

THE ARAB SPRING MEETS US COUNTERTERRORISM: “WE CONSIDER THE DRONES TERRORISM”

Jeremy Scahill has a new story describing how our counterterrorism efforts in Yemen, combined with the Arab Spring, are making al Qaeda's affiliates in Yemen more popular among local Yemenis. He quotes one tribal leader comparing AQAP's terrorism to our use of drones.

“Why should we fight them? Why?” asks Sheik Ali Abdullah Abdulsalam, a southern tribal sheik from Shebwa who adopted the nom du guerre Mullah Zabara, he says, out of admiration for Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar. “If my government built schools, hospitals and roads and met basic needs, I would be loyal to my government and protect it. So far, we don't have basic services such as electricity, water pumps. Why should we fight Al Qaeda?” He says that AQAP controls large swaths of Shebwa, conceding that the group does “provide security and prevent looting. If your car is stolen, they will get it back for you.” In areas “controlled by the government, there is looting and robbery. You can see the difference.” Zabara adds, “If we don't pay more attention, Al Qaeda could seize and control more areas.”

Zabara is quick to clarify that he believes AQAP is a terrorist group bent on attacking the United States, but that is hardly his central concern. “The US sees Al Qaeda as terrorism, and we consider the drones terrorism,” he says. “The drones are flying day and night,

frightening women and children, disturbing sleeping people. This is terrorism." Zabara says several US strikes in his region have killed scores of civilians and that his community is littered with unexploded cluster bombs, which have detonated, killing children. He and other tribal leaders asked the Yemeni and US governments for assistance in removing them, he says.

As Scahill describes it, the increasing influence of AQAP and its new rebranded organization, Ansar al Sharia, has been made worse in the last year, as the US has moved most of its counterterrorism personnel to Djibouti for security reasons, leaving Saleh's government to use the counterterrorism troops we've outfitted to defend his own regime, and leaving us to rely on the unpopular drone strikes to hit counterterrorism targets. And the guy who is supposed to be in charge of these counterterrorism forces, Ali Abdullah Saleh's son Yahya, has left the country to go hang out in Cuba with Che Guevara's family.

Given Scahill's description of how Yemen's Central Security Forces ran away from a battle with militants last May, effectively handing them all their weapons, you get the feeling significant numbers of troops will join al Qaeda's affiliates once Saleh loses his incentive to toy with Americans.

But that shouldn't be a big surprise. That's about what's happening in Afghanistan right now too.

In almost every combat outpost I visited this year, the troopers reported to me they had intercepted radio or other traffic between the ANSF and the local Taliban making essentially mini non-aggression deals with each other.

[snip]

To sum: in a number of high profile

mission opportunities over the past 11 months the ANA and ANP have numerous times run from the battle, run from rumors, or made secret deals with the Taliban.

What we're doing? Partnering with illegitimate leaders who have a disincentive to do anything to fix their country which, as a result, lends credibility to the insurgents?

That's not working.