

RIYADH'S STATION CHIEF, JOHN BRENNAN, TAKES JSOC'S DRONE KEYS AWAY

I think I've actually found a story in which John Brennan features but was probably not the original leaker: this one, describing how Brennan is centralizing all drone targeting decisions in the White House.

The Pentagon is likely to be sidelined from decisions on determining which terror leaders are targeted for attacks by drones. It's a change that would concentrate the power to strike with lethal force outside war zones within one small team at the White House.

Let me make a few points about timing.

First, this leak comes on the same day the Obama Administration succeeded in hiding the "Gloves Come Off" Memorandum of Notification authorizing—in addition to torture—the targeted killing program. I suspect this means there will be less oversight from here on out.

In addition, the leak also comes just after the Administration asked for another month extension on their response to the drone FOIA. That's funny, because the Administration was reportedly ready to start revealing details about military drone operations, but not CIA ones.

The changes considered most likely to win adoption would bring about greater openness regarding the military drone program, while keeping most or all details of CIA strikes classified, U.S. officials said. CIA officials are opposed to publicly acknowledging the details of drone programs under its control, for fear of setting precedents

that could affect other covert programs.

Does this mean the Administration also wants to micromanage transparency, as well as targeting, in part by exerting more control over that part of the program that would be more transparent?

But the most interesting coincidence with this news is the expansion of signature strikes in Yemen. When Greg Miller first reported on the possibility of signature strikes in Yemen, he suggested that JSOC neither needed nor wanted that authority; it would be used with CIA alone.

The CIA is seeking authority to expand its covert drone campaign in Yemen by launching strikes against terrorism suspects even when it does not know the identities of those who could be killed, U.S. officials said.

[snip]

Some U.S. officials have voiced concern that such incidents could become more frequent if the CIA is given the authority to use signature strikes.

"How discriminating can they be?" asked a senior U.S. official familiar with the proposal. Al-Qaeda's affiliate in Yemen "is joined at the hip" with a local insurgency whose main goal is to oust the country's government, the official said. "I think there is the potential that we would be perceived as taking sides in a civil war."

[snip]

The JSOC has broader authority than the CIA to pursue militants in Yemen and is not seeking permission to use signature strikes, U.S. officials said.

That was two days before the Saudis delivered us up an UndieBomb plot on April 20 to justify expanding our attacks in Yemen.

But when, five days after the Saudis delivered the UndieBomb plot (though still weeks before we'd learn about it), WSJ reported Obama had approved the signature strikes, the story said JSOC had asked for signature authority along with the CIA.

"This was an interagency decision made based on deliberations about the growing threat from AQAP and concerns about the safe haven," a senior Obama administration official said. The White House is "broadening the aperture" for CIA and JSOC strikes, the official added.

[snip]

The CIA and JSOC asked last year for broader targeting powers, however, which would include leeway to conduct what are known as "signature strikes," in which targets are identified based on patterns of behavior, such as surveillance showing they are transporting weapons.

[snip]

Recently the CIA and JSOC, citing the fears about an al Qaeda haven, renewed requests to the White House.

In other words, there have been conflicting reports about whether JSOC wanted to or would participate in signature strikes.

Since then, we've launched our big new assault on Yemen, including a drone strike that killed 8 civilians.

Then, just as our assault expands, John Brennan—perhaps along with his Saudi friends—decides we can't exercise the level of caution that DOD has previously exercised.

Under the new plan, Brennan's staff compiles the potential target list and runs the names past agencies such as the State Department at a weekly White House

meeting, the officials said. Previously, targets were first discussed in meetings run by the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Adm. Mike Mullen at the time, with Brennan being just one of the voices in the debate. Brennan ultimately would make the case to the president, but a larger number of officials would end up drawn into the discussion.

[snip]

Some of the officials carrying out the policy are equally leery of "how easy it has become to kill someone," one said. The U.S. is targeting al-Qaida operatives for reasons such as being heard in an intercepted conversation plotting to attack a U.S. ambassador overseas, the official said. Stateside, that conversation could trigger an investigation by the Secret Service or FBI.

The former Riyadh Station Chief, John Brennan, is now running an entire war out of the National Security Council.

I guess these guys are bored outdoing W, and are now aspiring to match Reagan's level of hubris and abuse of power.