

# LET THE DRONES BEGIN

Fresh off exempting Yemen from any sanctions for its use of child soldiers and partly in response to this week's attempted package bombings, the government appears to be ready to let the CIA start operating drones in Yemen.

Allowing the U.S. military's Special Operations Command units to operate under the CIA would give the U.S. greater leeway to strike at militants even without the explicit blessing of the Yemeni government. In addition to streamlining the launching of strikes, it would provide deniability to the Yemeni government because the CIA operations would be covert. The White House is already considering adding armed CIA drones to the arsenal against militants in Yemen, mirroring the agency's Pakistan campaign.

[snip]

Placing military units overseen by the Pentagon under CIA control is unusual but not unprecedented. Units from the Joint Special Operations Command have been temporarily transferred to the CIA in other countries, including Iraq, in recent years in order to get around restrictions placed on military operations.

[snip]

The CIA conducts covert operations based on presidential findings, which can be expanded or altered as needed. Congressional oversight is required but the information is more tightly controlled than for military operations. For example, when the military conducts missions in a friendly country, it operates with the consent of the local government.

An increase in U.S. missile strikes or combat ground operations by American commando forces could test already sensitive relations with Yemen, which U.S. officials believe is too weak to defeat al Qaeda. Such an escalation could prompt Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Saleh to end the training his military receives from U.S. special operations forces.

If Saleh is too weak (or ideologically compromised) to get the job done against al Qaeda, then why are we foisting our special ops training on him and the 50% of his military that are children (though the US insists that no children will go through our training)?

And I wonder what would have happened if we responded to the UnaBomber by dropping bombs throughout Montana?

The WSJ doesn't say it, but this may well be an effort to evade the AUMF problem limiting the Afghan war on terror to targets who had a hand in 9/11, which AQAP did not. We know Cheney repeatedly chose to do his covert work through JSOC, claiming he didn't have to brief Congress on the actions. This seems to be the opposite: Obama appears ready to brief Congress (presumably, with the new Intelligence Authorization, the entire intelligence committees). But by running essentially military actions through CIA, you can avoid the whole declare war thing—you just issue and tweak a finding, letting the Commander-in-Chief dictate the terms of the not-war.

Meanwhile, here's a rather curious detail from our other drone war. Two top Tehrik-i-Taliban figures were reportedly shot. Like with guns, not drones.

Former Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan's (TTP) commander Baitullah Mehsud's brother Yaqoob Khan has reportedly been shot dead by unidentified men in Mir

Ali, North Waziristan.

[snip]

Earlier this week, a key commander of the TTP, Adnan Afridi, is reported to have been shot dead by unknown persons in the Naseerabad area of Rawalpindi.

Maybe these were internal disputes, maybe we didn't kill these men. But it would be an interesting development if we started targeting individual people, wouldn't it?

Update: See Spencer's very good piece on this.