

BRENNAN APPROVED SIGNATURE STRIKES IN YEMEN BECAUSE OF “PERSONAL APPEALS”

Daniel Klaidman has what must be intended as a defense of John Brennan. Given that it (once again) fails to mention Abdulrahman al-Awlaki, accepts Brennan’s claims to have opposed torture on its face, and makes no mention of Brennan’s assault on Americans’ privacy, it fails to make the case it tries to, that Brennan would rein in the war on terror at CIA.

Nevertheless, I find it fascinating for the way in which Klaidman updates his earlier work to explain why Brennan approved signature strikes in Yemen.

First, Klaidman explains that Brennan’s deep knowledge of Yemen stems from his years as CIA Station Chief ... in Saudi Arabia.

Nowhere were the subtleties in Brennan’s worldview more obvious than in Yemen, a country he had long personal ties to from his days as CIA station chief in Saudi Arabia.

That’s a really funny claim. After all, while many of the tribes are the same and the Saudis have really close ties to the Yemenis, the description makes it clear (as if it weren’t already) that Brennan sees and understands Yemen through a Saudi lens.

As Gregory Johnsen tweeted,

If you rely on the Saudis to explain Yemen to you, then you are asking to be deceived.

Which is what we have demonstrably been in Yemen, since Brennan took over.

So when Brennan says things like,

Contrary to the conventional wisdom, we see little evidence that these actions are generating widespread anti-American sentiment or recruits of AQAP.

We should remember, then, that even according to Brennan's own description (as parroted by Klaidman) he understands Yemen from a Saudi perspective.

Consider what that means for Klaidman's admission that Brennan reversed his celebrated opposition to signature strikes in Yemen because of personal ties. Ties, to the Yemenis, Klaidman says.

The military wanted to conduct broad-based signature strikes in the country. But Obama was worried about getting embroiled in a domestic conflict—and he and Brennan said no. Then, in the spring of 2011, with bin Laden dead, the military again proposed massive signature strikes in Yemen, thinking that the time was right to deliver a knockout blow to al Qaeda and its most dangerous affiliate, AQAP.

But Obama and Brennan, fearful of getting sucked into a wider war, remained opposed. Brennan employed his best bureaucratic weapon to brush back the generals: Obama. He told the president that it was time to make an "unequivocal statement," which would go out through the "interagency," that he was opposed to such signature strikes. Soon thereafter, at one of his weekly counterterrorism briefings—the so-called Terror Tuesday meetings—Yemen was on the agenda. When one of the president's military advisers made a reference to the ongoing "campaign" in Yemen, Obama, according to two participants in the meeting, abruptly cut him off. There's

no “campaign” in Yemen, he said sharply, reminding the general that the goal there was to protect the homeland by going after members of al Qaeda, not to get involved in a civil war.

[snip]

Then, in the spring of 2012, with Yemen falling into chaos and AQAP gaining more and more territory, Yemeni officials—with whom Brennan had close ties going back to his days as a CIA station chief in the region—beseeched Brennan to help. The Yemeni Army was collapsing under the brutal assault; soldiers were being crucified and beheaded by the jihadis. By April 2012, Brennan and Obama finally relented and permitted signature strikes in the country.

Those who defend this decision point out that it would have been a catastrophe for U.S. security if significant parts of the country had fallen to AQAP, which was intent on attacking the American homeland. Yet some inside the administration were critical. Says one senior administration official of Brennan’s history in Yemen: “He responded to the personal appeals because he has a long history with these guys.” In other words: Brennan’s lawyerly preference for rules and constraints may sometimes have taken a backseat to emotion.

On at least two occasions, Obama and Brennan agreed that getting involved in Yemen would amount to taking sides in a civil war. And then, when Yemenis (was it really just Yemenis?) made a personal appeal to Brennan, he reversed course, and agreed to get involved in a civil war.

I guess all those claims – which were obviously

false on their face – that we only use signature strikes because of a risk to American interests are no longer operative?

Which makes it all the more curious that Klaidman makes no mention of the Saudi created bomb plot that directly preceded the decision to use signature strikes. It seems rather pertinent, no?