

OBAMA PUTS MORE AMERICAN TARGETS IN YEMEN

I want to unpack this dense LAT article on drones—titled “In Yemen, lines blur as U.S. steps up airstrikes.” Maybe it’s intentional but both at LAT’s level and that of its Administration sources, the depiction of our efforts in Yemen is a big muddle. The article is useful for details it offers on what and where JSOC is operating and where CIA is (though here too, the title “lines blur” is appropriate). And it advances an important argument:

As the pace [on strikes in Yemen] quickens and the targets expand, however, the distinction may be blurring between operations targeting militants who want to attack Americans and those aimed at fighters seeking to overthrow the Yemeni government.

U.S. officials insist that they will not be drawn into a civil war and that they do not intend to put ground troops in Yemen other than trainers and small special operations units.

Yet because the article accepts the frame of its sources, it doesn’t go far enough in pointing out where the lines are clear, the US story about those lines is the primary source of blurred understanding.

As just one example, it treats AQAP as “the main insurgent” group.

The U.S. has focused its airstrikes in areas where militants from Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, the main insurgent group operating in Yemen, and their tribal allies have seized and held towns in the last year.

Not only does this elide the difference between insurgent and terrorist, but the entire article makes no mention of other opposition groups like the Houthis, which have also been targeted (they say, by Saudi-assisted Yemeni forces).

But that's nothing compared to the contradictory comments apparently coming from government sources. Consider this passage:

Most militants fighting under the Al Qaeda banner in Yemen are local insurgents, U.S. officials say, along with Saudis bolstering the ranks and assuming leadership roles. Some of the militants are known to harbor ambitions of attacking the West: Ibrahim Hassan Asiri, who made the underwear bomb used by Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab in an attempt to blow up an airliner over Detroit, remains at large in Yemen, U.S. officials say.

If most of these militants are "local insurgents," then is it really the case that AQAP is the main insurgent group? Or is the relationship something different?

And it's interesting to see "US officials," in an apparent effort to justify targeting these "local insurgents" as an international terrorist group, pointing to Asiri as proof that AQAP still wants to hit the West. I don't doubt he does. But the killing of Anwar al-Awlaki was premised on the notion that **he**, not Asiri, was the external operations head pushing AQAP to attack the West. Were we targeting the wrong guy?

Given the ambiguities about whom we're targeting, the contradictory claims about why we've ratcheted up attacks is troubling. The article first says that the US limited drone strikes out of a desire not to be seen as backing Saleh.

The U.S. effort in Yemen was brought to a virtual standstill – a "lull," Gen.

James N. Mattis told Congress – by Saleh’s yearlong effort to cling to power. The U.S. did not want to be seen as backing a repressive ruler, and it also became dangerous for American personnel to be in the country. Since Saleh’s departure, the use of drones and manned warplanes to attack militants has expanded significantly.

Yet the article later suggests that Saleh, not the Americans, was the impediment to using drones.

Yemen’s new president, Abdu Rabu Mansour Hadi, has proved more willing than his predecessor to approve U.S. airstrikes, one of the reasons for the recent surge in attacks, American and Yemeni officials said.

Given discussions about insurgents taking over entire towns in the south, the impetus for strikes may be something else entirely—an attempt to save the partner government we’ve worked with for the last decade, regardless of its legitimacy.

Now consider the varying explanations for why we’re attacking militants, particularly given the Administration’s rather tardy discovery that Asiri, not (or not just) Awlaki has been pushing to attack Western targets. The LAT notes that AQAP recently killed an American teacher.

An Al Qaeda affiliate claimed credit for a March 18 attack in which an American teacher was shot and killed by motorcycle-riding assailants.

It doesn’t mention the other attack launched by rebels in March: in which Ansar al Sharia claimed to have killed a CIA officer who was “training” government forces (I think some reports of this attack have disappeared from the US-based outlets that initially reported it;

take that for what you will).

Now consider this passage, which reads like an effort to defend claims that we're not intervening in a civil war.

The militants were targeted not because they were plotting attacks against the U.S. but because intelligence suggested they were planning attacks on American diplomats or other targets inside Yemen, the U.S officials said.

The militants have planned attacks on "American diplomats." Uh huh. Perhaps those "diplomats" are the kind that recruit local people to help target drones?

Well as it turns out, we're sending more "diplomats" into the country.

Heavily armed American soldiers have begun appearing in large numbers at the Sheraton Hotel in the capital, Sana, a Yemeni official said.

That's how we conduct diplomacy these days, isn't it? With heavily armed soldiers and—as the article notes we're now discussing—by providing heavily armed tanks?

Who knows? Maybe LAT's sources were just aiming for more subtlety than Fox's, which speaks much more unambiguously about what is going on.

Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, or AQAP, is more of a threat today than it was six months ago despite the death of the American cleric Anwar al-Awlaki, according to US officials familiar with the situation.

Asked if the Al Qaeda affiliate in Yemen was stronger and better positioned than it was at the time of Anwar al-Awlaki's death Sept. 30 in a CIA drone strike, one official simply responded, "Yes."

"AQAP has been on an upward trajectory," Fox News was told. As the Al Qaeda affiliate has strengthened its base in southern Yemen, U.S. officials said the "expanded domestic footprint provides more room and more opportunity to invite operatives from abroad, more recruits to train and continue plotting external attacks."

Mind you, Fox's sources are no more clear whether AQAP is a threat because it threatens an illegitimate government in Yemen or because it might threaten us.

Whichever version of anonymous leaks you read, though, it's clear the Administration is pushing for greater involvement in Yemen without really thinking about why we're involved there or how militarily backing an government with questionable legitimacy helps things.