* issue. See R. & R., ECF No. 83 at 33.

On September 23, 2020, Plaintiffs filed objections to the R. & R. See Pl.'s Objs., ECF No. 87. Defendants filed a notice informing the Court that (1) it would not raise objections to the R. & R.; and (2) the FBI was withdrawing its *Glomar* response and had commenced a search for responsive records. See Defs.' Notice Regarding R. & R., ECF No. 86. Defendants also filed a brief in opposition to Plaintiffs' objections on November 23, 2020. See Defs.' Response Pls.' Objs. Magistrate's R. & R. ("Defs.' Opp'n"), ECF No. 91.

The motions are now ripe and ready for adjudication.

III. Legal Standard

A. Objections to a Magistrate Judge's Report and Recommendation

Pursuant to Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 72(b), a party may file specific written objections once a magistrate judge has entered a recommended disposition. Fed. R. Civ. P. 72(b)(1)-(2). A district court "may accept, reject, or modify the recommended disposition." Fed. R. Civ. P. 72(b)(3); see also 28 U.S.C. § 636(b)(1)(C) ("A judge of the court may accept, reject, or modify, in whole or in part, the findings or recommendations made by the magistrate judge."). A district court "must determine de novo any part of the magistrate judge's disposition

that has been properly objected to.” Fed. R. Civ. P. 72(b)(3). “If, however, the party makes only conclusory or general objections, or simply reiterates his original arguments, the Court reviews the [R. & R.] only for clear error.” *Houlahan v. Brown*, 979 F. Supp. 2d 86, 88 (D.D.C. 2013) (citation and internal quotation marks omitted). “Under the clearly erroneous standard, the magistrate judge’s decision is entitled to great deference” and “is clearly erroneous only if on the entire evidence the court is left with the definite and firm conviction that a mistake has been committed.” *Buie v. Dist. of Columbia*, No. CV 16-1920 (CKK), 2019 WL 4345712, at *3 (D.D.C. Sept. 12, 2019) (citing *Graham v. Mukasey*, 608 F. Supp. 2d 50, 52 (D.D.C. 2009)) (internal quotation marks omitted).

Objections must “specifically identify the portions of the proposed findings and recommendations to which objection is made and the basis for the objection[s].” LCvR 72.3(b). “[O]bjections which merely rehash an argument presented and considered by the magistrate judge are not ‘properly objected to’ and are therefore not entitled to de novo review.” *Shurtleff v. EPA*, 991 F. Supp. 2d 1, 8 (D.D.C. 2013) (quoting *Morgan v. Astrue*, No. 08-2133, 2009 WL 3541001, at *3 (E.D. Pa. Oct. 30, 2009)). The Court reviews Plaintiffs’ objections de novo.

B. Summary Judgment

Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 56 provides that summary judgment motions must be granted if “there is no genuine dispute as to any material fact and the movant is entitled to judgment as a matter of law.” Fed. R. Civ. P. 56(a); *see also Anderson v. Liberty Lobby, Inc.*, 477 U.S. 242, 250 (1986). The moving party bears the initial burden “of informing the district court of the basis for its motion, and identifying those portions of ‘the pleadings, depositions, answers to interrogatories, and admissions on file, together with the affidavits, if any,’ which it believes demonstrate the absence of a genuine issue of material fact.” *Celotex Corp. v. Catrett*, 477 U.S. 317, 323 (1986); *see also* Fed. R. Civ. P. 56(c)(1). This burden “may be discharged by ‘showing’ . . . that there is an absence of evidence to support the nonmoving party’s case.” *Celotex*, 477 U.S. at 325.

A party opposing a summary judgment motion must show that a genuine factual issue exists by “(A) citing to particular parts of materials in the record . . . or (B) showing that the materials cited do not establish the absence . . . of a genuine dispute.” Fed. R. Civ. P. 56(c). Any factual assertions in the moving party’s affidavits will be accepted as true unless the opposing party submits his own affidavits or other documentary evidence contradicting the assertion. *See Neal v. Kelly*, 963

F.2d 453, 456 (D.C. Cir. 1992). However, "the inferences to be drawn from the underlying facts . . . must be viewed in the light most favorable to the party opposing the motion." *Matsushita Elec. Indus. Co., Ltd. v. Zenith Radio Corp.*, 475 U.S. 574, 587 (1986) (citation and internal quotation marks omitted).

C. FOIA

FOIA is based on the recognition that an informed citizenry is "vital to the functioning of a democratic society, needed to check against corruption and to hold the governors accountable to the governed." *NLRB v. Robbins Tire & Rubber Co.*, 437 U.S. 214, 242 (1978). It was enacted to "pierce the veil of administrative secrecy and to open agency action to the light of public scrutiny," and it favors "full agency disclosure." *Dep't of the Air Force v. Rose*, 425 U.S. 352, 360-61 (1976) (quoting *Rose v. Dep't of the Air Force*, 495 F.2d 261, 263 (2d Cir. 1974)).

Although FOIA is aimed toward "open[ness] . . . of government," *Jud. Watch, Inc. v. U.S. Dep't of Com.*, 375 F. Supp. 3d 93, 97 (D.D.C. 2019); Congress acknowledged that "legitimate governmental and private interests could be harmed by release of certain types of information," *Critical Mass Energy Project v. Nuclear Regul. Comm'n*, 975 F.2d 871, 872 (D.C. Cir. 1992) (citation and internal quotation marks omitted). As

such, pursuant to FOIA's nine exemptions, an agency may withhold certain requested information. 5 U.S.C. § 552(b)(1)-(9).

However, "because FOIA establishes a strong presumption in favor of disclosure, requested material must be disclosed unless it falls squarely within one of the nine exemptions." See *Burka v. U.S. Dep't of Health & Hum. Servs.*, 87 F.3d 508, 515 (D.C. Cir. 1996) (citations omitted).

FOIA cases are usually and appropriately resolved on motions for summary judgment. *Brayton v. Off. of the U.S. Trade Rep.*, 641 F.3d 521, 527 (D.C. Cir. 2011). An agency has the burden of demonstrating that "each document that falls within the class requested either has been produced, is unidentifiable, or is wholly [or partially] exempt from the Act's inspection requirements." *Goland v. CIA*, 607 F.2d 339, 352 (D.C. Cir. 1978) (citation and internal quotation marks omitted).

In reviewing a summary judgment motion in the FOIA context, the court must conduct a de novo review of the record, see 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(B); but may rely on agency declarations, see *SafeCard Servs. v. SEC*, 926 F.2d 1197, 1200 (D.C. Cir. 1991). Agency affidavits or declarations that are "relatively detailed and non-conclusory" are accorded "a presumption of good faith, which cannot be rebutted by purely speculative claims about the existence and discoverability of other documents." *Id.* (citation and internal quotation marks omitted). The Court may award

summary judgment solely on the basis of information provided by the agency in declarations when the declarations describe “the documents and the justifications for nondisclosure with reasonably specific detail, demonstrate that the information withheld logically falls within the claimed exemption, and are not controverted by either contrary evidence in the record nor by evidence of agency bad faith.” *Mil. Audit Project v. Casey*, 656 F.2d 724, 738 (D.C. Cir. 1981) (citation and internal quotation marks omitted).

IV. Analysis

A. Magistrate Judge Robinson Correctly Concluded that DOD Conducted an Adequate Search

To prevail on summary judgment, an agency must show “beyond material doubt . . . that it has conducted a search reasonably calculated to uncover all relevant documents.” *Weisberg v. DOJ*, 705 F.2d 1344, 1351 (D.C. Cir. 1983). It must demonstrate “that it made a good faith effort” to perform this search, “using methods which can be reasonably expected to produce the information requested.” *Oglesby v. U.S. Dep’t of Army*, 920 F.2d 57, 68 (D.C. Cir. 1990). If a FOIA requester challenges the adequacy of the agency’s search, “the agency may meet its burden by providing ‘a reasonably detailed affidavit, setting forth the search terms and the type of search performed, and averring that all files likely to contain responsive materials . . . were

searched." *Iturralde v. Comptroller of Currency*, 315 F.3d 311, 313-14 (D.C. Cir. 2003). These affidavits "are accorded a presumption of good faith." *SafeCard Servs., Inc. v. SEC*, 926 F.2d 1197, 1200 (D.C. Cir. 1991).

A court may not grant summary judgment to the agency "if the record raises substantial doubts regarding the agency's efforts, 'particularly in view of well[-]defined requests and positive indications of overlooked materials.'" *Heartland All. for Hum. Needs & Hum. Rts. v. U.S. Immigr. & Customs Enf't*, 406 F. Supp. 3d 90, 110 (D.D.C. 2019) (quoting *Valencia-Lucena v. U.S. Coast Guard*, 180 F.3d 321, 326 (D.C. Cir. 1999)). The burden is on the FOIA requester to produce "countervailing evidence" creating a genuine dispute of material fact, *id.* (quoting *Morley v. C.I.A.*, 508 F.3d 1108, 1116 (D.C. Cir. 2007)); and the requester "can only . . . rebut[]" the agency's affidavits "with clear evidence of bad faith," *Bigwood v. U.S. Dep't of Def.*, 132 F. Supp. 3d 124, 136 (D.D.C. 2015). "[T]he fact that a particular document was not found does not demonstrate the inadequacy of a search." *Boyd v. Crim. Div. of U.S. Dep't of Just.*, 475 F.3d 381, 391 (D.C. Cir. 2007). Similarly, "[m]ere speculation that as yet uncovered documents may exist does not undermine the finding that the agency conducted a reasonable search for them." *SafeCard Servs.*, 926 F.2d at 1201.

Here, Magistrate Judge Robinson determined that DOD is entitled to a presumption of good faith as to the adequacy of its search because "it submitted a 'reasonably detailed' declaration from Mark Herrington, the Associate Deputy General Counsel in the DoD Office of General Counsel" ("Mr. Herrington") that sufficiently "explain[ed] how the searches for responsive records were conducted." R. & R., ECF No. 83 at 9-10. Plaintiffs object to this conclusion, arguing that the agency's search was inadequate because: (1) DOD is not entitled to a presumption of good faith; and (2) DOD failed to produce certain responsive records. For the reasons explained below, the Court rejects both arguments and **ADOPTS** the R. & R. with respect to the adequacy of DOD's search.

1. Plaintiffs Have Not Overcome the Presumption of Good Faith Owed DOD

Plaintiffs raise two objections as to Magistrate Judge Robinson's conclusion that DOD's affidavit is entitled to a presumption of good faith. Plaintiffs first object that Magistrate Judge Robinson did not consider DOD's misrepresentations regarding the timing of the orders transmitted on September 11 and 12, 2012 after the attack on Benghazi. See Pls.' Objs., ECF No. 87 at 9-18. To support their objection, they cite testimony from former Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta ("former Secretary Panetta") to a House Select

Committee that the first order following the attack was transmitted at 8:39 P.M. on September 11, 2012. See Pls.' Objs., ECF No. 87 at 9-18. Plaintiffs argue that these statements are "evidence of bad faith" because the earliest order DOD produced in this case was the 3:00 A.M. EXORD. *Id.* at 16.

Plaintiffs' objection fails because the evidence they cite is entirely consistent with DOD's representations. In the congressional testimony, former Secretary Panetta explained that the National Military Command Center issued a formal order at 8:39 P.M. that was "the oral direction[] that commenced the action for the task forces and the other units to move." Clarke Decl., Ex. 3 ("Panetta Test."), ECF No. 71-1 at 15-16. Similarly, in the affidavit DOD submitted, Mr. Herrington explains that the 3:00 A.M. EXORD was "the first written order" and that "the initial orders were conveyed verbally" earlier in the night. Herrington Decl., ECF No. 68-4 ¶¶ 16-22. DOD also submitted an accompanying exhibit that details the timeline of orders even more clearly. Specifically, the timeline states that former Secretary Panetta "provide[d] verbal authorization" for various military units to prepare to deploy between 6:00 P.M. and 8:00 P.M. on September 11, 2012. See Timeline of Dep't of Def. Actions on September 11-12, 2012 ("Timeline"), ECF No. 87-1 at 1. It explains that "[d]uring this period, actions [we]re verbally conveyed from the Pentagon to the affected Combatant

Commands in order to expedite movement of forces upon receipt of formal authorization.” *Id.* The timeline further records that at 8:39 P.M., the National Military Command Center “transmit[ted] formal authorization” to move certain military units. *Id.* at 2.

Plaintiffs’ objection thus fails to address the factual record in this case. The evidence from both parties supports DOD’s claim that the order issued at 8:39 P.M. was a verbal order. Plaintiffs have not offered any evidence that this order was also reduced to writing that could have been produced here, and indeed, the evidence suggests that it never was. *Cf.* Panetta Test., ECF No. 71-1 at 15-16; Herrington Decl., ECF No. 68-4 ¶¶ 16-22. Because Plaintiffs have not pointed to any actual discrepancy between former Secretary Panetta’s public statements and DOD’s FOIA production, their argument about the 8:39 P.M. order cannot overcome the presumption of DOD’s good faith.

Plaintiffs also object that Magistrate Judge Robinson did not appropriately consider certain other details in the Final Report of the Select Committee on the Events Surrounding the 2012 Terrorist Attack in Benghazi, H. Rep. No. 114-848 (2016). See Pls.’ Objs., ECF No. 87 at 9-22. They explain that the following constitutes evidence of bad faith: former Secretary Panetta’s “testimony [before Congress] conflicted with known facts”; “his actions [on the night of the attack] were contradictory”; he “professed initial ignorance of the

particulars of the siege"; and his "subordinates had assured him that forces were moving when no such order had been transmitted." *Id.* at 16.

The Court agrees with Magistrate Judge Robinson that this information "is of little significance." R. & R., ECF No. 83 at 14. Plaintiffs are attempting to cast doubt on DOD's search by questioning the reliability of former Secretary Panetta's testimony to a House Select Committee. See Pls.' Objs., ECF No. 87 at 9-22. Plaintiffs' misgivings about that testimony are, at most, "[h]azy allegations of administrative malfeasance," which "may sound incriminating" but are not the "concrete, specific challenges to the sufficiency of [an agency's] search [required by the Court] in order to deny the agency summary judgment.'" *Am. Oversight v. U.S. Dep't of Just.*, 401 F. Supp. 3d 16, 37 (D.D.C. 2019) (quoting *Competitive Enter. Inst. v. U.S. Env't Prot. Agency*, 12 F. Supp. 3d 100, 111 (D.D.C. 2014)). Plaintiffs therefore have failed to meet their burden to produce "countervailing evidence" of DOD's alleged bad faith in conducting its FOIA search. *Heartland All. for Hum. Needs & Hum. Rts.*, 406 F. Supp. 3d at 110.

2. DOD's Search Was Adequate Even Though It Could Not Locate Certain Records

Plaintiffs also object to Magistrate Judge Robinson's conclusion that DOD's search was adequate because they claim

that she did not address four records DOD failed to locate. See Pls.' Objs., ECF No. 87 at 22-25. The first three records are a series of orders issued at 8:02 P.M., 8:39 P.M., and 11:00 P.M. on September 11, 2012. See *id.* at 22-23. To support their argument that these records must exist, Plaintiffs cite questions and notes from the Chief Investigative Counsel of the House Select Committee on the Benghazi attack and testimony from former Secretary Panetta before that Committee. This evidence is not persuasive. The Chief Investigative Counsel discussed only that the orders were conveyed and never indicated that the three orders were written down. See Pls.' Objs., ECF No. 87 at 23 n.29; *Id.* at 23 n.30. More pointedly, former Secretary Panetta testified that these orders were "oral directions." Panetta Test., ECF No. 71-1 at 16. Plaintiffs' repeated claims that written records of these orders exist are "purely speculative" and are insufficient to rebut DOD's affidavit. *SafeCard Servs.*, 926 F.2d at 1200 (citation omitted).

Plaintiffs also claim that DOD's search was inadequate because the agency did not produce a "PINNACLE OPREP-3 Report." See Pls.' Objs., ECF No. 87 at 23-25. In their Complaint, they explain that they requested these reports from the DIA in their May 28, 2014 FOIA request. See Compl., ECF No. 1 ¶¶ 19, 98. DOD explained that, although the DIA "conducted [a search] in response to this request," it was unable to locate the reports

because “the OPREP 3 report would come from [AFRICOM],” not the DIA. Herrington Decl., ECF No. 68-4 ¶¶ 23-24. As Magistrate Judge Robinson explained in her R. & R., Plaintiffs have not provided any countervailing evidence to rebut this affidavit and suggest that the DIA should have been able to locate the reports among its records. See R. & R., ECF No. 83 at 12 n.6; *cf. Reps. Comm. for Freedom of Press v. Fed. Bureau of Investigation*, 877 F.3d 399, 408 (D.C. Cir. 2017). Without any evidence to overcome the presumption of good faith owed DOD, Plaintiffs’ “speculati[on] about the existence and discoverability of” the PINNACLE OPREP-3 reports within the DIA fails. *SafeCard Servs.*, 926 F.2d at 1200 (citation omitted).

Accordingly, the Court rejects Plaintiffs’ arguments; **ADOPTS** this portion of the R. & R.; **GRANTS** Defendants’ Motion for Summary Judgment regarding the adequacy of DOD’s search; and **DENIES** Plaintiffs’ Cross-Motion for Summary Judgment on the issue.

B. Magistrate Judge Robinson Correctly Concluded that DOD’s Maps are Protected from Disclosure Under Exemption 1

Plaintiffs next challenge Magistrate Judge Robinson’s conclusion that DOD appropriately withheld in full 12 pages of maps containing “the numbers and locations of ships, submarines, response forces, and aircraft surrounding Benghazi, Libya”; the “numbers of military personnel located in particular countries

during that time"; and "the transit time required for each available asset to reach Benghazi." R. & R., ECF No. 83 at 15-16 (quoting Malloy Decl., ECF No. 69-1 ¶ 9). For the reasons that follow, the Court rejects Plaintiffs' arguments and **ADOPTS** this portion of the R. & R.

FOIA Exemption 1 protects from disclosure information that is "specifically authorized under criteria established by an Executive order to be kept secret in the interest of national defense or foreign policy" and is "in fact properly classified pursuant to such Executive order." 5 U.S.C. § 552(b)(1). The current executive order governing classification is Executive Order 13,526, see Exec. Order 13,526, 75 Fed. Reg. 707, 707 (Dec. 29, 2009); which authorizes information to be classified if certain conditions are met, *id.*; see also *Lindsey v. Fed. Bureau of Investigation*, 490 F. Supp. 3d 1, 11 (D.D.C. 2020).

The agency "bears the burden of proving the applicability of claimed exemptions." *Am. C.L. Union v. U.S. Dep't of Def.*, 628 F.3d 612, 619 (D.C. Cir. 2011). In the national security context, a court "must accord substantial weight to an agency's affidavit concerning the details of the classified status of the disputed record." *Id.* (quoting *Wolf v. C.I.A.*, 473 F.3d 370, 374 (D.C. Cir. 2007)). Courts "have consistently deferred to executive affidavits predicting harm to the national security, and have found it unwise to undertake searching judicial

review.” *Ctr. for Nat. Sec. Studies v. DOJ*, 331 F.3d 918, 927 (D.C. Cir. 2003) (collecting cases).

Plaintiffs do not dispute that DOD classified the maps pursuant to Sections 1.4(a), 1.4(d), and 1.4(g) of Executive Order 13,526. *See generally* Pls.’ Objs., ECF No. 87. They instead object that disclosure is appropriate because the information in DOD’s records “implicate[s] no national security interest.” *Id.* at 22. To support this argument, Plaintiffs cite an affidavit from retired Admiral Lyons. *See* Lyons Decl., ECF No. 71-2. The Court will not consider this evidence, though. The declarant “merely states his opinion, instead of any facts, about current national security risks,” *R. & R.*, ECF No. 83 at 12 n.5 (citing Lyons Decl., ECF No. 71-2 ¶ 2 (“The sole purpose of this affidavit is to set forth my opinion.”)); and affidavits consisting of “conclusory opinions” are insufficient on motions for summary judgment, *Waldie v. Schlesinger*, 509 F.2d 508, 510 (D.C. Cir. 1974).

However, even if it were appropriate for the Court to weigh this evidence, Plaintiffs’ assertion would fail. Retired Admiral Lyons’ “opinion about the nature of current or future military assets is limited at best” because he is currently retired and does not know DOD’s current national security concerns. *R. & R.*, ECF No. 83 at 16-17. DOD, by contrast, has explained that “[e]ven with the passage of time, how DOD’s forces are

positioned at a particular time could provide potentially damaging and/or threatening insight to adversaries regarding DoD's interests, intent and potential operations." Malloy Decl., ECF No. 69-1 ¶ 11. Magistrate Judge Robinson found "no reason to doubt" DOD's assessment, which must be given "'substantial weight,'" R. & R., ECF No. 83 at 16 (quoting *Am. C.L. Union*, 628 F.3d at 619); and neither does the Court.

Plaintiffs also object to the R. & R. because the information they requested is already publicly available through a map published by the Congressional Research Service ("CRS") and another map they created. See Pls.' Objs., ECF No. 87 at 19-22. A FOIA requester may compel disclosure of classified information otherwise protected pursuant to Exemption 1 if he can establish the following: "(1) the information requested must be as specific as the information previously released; (2) the information requested must match the information previously disclosed; and (3) the information requested must already have been made public through an official and documented disclosure." *Am. C.L. Union*, 628 F.3d at 620-21 (citations omitted).

The maps Plaintiffs cite do not meet this standard because "the information requested" does not "match the information previously disclosed." *Id.* at 620.² The CRS map shows only the

² Plaintiffs also argue that disclosure is appropriate because "[t]he Congressional record on this issue is replete with

distances between Benghazi and other locations in the Mediterranean region. See Clarke Decl., ECF No. 71-1 at 55. Plaintiffs' map provides only their estimates of travel times to Benghazi from other locations in the Mediterranean region. See *id.* at 118. Neither map details all of the information Plaintiffs asked for in their FOIA requests, such as the official positions of the military assets or the types of assets at those locations. See Am. Compl., ECF No. 31 ¶¶ 30, 67, 75, 80, 95, 105. Controlling caselaw requires that the Court "insist[] on exactitude." *Am. C.L. Union*, 628 F.3d at 621. Thus, because there are substantive differences between the information requested and the information disclosed,³ the Court agrees with Magistrate Judge Robinson's conclusion that disclosure is not required.

The Court therefore **ADOPTS** this portion of the R. & R.; **GRANTS** Defendants' Motion for Summary Judgment regarding the withholding of DOD's maps pursuant to FOIA Exemption 1; and **DENIES** Plaintiffs' Cross-Motion for Summary Judgment on the issue.

discussions of the assets, travel times, and available personnel and aircraft, and this information has been extensively reported by the media." Pls.' Objs., ECF No. 87 at 21. They provide no citations on this point, and so the Court rejects this argument.³ Additionally, Plaintiffs' map is not "an official and documented disclosure." *Am. C.L. Union*, 628 F.3d at 621.

C. The CIA Appropriately Redacted Portions of the Inspector General's Files

Plaintiffs next object to Magistrate Judge Robinson's determination that the CIA appropriately redacted records related to a complaint sent to the CIA Inspector General David Buckley. See R. & R., ECF No. 83 at 18. For the reasons below, the Court **ADOPTS** the R. & R. as to the redaction of the CIA IG files.

FOIA Exemption 3 allows an agency to withhold records that are "specifically exempted from disclosure by statute" if the statute "(A) requires that the matters be withheld from the public in such a manner as to leave no discretion on the issue, or (B) establishes particular criteria for withholding or refers to particular types of matters to be withheld." 5 U.S.C. § 552(b)(3); see also *C.I.A. v. Sims*, 471 U.S. 159, 167 (1985). The CIA has invoked two exempting statutes to protect portions of the IG files from disclosure: Section 6 of the Central Intelligence Agency Act of 1949 (the "CIA Act") and Section 102A(i)(1) of the National Security Act of 1947. See R. & R., ECF No. 83 at 20; *Halperin v. CIA*, 629 F.2d 144, 147 (D.C. Cir. 1980) (explaining that both statutes are exempting statutes under Exemption 3).

Plaintiffs object to Magistrate Judge Robinson's application of the CIA Act here. They argue that the CIA must

produce redacted portions of the records because “the specific subject matter of an investigation by . . . the Office of Inspector General of the Central Intelligence Agency,’ unlike most other CIA operational records, is subject to the FOIA.” Pls.’ Objs., ECF No. 87 at 26 (quoting 50 U.S.C. § 3141(c)(3)). This argument is unconvincing because the CIA never invoked Section 3141 to protect any part of the IG files from disclosure. See Shiner Decl., ECF No. 68-5 ¶¶ 41, 43. Indeed, the CIA clarified in its response to Plaintiffs’ Cross-Motion for Summary Judgment that it has never relied on Section 3141 to try to prevent disclosure of the IG files. See Shiner Suppl. Decl., ECF No. 77-2 ¶¶ 4-5; Defs.’ Opp’n, ECF No. 91 at 19.

Plaintiffs also object in passing to the following: “that ‘the subject matter of these records is apparent from the face of them,’ that disclosure of the specifics of the wrongdoing alleged could lead to the disclosure of the whistleblower’s identity, and that nondisclosure is justified as the information ‘relates to intelligence sources and methods.’” Pls.’ Objs., ECF No. 87 at 29-30 (footnotes omitted). The Court need not consider these objections as Plaintiffs have not made any argument or cited any law to support these bare points. See *Berry L. PLLC v. Kraft Foods Grp., Inc.*, No. CV 13-0475 (RBW), 2013 WL 12061613, at *5 (D.D.C. Dec. 11, 2013) (“The Court need not consider unsupported, cursory arguments.”).

Accordingly, the Court **ADOPTS** this portion of the R. & R.; **GRANTS** Defendants' Motion for Summary Judgment as to the withholding of the CIA IG records; and **DENIES** Plaintiffs' Cross-Motion for Summary Judgment on the issue.

D. The Issue of the FBI's *Glomar* Response is Moot

Magistrate Judge Robinson recommended denying Defendants' Motion for Summary Judgment with respect to the FBI's *Glomar* response because the agency failed to provide a "logical" or "plausible" explanation as to why "acknowledging the existence of any 302 report would necessarily reveal the existence of specific 302 reports." R. & R., ECF No. 83 at 25-26; see *Am. C.L. Union v. C.I.A.*, 710 F.3d 422, 427 (D.C. Cir. 2013) (citations omitted). In lieu of raising objections to the R. & R., Defendants filed a Notice stating that that the FBI "no longer intends to maintain its prior *Glomar* assertion" and will now "conduct a search for responsive records that would have been covered by the *Glomar* assertion." Defs.' Notice Regarding R. & R., ECF No. 86 at 1.

Because of the FBI's changed position, the Court need not evaluate the R. & R.'s recommendation as to the *Glomar* response. See *Edelman v. Sec. & Exch. Comm'n*, 172 F. Supp. 3d 133, 156 (D.D.C. 2016) (determining that the court need not resolve the appropriateness of an agency's *Glomar* response after the agency withdrew its *Glomar* response and searched for responsive

records). Accordingly, the Court **DENIES** Defendants' Motion for Summary Judgment regarding the FBI's *Glomar* response as moot.

E. Plaintiffs Have Not Met the Standard for Discovery

"It is well established that discovery is rare in FOIA cases." *Cole v. Rochford*, 285 F. Supp. 3d 73, 76 (D.D.C. 2018). Courts permit discovery in these cases "only in exceptional circumstances," *id.*: "when [the FOIA] plaintiff has made a sufficient showing that the agency acted in bad faith, has raised a sufficient question as to the agency's good faith, or when a factual dispute exists and the plaintiff has called the affidavits submitted by the government into question," *Citizens for Resp. & Ethics in Wash. v. U.S. Dep't of Just.*, No. CIV. 05-2078(EGS), 2006 WL 1518964, at *3 (D.D.C. June 1, 2006) (citations omitted).

Plaintiffs object to Magistrate Judge Robinson's recommendation that the Court deny their Rule 56(d) request to propound an interrogatory to DOD. See Pls.' Objs., ECF No. 87 at 16, 31. Specifically, they claim that DOD made certain misrepresentations to Congress and the public, which establish the agency's bad faith and therefore support their discovery request. *Id.* at 9-16; 31. However, as the Court explained *supra*, Plaintiffs have not demonstrated that DOD acted in bad faith or otherwise raised a question about DOD's good faith in responding to the FOIA requests at issue in this case. See *Citizens for*

Resp. & Ethics in Wash., 2006 WL 1518964, at *3. This failure is fatal to their discovery request. See *Am. Oversight v. U.S. Dep't of Just.*, 401 F. Supp. 3d 16, 29 (D.D.C. 2019); *Cole*, 285 F. Supp. at 76.

The Court therefore **ADOPTS** this portion of the R. & R. and **DENIES** Plaintiffs' Rule 56(d) request.

V. Conclusion

For the foregoing reasons, the Court **ADOPTS** Magistrate Judge Robinson's R. & R., ECF No. 83; **GRANTS IN PART** and **DENIES IN PART** Defendants' Motion for Summary Judgment, ECF No. 68; **GRANTS IN PART** and **DENIES IN PART** Plaintiffs' Cross-Motion for Summary Judgment, ECF No. 71; and **DENIES** Plaintiffs' Motion for Leave to Propound Interrogatory to DOD, ECF No. 73.

An appropriate Order accompanies this Memorandum Opinion.

SO ORDERED.

Signed: Emmet G. Sullivan
United States District Judge
November 28, 2022

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
FOR THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

ACCURACY IN MEDIA, *et al.*,

Plaintiffs,

v.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE, *et al.*,

Defendants.

Civ. Action No. 14-1589 (EGS/DAR)

ORDER

For the reasons stated in the accompanying Memorandum Opinion, it is hereby

ORDERED that Magistrate Judge Robinson's Report and Recommendation as to Defendant's Motion for Summary Judgment, see ECF No. 83, is **ADOPTED**; Defendant's Motion for Summary Judgment, see ECF No. 68, is **GRANTED IN PART** and **DENIED IN PART**; Plaintiffs' Cross-Motion for Summary Judgment, see ECF No. 71, is **GRANTED IN PART** and **DENIED IN PART**; and Plaintiffs' Motion for Leave to Propound Interrogatory to DOD, see ECF No. 73, is **DENIED**; and it is further

ORDERED that the parties shall submit, by no later than January 20, 2023, a Joint Status Report explaining whether any dispute remains regarding the FD-302s.

SO ORDERED.

Signed: Emmet G. Sullivan
United States District Judge
November 28, 2022

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
FOR THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

ACCURACY IN MEDIA, INC., *et al.*,

Plaintiffs,

v.

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF
DEFENSE, *et al.*,

Defendants.

Civil Action No. 14-1589 (LLA)

MEMORANDUM OPINION

This matter is before the court on a Motion for Summary Judgment by Defendant Federal Bureau of Investigation (“FBI”) and a Cross-Motion for Summary Judgment by Plaintiffs, Accuracy in Media, Inc., and seven individuals.¹ ECF Nos. 97 & 98. Plaintiffs claim that the government violated the Freedom of Information Act (“FOIA”) by unlawfully withholding certain records pertaining to the September 11, 2012 attacks on the U.S. Embassy in Benghazi, Libya. *See generally* ECF No. 31. Upon consideration of the motions and supporting documentation, the court will grant the FBI’s Motion for Summary Judgment and deny Plaintiffs’ Cross-Motion for Summary Judgment.

I. Background

In 2014, Plaintiffs submitted over forty FOIA requests to the Defendants, which are the U.S. Department of Defense, the U.S. Department of State (“State Department”), the FBI, and the Central Intelligence Agency (“CIA”). *See generally* ECF No. 31. Over the course of this

¹ The individual Plaintiffs are Roger L. Aronoff, Captain Larry W. Bailey (Ret.), Lieutenant Colonel Kenneth Benway (Ret.), Colonel Richard F. Brauer, Jr. (Ret.), Claire M. Lopez, Admiral James A. Lyons, Jr. (Ret.), and Kevin Michael Shipp.

litigation, the parties resolved many of the requests at issue without court intervention. ECF No. 83, at 2. Only one issue remains in dispute: Plaintiffs' request for certain FBI interview reports—referred to as FD-302s—and corresponding handwritten notes of interviews conducted with United States personnel who were present during the attacks. ECF No. 31 ¶ 126 (8).

The FBI initially provided a *Glomar* response to Plaintiffs' request for these records, neither confirming nor denying the existence of such records. ECF No. 83, at 23-24; *see Roth v. U.S. Dep't of Just.*, 642 F.3d 1161, 1171 (D.C. Cir. 2011) (“In a [*Glomar*] response the government neither confirms nor denies the existence of the requested records.”). In 2018, the parties cross-moved for summary judgment on this issue, among others, and the case was assigned to Magistrate Judge Deborah Robinson. *See* Jan. 7, 2019 Minute Order. Judge Robinson recommended that summary judgment be granted to Defendants on all issues, except for the FBI's *Glomar* response. ECF No. 83, at 33. Shortly thereafter, the FBI withdrew its *Glomar* response and informed the court that it would search for and process the sought-after records. ECF No. 86, at 1.

To locate pertinent records, the FBI conducted index searches of its case management systems using key terms related to the Benghazi attacks. ECF No. 97-3 ¶¶ 20-22. The FBI informed Plaintiffs that it had compiled responsive records but, after consulting with the State Department and the CIA, it had determined that the records were protected in full pursuant to FOIA exemptions 1, 3, 5, 6, 7(A), 7(C), 7(E), and 7(F). ECF No. 97-2 ¶ 8.

The court later adopted Judge Robinson's recommendations on the other outstanding issues, but it found Defendants' motion for summary judgment with respect to the *Glomar* response moot in light of the FBI's change of position. ECF No. 92, at 20, 24, 27-28. The parties informed the court that Plaintiffs intended to challenge the FBI's new justifications for withholding

the FD-302 interview reports, and the parties subsequently filed cross-motions for summary judgment. *See* ECF No. 94 at 2; Feb. 22, 2023 Minute Order; ECF Nos. 97 & 98.

II. Legal Standard

The purpose of FOIA is “to pierce the veil of administrative secrecy and to open agency action to the light of public scrutiny.” *Am. C.L. Union v. U.S. Dep’t of Just.*, 655 F.3d 1, 5 (D.C. Cir. 2011) (quoting *Dep’t of the Air Force v. Rose*, 425 U.S. 352, 361 (1976)). Congress nonetheless included nine exemptions to disclosure that “are intended ‘to balance the public’s interest in governmental transparency against the legitimate governmental and private interests [that] could be harmed by release of certain types of information.’” *Tipograph v. U.S. Dep’t of Just.*, 83 F. Supp. 3d 234, 238 (D.D.C. 2015) (quoting *United Techs. Corp. v. U.S. Dep’t of Def.*, 601 F.3d 557, 559 (D.C. Cir. 2010)).

Most FOIA cases are appropriately resolved on motions for summary judgment. *Brayton v. Off. of the U.S. Trade Representative*, 641 F.3d 521, 527 (D.C. Cir. 2011). A court shall grant summary judgment “if the movant shows that there is no genuine dispute as to any material fact and the movant is entitled to judgment as a matter of law.” Fed. R. Civ. P. 56(a). The agency invoking a FOIA exemption bears the burden of demonstrating it applies. *U.S. Dep’t of Just. v. Repts. Comm. for Freedom of the Press*, 489 U.S. 749, 755 (1989). Summary judgment may be awarded to the agency if it can demonstrate that no material facts are in dispute, that it conducted an adequate search for responsive records, and that each record has either been produced or is exempt from disclosure. *Jud. Watch, Inc. v. U.S. Dep’t of Homeland Sec.*, 59 F. Supp. 3d 184, 189 (D.D.C. 2014). “To successfully challenge an agency’s showing that it complied with the FOIA, the plaintiff must come forward with specific facts demonstrating that there is a genuine issue with respect to whether the agency has improperly withheld extant agency records.” *Manna v. U.S.*

Dep't of Just., 106 F. Supp. 3d 16, 18 (D.D.C. 2015) (quoting *Span v. U.S. Dep't of Just.*, 696 F. Supp. 2d 113, 119 (D.D.C. 2010)).

In assessing a motion for summary judgment, the court affords “substantial weight” to an agency affidavit that is detailed and non-conclusory. *Jud. Watch, Inc. v. U.S. Dep't of Def.*, 715 F.3d 937, 940-41 (D.C. Cir. 2013) (quoting *Am. C.L. Union v. U.S. Dep't of Def.*, 628 F.3d 612, 619 (D.C. Cir. 2011)). The affiant must describe “the documents and the justifications for nondisclosure with reasonably specific detail [and] demonstrate that the information withheld logically falls within the claimed exemption,” and the court will credit such statements if they “are not controverted by either contrary evidence in the record nor by evidence of agency bad faith.” *Manning v. U.S. Dep't of Just.*, 234 F. Supp. 3d 26, 32 (D.D.C. 2017) (quoting *Mil. Audit Project v. Casey*, 656 F.2d 724, 738 (D.C. Cir. 1981)). “Ultimately, an agency’s justification for invoking a FOIA exemption is sufficient if it appears ‘logical’ or ‘plausible.’” *Wolf v. Cent. Intel. Agency*, 473 F.3d 370, 374-75 (D.C. Cir. 2007).

III. Discussion

FBI invokes multiple FOIA exemptions to justify its withholding, but this court need only address one: Exemption 7(A), which allows an agency to withhold “records or information compiled for law enforcement purposes, but only to the extent that the production of such law enforcement records or information could reasonably be expected to interfere with enforcement proceedings.” 5 U.S.C. § 552(b)(7)(A). The court concludes that the FD-302s were properly withheld pursuant to Exemption 7(A), thereby warranting summary judgment for the FBI without the need to address the other grounds raised. *See Am. C.L. Union*, 628 F.3d at 619 n.2.

“Exemption 7(A) reflects the Congress’s recognition that ‘law enforcement agencies ha[ve] legitimate needs to keep certain records confidential, lest the agencies be hindered in their investigations or placed at a disadvantage when it [comes] time to present their case.’” *Citizens*

for Resp. & Ethics in Wash. v. U.S. Dep't of Just., 746 F.3d 1082, 1096 (D.C. Cir. 2014) (quoting *NLRB v. Robbins Tire & Rubber Co.*, 437 U.S. 214, 224 (1978)). When litigation itself threatens to reveal FOIA-exempt information, an agency may provide a categorical description of the withheld information rather than a document-by-document justification for exemption. *Id.* at 1089-90. Categorical treatment is appropriate under Exemption 7(A) when the general description supports an inference that the withheld category has a rational link to the agency's alleged interference. *See id.* at 1088-89.

“[A]n ongoing criminal investigation typically triggers Exemption 7(A).” *Id.* at 1098. “[T]o withhold documents pursuant to Exemption 7(A), an agency must show that they were compiled for law enforcement purposes and that their disclosure (1) could reasonably be expected to interfere with (2) enforcement proceedings that are (3) pending or reasonably anticipated.” *Mapother v. U.S. Dep't of Just.*, 3 F.3d 1533, 1540 (D.C. Cir. 1993) (emphasis omitted).

Plaintiffs do not appear to contest that the FBI compiled the records for law enforcement purposes or that the Benghazi investigation remains ongoing, so the court will only briefly touch on these requirements. The FBI submitted several declarations in support of its motion, of which two are particularly relevant to these issues: the declaration of Michael G. Seidel, Section Chief of the Record/Information Dissemination Section, Information Management Division of the FBI, ECF 97-2; and the declaration of Timothy J. Kootz, Director of the Office of Information Programs and Services of the State Department, ECF 97-5. Mr. Seidel averred that the FD-302s and interview notes were compiled for law enforcement purposes. ECF No. 97-2 ¶ 10. He also stated that the investigation of the Benghazi attacks “remains ongoing.” *Id.* ¶ 13. Specifically, he explained that “[t]he FBI continues to pursue all logical leads to identify and investigate those individuals who helped perpetuate, assist, or otherwise support the 2012 attack.” *Id.* ¶ 13.

Mr. Kootz similarly testified that the relevant FD-302s were compiled during the FBI's investigation of the attacks in Benghazi and that the investigation is "ongoing." ECF No. 97-5 ¶¶ 25-26. Plaintiffs present no evidence to contradict these statements, nor do they point to anything in the record suggesting bad faith on the part of the government. Accordingly, the court credits the government's declarations, and it finds that the records were compiled for law enforcement purposes and that the relevant investigation is ongoing. *Manning*, 234 F. Supp. 3d at 33.

That leaves the question whether disclosure of the records "could reasonably be expected to interfere with" the ongoing investigation. *Mapother*, 3 F.3d at 1540. Plaintiffs raise two main arguments against the FBI's claim of interference. First, they argue that the FBI has not sufficiently explained how the specific information they seek—those portions of the FD-302s that describe a purported order to security forces at the embassy to "stand down"—could interfere with an ongoing investigation. ECF No. 98, at 16-17; ECF No. 102, at 4-5. Second, they suggest that public statements made by security forces present at the attack undercut the FBI's arguments and require disclosure because the underlying information is already public. ECF No. 98, at 12-14; ECF No. 102, at 5-6. The court is not persuaded.

Sufficiency of the explanation. As noted, an agency may invoke Exemption 7(A) on a categorical basis when "the FOIA litigation process threatens to reveal 'the very information the agency hopes to protect.'" *Citizens for Resp. & Ethics in Wash.*, 746 F.3d at 1088 (quoting *Am. C.L. Union v. Cent. Intel. Agency*, 710 F.3d 422, 432 (D.C. Cir. 2013)); see *Robbins Tire & Rubber Co.*, 437 U.S. at 224 ("[L]aw enforcement agencies ha[ve] legitimate needs to keep certain records confidential, lest the agencies be hindered in their investigations or placed at a disadvantage when it [comes] time to present their case."). "Categorical withholding is often appropriate under

Exemption 7(A).” *Citizens for Resp. & Ethics in Wash.*, 746 F.3d at 1098. It is permissible where the agency (1) defines its categories functionally, (2) conducts a document-by-document review to sort information into the proper category, and (3) explains how disclosure will interfere such that the court can “trace a rational link between the nature of the document and the alleged likely interference.” *Crooker v. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, & Firearms*, 789 F.2d 64, 67 (D.C. Cir. 1986); *Citizens for Resp. & Ethics in Wash.*, 746 F.3d at 1098.

The FBI properly invoked categorical withholding here. It defined its category functionally, characterizing the FD-302s as “Evidentiary/Investigative Materials.” ECF No. 97-2 ¶ 17. Mr. Seidel explained that this category encompasses records gathered through witness interviews, and he further stated that the search was conducted on a document-by-document basis, and each covered record was placed within the functional category. *Id.* ¶¶ 16-17.

The question, then, is not whether the disclosure of any specific portions of the FD-302s would interfere with the ongoing criminal investigation, but whether the FBI sufficiently explained how categorical disclosure would interfere with the investigation. It did. Mr. Seidel explained that the FD-302s “document the FBI’s investigation of the potential crimes and/or possible threats to national security” related to the Benghazi attacks. *Id.* ¶ 10. He further explained that a document-by-document description would “undermine” the FBI investigation because disclosure could reveal “leads the FBI is pursuing and the scope of the investigation.” *Id.* ¶ 15. This, in turn, could enable the suspected “groups or individuals to change their behavior and avoid scrutiny.” *Id.* More specifically, the FBI predicts that the disclosure of persons “of investigative interest” in the matter could lead to witness tampering and the destruction of evidence. *Id.* ¶ 14.

“Such predictive judgments of harm are entitled to deference . . . especially where, as here, the investigation concerns matters of national security.” *Manning*, 234 F. Supp. 3d at 36; *see Ctr.*

for Nat. Sec. Stud. v. U.S. Dep't of Just., 331 F.3d 918, 927 (D.C. Cir. 2003) (stating that the Supreme Court and the D.C. Circuit “have expressly recognized the propriety of deference to the executive in the context of FOIA claims which implicate national security”). In light of the FBI’s predictions, this is not an edge case. The interference that the agency warns of—potential witness tampering, destruction of evidence, and revelation of the scope of investigation—is within the heartland of exemption 7(A). *See Manning*, 234 F. Supp. 3d at 36 (finding sufficient interference under Exemption 7(A) where government declarations stated that the release of information would reveal the focus and scope of the investigation, allowing suspects to destroy evidence or alter their behavior); *Leopold v. U.S. Dep't of Just.*, 301 F. Supp. 3d 13, 26 (D.D.C. 2018) (finding sufficient interference under Exemption 7(A) where a “precise description of the records being withheld would ‘reveal non-public information about the targets and scope of the investigation’ which ‘could reasonably be expected to’ interfere with it”); *Tipograph*, 83 F. Supp. 3d at 239 (explaining that Exemption 7(A) protects against “chilling and intimidation of witnesses, and revelation of the scope and nature of the Government’s investigation”).

Because there is a “rational link” between the disclosure of the FD-302s and the threat of interference, the government’s categorical approach is appropriate. *Crooker*, 789 F.2d at 67; *Tipograph*, 83 F. Supp. 3d at 240 (“Because this explanation describes the nature of the information contained in the records, rather than merely the nature of the records themselves, it permits the Court to infer a rational link between the records and an investigative purpose.”).

Public disclosure. Plaintiffs also argue that some of the information contained within the FD-302s has already been made public, thus undercutting the FBI’s warnings of potential

interference.² ECF No. 98, at 12-14; ECF No. 102, at 5-6. Specifically, they allege that the FD-302s “reflect the accounts of Mark Geist, Kris Paronto, and John Tiegen,” all of which appear in a book and a movie, and some of which are detailed in Fox News interviews.³ ECF No. 102, at 6. It is undisputed that these three individuals were not FBI employees. ECF No. 100, at 12-13; ECF No. 102, at 3.

Plaintiffs seemingly invoke the doctrine of “official acknowledgment,” which requires an agency to disclose information “even over an agency’s otherwise valid exemption claim.” *Wolf*, 473 F.3d at 378. Official acknowledgement applies when “the information requested [is] as specific as the information previously released,” “the information requested [matches] the information previously disclosed,” and the information has already “been made public through an official and documented disclosure.” *Id.* (quoting *Fitzgibbon v. Cent. Intel. Agency*, 911 F.2d 755, 765 (D.C. Cir. 1990)). Plaintiffs bear the burden of showing the doctrine applies. *Buzzfeed, Inc. v. Fed. Bureau of Investigation*, 613 F. Supp. 3d 453, 472 (D.D.C. 2020) (quoting *Mobley v. Cent. Intel. Agency*, 806 F. 3d 568, 583 (D.C. Cir. 2015)).

Plaintiffs have not established the conditions required to invoke official acknowledgement. Although Mr. Seidel acknowledged that “some information pertaining to the Benghazi attacks has been made public,” he clarified that the “FBI has not disclosed the identities of the individuals” who were interviewed as part of the government’s investigation. ECF No. 97-2 ¶ 14. Nor has the FBI revealed the “focus and content” of the FD-302 interview reports. *Id.* Thus, the information

² In their initial cross-motion, Plaintiffs suggested that State Department’s August 2018 release of video clips showing the attack also undercut the FBI’s assertion of interference. ECF No. 98, at 16. They abandon this argument in their reply, so the court does not address it. ECF No. 102, at 6 (“Plaintiffs agree [that] [t]he surveillance footage is irrelevant.”).

³ The book is titled *13 Hours: The Inside Account of What Really Happened in Benghazi*, the movie is titled *13 Hours: The Secret Soldiers of Benghazi*. ECF No. 102, at 6.

requested does not match what the government has previously disclosed. *Wolf*, 473 F.3d at 378. It does not matter that three members of the security team—Mark Geist, Kris Paronto, and John Tiegen—have publicized their recounting of events. These are statements by third parties, not the “official and documented disclosure” required by the official acknowledgement doctrine. *Id.* (quoting *Fitzgibbon*, 911 F.2d at 765); see *Frugone v. Cent. Intel. Agency*, 169 F.3d 772, 774 (D.C. Cir. 1999) (explaining that the court “do[es] not deem ‘official’ a disclosure made by someone other than the agency from which the information is being sought”). Finally, at the core, public statements by third parties about the attacks do not undercut the FBI’s invocation of Exemption 7(A) because the FBI does not seek to obscure the underlying events—instead, it seeks to protect its investigation and future law enforcement proceedings. ECF No. 97-2 ¶¶ 14-15; see *Leopold*, 301 F. Supp. 3d at 26 (D.D.C. 2018). Public accounts of the attacks thus do not undermine the FBI’s concerns of interference with an open investigation.

IV. Conclusion

For the foregoing reasons, the court will issue a contemporaneous order granting the FBI’s Renewed Motion for Summary Judgment, ECF No. 97, and denying Plaintiffs’ Cross-Motion for Summary Judgment, ECF No. 98.

/s/ Loren L. AliKhan
LOREN L. ALIKHAN
United States District Judge

Date: April 26, 2024

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
FOR THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

ACCURACY IN MEDIA, INC., *et al.*,

Plaintiffs,

v.

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF
DEFENSE, *et al.*,

Defendants.

Civil Action No. 14-1589 (LLA)

ORDER

For the reasons stated in the court's Memorandum Opinion, ECF No. 103, it is hereby **ORDERED** that Defendant Federal Bureau of Investigation's Renewed Motion for Summary Judgment, ECF No. 97, is **GRANTED** and Plaintiffs' Cross-Motion for Summary Judgment, ECF No. 98, is **DENIED**. The Clerk of Court is directed to close this case.

This Order constitutes a final judgment of the court within the meaning of Rule 58(a) of the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure.

SO ORDERED.

/s/ Loren L. AliKhan
LOREN L. ALIKHAN
United States District Judge

Date: April 26, 2024