OUR "COOPERATION" WITH YEMEN

Since we killed Anwar al-Awlaki and especially since Abed Rabu Mansour Hadi has taken over as President of Yemen, anonymous counterterrorism officials have repeatedly boasted how good our counterterrorism cooperation with Yemen is.

But this interview between the editor of the Yemen Post, Hakim Almasmari, and TBIJ challenges that claim. First there's the matter of prison escapes, a problem that has plagued Yemen since 9/11. 88 suspected AQAP members have escaped during Hadi's rule.

> **Q: Do you anticipate any new stories to come out of these areas in the south now that al Qaeda has left?**
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> **HA:** Because I believe that al-Qaeda wasn't defeated and they evacuated, I do believe al-Qaeda will have many gains over the next couple of weeks. We will see gains from al-Qaeda over the next couple of weeks in return for their evacuation. Yesterday alone five senior members escaped a prison, a highly secured prison in Yemen. Two days ago, two suspected al-Qaeda militants escaped Aden prison. So it is going to get very dirty. Al-Qaeda needed to evacuate to give the government a good image, but in return they will be given their leaders or members released from prison. This will make al-Qaeda weaker today but stronger tomorrow.
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> **Q: You think there was something underhand in these prison escapes?**
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> **HA:** Yes, this is not just a random prison escape. Eighty-eight suspected al Qaeda militants have escaped prison over the last four months alone. It's a strategy — President Hadi needs to be powerful, he needs the image of being a

> leader. And sometimes that could mean cooperating or coming to agreement with al Qaeda to evacuate, but in return have some of their members released and further dialogue continues under the table between the government and al Qaeda.

And the report that we're not coordinating drone strikes with anyone in the Yemeni Defense Ministry suggests, at the least, we don't trust them for operational security.

> **Q: How credible do you think reports are that Yemen Air Force jets are launching airstrikes rather than American drones?**
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> **HA:** There is no way whatsoever that the Yemen Air Force is conducting all the air strikes. The Yemeni air force is weak and it is conducting some of the air strikes but they result in very little casualties. Eyewitnesses have confirmed that the missiles launched were US-made and US involvement was confirmed in many air strikes, especially in areas where the government has very little to no ground support.
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> It is worrying that the US drones strategy is increasing in Yemen and even more worrying that it is happening without any coordination with the Defense Ministry. We have talked to numerous Defense Ministry officials on this and they told us that only very very few ministry officials in Yemen know even details of the US drone strikes, which means that it happens in a very un-institutional manner. And the US is helping Yemen become more of a dictatorship rather than an institutional nation. By allowing the drone strikes and no one knowing about it, this way people cannot stand against it or approve it.

But then there's the suggestion of a different kind of "cooperation:" the funding we give to Yemeni news outlets that make them hesitant to cover drone strikes in much detail.

> **Q: You often file more specific reports of drone strikes compared with your peers. For example reporting five strikes in a day when others report 'many'. How are you able to be so specific?**
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> **HA:** Generally Yemen media tries to avoid covering drone strikes, for one main reason. Those who avoid it are doing so because they do not want to cut the links between them and any US funds or support for certain media outlets or certain publications.

So between requesting Yemen keep a critical journalist imprisoned (about the only one who, it seems, doesn't end up escaping Yemeni prisons) and leading other journalists to hesitate before covering drones, the US has done a fair amount to limit coverage.

But that doesn't seem to result in a Yemeni government we trust to wage the war against AQAP.