

WHEN DID THE “SIGNATURE STRIKES” START IN YEMEN?

Last week, I argued that the focus on the drone vetting process—the “Kill List”—is a shiny object, distracting us from signature strikes targeted at patterns, not people, in Yemen. Today, I’m going to push that further and suggest the focus on drones is also a shiny object distracting from the degree to which we’ve gone to war against Yemeni insurgents, using a variety of tactics including but not limited to drones.

I’ve long accepted, based on the public reporting, that Obama approved signature strikes in Yemen—and John Brennan took over the targeting process—just a day or two after the Saudis delivered up UndieBomb 2.0 around April 20. That’s based largely on the fact that when Greg Miller first reported on the issue on April 18, he spoke prospectively. When the WSJ reported that Obama had approved signature strikes, it said the decision had been made “this month” (meaning some time in April), and it pointed to an April 22 drone strike that seemed likely to be a signature strike.

The frequency of U.S. strikes in Yemen is expected to increase with the changes. On Sunday, a CIA-piloted drone hit a vehicle believed to be carrying AQAP militants. Intelligence analysts are working to identify those killed.

[snip]

The White House’s decision this month stopped short of giving CIA and JSOC the Pakistan-style blanket powers that had been sought—opting instead for what one defense official termed “signature lite.”

Interestingly, that WSJ report pointed to “several direct threats to the US” that surely included the UndieBomb sting that had already reportedly been delivered up to the Administration.

U.S. counterterrorism officials said they are currently tracking several direct threats to the U.S. connected to AQAP. The officials wouldn’t provide further details because that information is classified.

So one way or another, Administration sources seemed to time this to the UndieBomb plot.

But I want to consider the likelihood that Obama embraced “signature strikes”—or rather, expanded drone targeting—earlier than that (though remember that the Administration reportedly knew the UndieBomb plot was coming up to a month before April 20, when it was reportedly delivered up).

Based on TBIJ’s reports of drone strikes in Yemen, it’s fairly clear what have been treated as drone strikes started getting out of control in March, after Abed Rabu Mansour Hadi took over as President in February, not just in April. There are the strikes in three days in early March, which TBIJ estimates killed upwards of 50 people.

The latest strike involved at least five U.S. drones and took place in the Jabal Khanfar region of Jaar, located in southern Abyan province, two senior Yemeni security officials said. At least six suspected al Qaeda militants were killed, Yemeni officials said.

A member of the military committee — Yemen’s highest security authority — confirmed that strike, and said the Yemeni government was given no advance warning of it.

“The United States did not inform us on

the attacks. We only knew about this after the U.S. attacked," the committee member told CNN.

The strike was the third such attack on suspected al Qaeda targets in less than three days, according to Yemeni officials.

The United States was also involved in two other major attacks on Friday and Saturday, which killed at least 58 suspected al Qaeda insurgents, two senior Yemeni defense ministry officials said.

The Friday airstrikes occurred in the Yemen province of al-Baitha in areas used as launching pads for militant attacks. The second attack took place in the towns of Jaar and Zinjibar in Abyan province.

One of the strikes—in Bayda—reportedly killed a significant number of civilians.

It's not just the civilian casualties, the high numbers of dead, or the reported Yemeni ignorance of the strikes that suggest these might be signature strikes (or something even broader) rather than personality strikes. They also accompany other military action—including reported naval bombardment—that suggests they're part of the coordinated assault on insurgents. While there have certainly been a number of lower level AQAP members named as those killed in the strikes, the focus seems to be on militarily significant targets, not individuals.

Also note, on some of these strikes, there has been confusion whether a drone or manned planes carried out the attack (partly based on the mistaken assumption—now largely put to rest—that only Yemen, rather than the US, would be using manned aircraft in Yemen).

Finally, note that all of these strikes came in the wake of AQAP claims to have killed a CIA

officer earlier in March, though the US denied it. Provide AQAP targets to hit, they'll hit those targets, and you've got a reason to retaliate 100 times.

With all that in mind, re-read this April 2 LAT article. While it focuses on drone strikes that net 4-8 casualties rather than the ones that resulted in over 20, it does make it clear we were already at war against insurgents, not just AQAP.

As the pace 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.

[snip]

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.

The LAT also dances around the two justifications the Administration has been testing out for going to war in Yemen: the targeting of "diplomats" and civilians in Yemen, and the possibility that Ibrahim al-Asiri might strike again.

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.

The militants say they are fighting the

governments in Sana and Riyadh as well as the United States. They have mounted lethal attacks on Yemeni government officials and civilians, including a March 5 battle that killed 100 Yemeni soldiers. An Al Qaeda affiliate claimed credit for a March 18 attack in which an American teacher was shot and killed by motorcycle-riding assailants.

[snip]

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.

In other words, while LAT may have significantly under-reported the casualties in this assault on insurgents, they very clearly portray it as such, well before the news stories about signature versus personality drone strikes got rolled out. It appears the Administration was already preparing its rather weak claims that our entry into this counterinsurgency was a response to imminent threats.

And then, over the course of the month of April, the White House developed first the claim that this war against insurgents is really just signature strikes like we've seen in Pakistan (where they're not accompanied by the same number of JSOC "trainers" and ships). As April turned to May, that claim turned into a campaign ad about Obama the steely Decider overseeing each and every kill.

All the decisions about this campaign may well be coming out of the steely Decider's White House. But it's pretty clear the rest of this news blitz arose because,

Brennan believed there was an even greater need to ... show[] the American public that al-Qaida [sic] targets are chosen only after painstaking and

exhaustive debate [admittedly
selectively cropped quote; see the
original nonsensical sentence [here](#)]

We've significantly joined a counterinsurgency in Yemen—basically gone to war with no formal war announcement or declaration. Rather than announcing that, the White House has rolled out a campaign about how careful all these drone strikes are.