THE BLOWBACK INHERENT TO NETWORK ANALYSIS KILL LISTS

As I noted Gregory McNeal has a fascinating series of posts at Lawfare on how the government develops kill lists (this post even has a mock-up of a Kill List baseball card). But I find this post, which describes how the Kill List makers use network analysis to pick and choose whom to kill, the most interesting. It implicitly reveals one of the most fundamental problems with the way we're doing drone targeting.

McNeal describes how the government uses network analysis to find the most crucial people in the functioning of a terrorist network. Those people, he explains, may not be the most senior or public members of the group.

> Networked based analysis looks at terrorist groups as nodes connected by links, and assesses how components of that terrorist network operate together and independently of one another. Those nodes and links, once identified will be targeted with the goal of disrupting and degrading their functionality. To effectively pursue a network based approach, bureaucrats rely in part on what is known as "pattern of life analysis" which involves connecting the relationships between places and people by tracking their patterns of life. This analysis draws on the interrelationships among groups "to determine the degree and points of their interdependence." It assesses how activities are linked and looks to "determine the most effective way to influence or affect the enemy system."
>
> [snip]
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> Viewing targeting in this way

> demonstrates how seemingly low level individuals such as couriers and other "middle-men" in decentralized networks such as al Qaeda are oftentimes critical to the successful functioning of the enemy organization. Targeting these individuals can "destabilize clandestine networks by compromising large sections of the organization, distancing operatives from direct guidance, and impeding organizational communication and function." Moreover, because clandestine networks rely on social relationships to manage the trade-off between maintaining secrecy and security, attacking key nodes can have a detrimental impact on the enemy's ability to conduct their operations.

McNeal's description of the role of network analysis is not entirely new. We've seen hints of it in the drone speeches made by various officials. But the description greatly fleshes out what the government thinks it is doing when it engages in pattern of life analysis.

From there, McNeal explains that a range of outsiders — NGOs, journalists, **even family members** — may not be able to see what the network analysts privy to this magic information can see, the crucial role someone has in a terrorist network.

> Thus, **while some individuals may seem insignificant to the outside observer**, when considered by an analyst relying on network based analytical techniques, the elimination of a seemingly low level individual might have an important impact on an enemy organization. Moreover, because terrorist networks rely on secrecy in communication, individuals within those networks may forge strong ties that remain dormant for the purposes of operational security. **This means that social ties that appear inactive or weak to a casual**

> **observer such as an NGO, human rights worker, journalist, or even a target's family members may in fact be strong ties within the network**. Furthermore, because terrorist networks oftentimes rely on social connections between charismatic leaders to function, disrupting those lines of communication can significantly impact those networks. [my emphasis]

Even assuming the software that lays at the core of network analysis provides better knowledge than the deeply embedded understanding of those more familiar with the culture in question (and for a robust view on that, see Haley Barbour on steak power lunches), there is a serious problem with this result.

The most complete description of the network analysis that lies behind our drone killing makes it clear that members of a target's own community may not understand why he was targeted.

Adam Baron, describing the aftermath of the drone killing of the Yemeni Adnan al Qadhi in Beit al Ahmar last year, shows what happens when members of a target's community don't understand why he was killed.

> Few here dispute Qadhi's open sympathy toward AQAP. After all, the target's house, modest compared to nearby fortress-like compounds, sticks out because of a mural on one side that shows al Qaida's signature black flag.
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> But **his relatives and associates say there's more nuance to Qadhi's story**. While he was labeled as a local leader of AQAP after his death, **as recently as last winter he'd participated on a team that mediated between the government and AQAP-linked militants** who'd seized control of the central town of Rada. The scion of a prominent local family who

> still held a position as an officer in the Yemeni military, **Qadhi had refused to take part in the fighting**, relatives said. They said he stayed home even as other AQAP militants carved out a base in the southern province of Abyan.
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> "He may have supported al Qaida, but he wasn't taking part in activities," said Abdulrazzaq Jamal, a Yemeni journalist and analyst who met with Qadhi shortly before his death. "**There were connections, but there wasn't perceptible tangible support**."
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> While Qadhi appeared to make little secret of his extremist ideology, his relatives said the strike against him came as a total shock. There had been no indication that he was a potential drone target, they said. Had they known he was considered such a high-value target, they claimed, they would've assured his cooperation with the authorities.
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> [snip]
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> His neighbor, Mohamed Abdulwali, took a break from repairing a water canister to chime in: "**Any action has a reaction. Any violence will breed violence**." [my emphasis]

It's not that Qadhi's neighbors didn't know about his support for AQAP. But they had a very different understanding of what kind of threat he posed — particularly given his role in mediating between locals and AQAP and his decision not to engage in hostilities — then the network analysts in the US who ordered up his death.

And that different understanding made the US strike illegitimate in their view, a perceived violation of rule of law. It led to open calls for a violent response.

In short, it converted an otherwise neutral

community into one opposed to the United States.

If network analysis results in killings that local communities do not understand and therefore consider illegitimate, it will lead to us losing the political battle for hearts and minds.

There are more potential problems that come from network analysis killing. For example, unless the analysts are also doing network analysis of the surrounding community, they may miss the role a person — and Qadhi is a perfect example — might play in persuading locals to turn against al Qaeda. That is, killing someone like Qadhi may rule out what we did with the Sons of Iraq, effectively undercutting a really violent insurgency by buying the loyalty (or perhaps renting, as this violence is returning now) of key leaders within the insurgency. Aiming to kill the key figures in the network may not be the most efficient way of achieving peace and stability, even if it allows Administration figures to boast about stomping out the enemy.

But at its core, it's the (claimed) asymmetric understanding of this network that makes this kind of killing so stupid. Drone killing that presumes a special knowledge about individuals' roles in a terrorist network — but doesn't share it with the people whose sympathy we must have to win this fight — is bound to backfire.

Update: McNeal reminds me that network analysis involves human analysts assisted by software, not just software. It's a fair point. To be clear, though, I'm not dismissing the value of network analysis (though I question how good our HUMINT going into it is). I'm suggesting that information asymmetry makes it really dangerous to use.