

CLUSTER BOMBS ON THE HEAD OF A SAUDI PINPOINT

Congratulations to the NYT, which offers the superlative version of a story everyone seems to be writing today. It describes a whole host of reasons why we should not trust the Saudis.

That collaboration appears to have intensified over the past two years, despite a long history of mistrust rooted in the role of Saudi hijackers in the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. The relationship was tested again last year when Saudi leaders responded furiously to American endorsement of the revolt that ousted a Saudi ally, President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt. American diplomats were surprised and angered in turn soon afterward when Saudi Arabia sent troops to help put down unrest in neighboring Bahrain.

[snip]

The counterterrorism cooperation has not been without bumps, officials from both countries acknowledge.

In 2007, the Federal Bureau of Investigation quietly sent a handful of agents to Saudi Arabia to work with officials there on a classified counterterrorism strategy, according to a senior American official who was briefed on the program. After several months, however, the two sides disagreed on a common strategy, and the F.B.I. agents went home.

Internal State Department cables obtained by WikiLeaks and made available to several news organizations revealed American frustration with Saudi Arabia in curtailing financial supporters of

many extremist activities.

“It has been an ongoing challenge to persuade Saudi officials to treat terrorist financing emanating from Saudi Arabia as a strategic priority,” said a classified cable sent by Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton in December 2009, concluding that “donors in Saudi Arabia constitute the most significant source of funding to Sunni terrorist groups worldwide.”

But ultimately concludes that in spite of all this evidence, our partnership with the Saudis is working just great.

But when it comes to counterterrorism, the Saudis have been crucial partners, not only for the United States but also for an array of other Western powers.

[snip]

Under pressure from the United States, American officials now say, Saudi Arabia is taking the threat more seriously, holding financiers accountable through prosecutions and making terrorist financing a higher priority.

Like many of these stories, the NYT quotes Mustafa Alani, a counterterrorism analyst at the Gulf Research Center with close ties to the Saudi intelligence establishment, describing the division of labor on counterterrorism: the US conducts electronic surveillance, the Saudis provide HUMINT. And while the NYT gets the prize for the most self-contradictory celebration of US-Saudi counterterrorism “cooperation,” my favorite quote from Alani is this one, in the WaPo’s version of the story.

“Even with the drone strikes, the air raids, the Americans need someone on the ground,” Alani said. “The Saudis are the ones who can pinpoint targets for the

Americans.”

The Saudis, Alani brags, are responsible for our pinpointed targeting in Yemen. You know? The kind that manages to kill an American teenager but fails to hit its intended target. Or the kind that will become even less pinpointed now that the Saudis have delivered up a bomb plot to convince the President that AQAP is still targeting the US (this CNN story confirms that the bomb plot was delivered up before Obama’s signature strike okay was reported) and therefore needs to be targeted with signature strikes.

But since we’re discussing Saudi pinpointed targeting, let’s look more closely at two other Saudi pinpoints. First, there’s the Saudi strike on a Houthi medical clinic in 2009-2010, which they used to ask for Predator drones. Almost the whole cable is worth reading to see the multiple ways in which Saudi Prince Khaled bin Sultan manipulated us.

USG CONCERNS ABOUT POSSIBLE STRIKES ON CIVILIAN TARGETS

¶2. (S/NF) Ambassador Smith delivered points in reftel to Prince Khaled on February 6, 2010. The Ambassador highlighted USG concerns about providing Saudi Arabia with satellite imagery of the Yemen border area absent greater certainty that Saudi Arabia was and would remain fully in compliance with the laws of armed conflict during the conduct of military operations, particularly regarding attacks on civilian targets. The Ambassador noted the USG’s specific concern about an apparent Saudi air strike on a building that the U.S. believed to be a Yemeni medical clinic. The Ambassador showed Prince Khaled a satellite image of the bomb-damaged building in question.

IF WE HAD THE PREDATOR, THIS MIGHT NOT HAVE HAPPENED

¶13. (S/NF) Upon seeing the photograph, Prince Khalid remarked, "This looks familiar," and added, "if we had the Predator, maybe we would not have this problem." He noted that Saudi Air Force operations were necessarily being conducted without the desired degree of precision, and recalled that a clinic had been struck, based on information received from Yemen that it was being used as an operational base by the Houthis. Prince Khalid explained the Saudi approach to its fight with the Houthis, emphasizing that the Saudis had to hit the Houthis very hard in order to "bring them to their knees" and compel them to come to terms with the Yemeni government. "However," he said, "we tried very hard not to hit civilian targets." The Saudis had 130 deaths and the Yemenis lost as many as one thousand. "Obviously," Prince Khaled observed, "some civilians died, though we wish that this did not happen."

HOW THE TARGETS WERE SELECTED

¶14. (S/NF) Prince Khaled gave the Ambassador further background, explaining that the targets given to the Saudi Air Force were studied and recommended by a Saudi-Yemeni joint committee headed by Saudi and Yemeni general officers. That joint committee reported to him, and no targets were struck unless they had clearance from this joint committee. "Did they make mistakes? Possibly." Prince Khaled also

reported that the Saudis had problems with some of the targeting recommendations received from the Yemeni side. For instance, there was one occasion when Saudi pilots aborted a strike, when they sensed something was wrong about the information they received from the Yemenis. It turned out that the site recommended to be hit was the headquarters of General Ali Mohsen Al-Ahmar, the Yemeni northern area military commander, who is regarded as a political opponent to President Saleh. This incident prompted the Saudis to be more cautious about targeting recommendations from the Yemeni government.

CEASEFIRE COMING SOON

¶15. (S/NF) The Ambassador told Prince Khaled that the USG is looking to Saudi Arabia to help bring an end to the Houthi fighting soon. Prince Khaled responded that Saudi Arabia is “looking for ways to end this conflict in a way that fosters good relations.” He said that he met with President Saleh last Wednesday to discuss Houthi ceasefire terms, and they agreed that, so long as the Houthis deliver on the terms they offered, there should be news about a ceasefire “within a week.” As part of the ceasefire arrangements the Yemeni military will be deployed on the Yemeni side of the border to prevent future Houthi incursions into Saudi Arabia. “Then,” Prince Khaled noted, “we can concentrate on Al-Qaida.”

COMMENT

¶16. (S/NF) Prince Khaled, in addressing the Ambassador's concerns about possible targeting of civilian sites appeared neither defensive nor evasive. He was unequivocal in his assurance that Saudi military operations had been and would continue to be conducted with priority to avoiding civilian casualties. The Ambassador found this assurance credible, all the more so in light of Prince Khaled's acknowledgment that mistakes likely happened during the strikes against Houthi targets, of the inability of the Saudi Air Force to operate with adequate precision, and the unreliability of Yemeni targeting recommendations. Based on these assurances, the Ambassador has approved, as authorized in reftel, the provision of USG imagery of the Yemeni border area to the Saudi Government. While the fighting with the Houthis appears to be drawing to a close, the imagery will be of continuing value to the Saudi military to monitor and prevent Houthi incursions across the border as well as enhancing Saudi capabilities against Al-Qaeda activities in this area.

This discussion starts with the US raising concerns about a Saudi request to get satellite images it can use to wage war against Yemen's Shia insurgents (with the jets we've sold it). The problem with giving the Saudis our data is they've done things like bomb medical clinics. Khaled effectively says, "well, if you give us Predator drones maybe we won't kill so many civilians. We wish killing civilians didn't happen, but the Saudis have to hit the Houthis very hard to bring them to their knees." That, plus an anecdote about how one time the Saudis avoided bombing a rival to Ali Abdullah Saleh, is all the reassurance US Ambassador James Smith needs before he approves sharing the satellite imagery (even though Khaled has said the fight against the Houthis will be over within a week).

And along the way, Khaled basically admits that al Qaeda has not been the Saudi priority, the Shia insurgency has. Just as cutting the flow of Saudi funds to terrorists has not been a priority.

And about pinpoint strikes in Yemen. Remember the al-Majala strike in December 2009—the one that took place just weeks before the meeting between Prince Khaled and Ambassador Smith (actually, the strike against the Houthi clinic may have taken place within days of the al-Majala strike)? The one where we hit a Bedouin tribe with cluster bombs? The one that remains one of the reasons Yemenis hate Americans?

The Saudis were involved in that pinpoint, too.

[Yemeni Deputy Prime Minister for Defense Rashad al-]Alimi said that the strikes were carried out “using intelligence aid from Saudi Arabia and the United States of America in our fight against terrorism.”

Now, I’m interested in more than why we ended up targeting a camp full of Bedouins and continued to insist we had killed only AQAP family members weeks after the attack. I’m also interested in what we claimed to be targeting (in addition to AQAP leader Nassr al-Wahishi). Immediately after the strike (but before Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab set off the last UndieBomb over Detroit) reports claimed the strike in al-Majala was an attempt to stop an imminent attack against a US target.

On orders from President Barack Obama, the U.S. military launched cruise missiles early Thursday against two suspected al-Qaeda sites in Yemen, administration officials told ABC News in a report broadcast on ABC World News with Charles Gibson.

One of the targeted sites was a suspected al Qaeda training camp north of the capitol, Sanaa, and the second target was a location where officials

said “an imminent attack against a U.S. asset was being planned.”

We know—from subsequent reporting—that we had warnings of an attack by a Nigerian and expected the attack around Christmas. But rather than looking for a terrorist on an in-bound flight from Amsterdam, we were bombing Bedouin families in Yemen, believing that’s where the imminent attacker was. And remember—we have every reason to believe that Jabir al-Fayfi was already infiltrated into AQAP by this point; the Saudis had HUMINT from inside the group.

So it’s not just that past Saudi pinpointing has tended to kill so many civilians. But it’s also that at least one catastrophically bad pinpoint—one reason why the terror threat in Yemen continues to grow—not only killed civilians, but had us looking in Yemen rather than in Detroit.

Ah well. What could go wrong, particularly as the Saudis offer us similar pinpointing as we start using drones to hit people in Yemen whose identities we won’t know?