

ARE WE CONFUSING CIA'S LEADER-CENTERED COLLECTION AND DEBATES ABOUT ITS PARAMILITARY OR MILITARY FOCUS?

In his written testimony for yesterday's drone hearing, Peter Bergen noted that the CIA keeps failing to warn policy makers of important developments.

Has the increased emphasis at the CIA on targeted killings hampered the agency's ability to understand really important political developments in the Muslim world, such as the Arab Spring? As a senior Obama official has noted: "The CIA missed Tunisia. They missed Egypt. They missed Libya." Even after the Egyptian revolution occurred, the CIA appears to have entirely missed the fact that the ultra-fundamentalist Salafists would do very well at the election box, winning around quarter of the votes in the 2011 parliamentary election, making them the second largest political bloc in Egypt after the Muslim Brotherhood.

At the hearing, Bergen more closely connected what he called CIA's paramilitary focus and its recent intelligence failures.

Bergen: CIA seems to have missed 1/4 seats by Salafists. CIA should be abt strategic warning. If CIA deformed bc paramilitary that's problem

It's a judgment often repeated: that the CIA has had some big recent intelligence failures because it has been too busy running drone

programs in Pakistan and Yemen.

But is that right?

Before I get at the core of the question, let me just repeat what John Brennan has actually said about his plans for the CIA's paramilitary capabilities, as laid out in his responses to the Senate Intelligence Committee prior to his confirmation.

Question 7: What role do you see for the CIA in paramilitary-style intelligence activities or covert action?

The CIA, a successor to the Office of Strategic Services, has a long history of carrying out paramilitary-style intelligence activities and must continue to be able to provide the President with this option should he want to employ it to accomplish critical national security objectives.

[snip]

Question 8: What are your views on what some have described as the increased "militarization" of the CIA mission following the September 11, 2001 attacks?

In my view, the CIA is the nation's premier "intelligence" agency, and needs to remain so. While CIA needs to maintain a paramilitary capability to be able to carry out covert action as directed by the President, the CIA should not be used, in my view, to carry out traditional military activities.

Almost everyone who reports on drones and Brennan claims he has said he wants to get the CIA out of the paramilitary business. Those people might want to consult what Brennan has said on the record, to Congress.

Just as importantly, Brennan has offered a rather different implicit explanation for why

the CIA missed the Arab Spring, one that has nothing to do with drones (or maybe it does). Brennan offered this description of his priorities for HUMINT in response to a question from Mark Warner at his confirmation hearing.

BRENNAN: Well clearly, counterterrorism is going to be a priority area for the intelligence community and for CIA for many years to come. Just like weapons proliferation is as well. Those are enduring challenges. And since 9/11 the CIA has dedicated a lot of effort, and very successfully, they've done a tremendous job to mitigate that terrorist threat.

At the same time, though, they do have this responsibility on global coverage. And so, what I need to take a look at is whether or not there has been too much of an emphasis of the CT front. As good as it is, we have to make sure we're not going to be surprised on the strategic front and some of these other areas, to make sure we're dedicating the collection capabilities, the operations officers, the all-source analysts, social media, as you said, the – **the so-called Arab Spring that swept through the Middle East. It didn't lend itself to traditional types of – of intelligence collection.**

There were things that were happening – happening in a – on a populist – in a populist way, that, you know, having somebody, you know, well positioned somewhere who can provide us information is not going to give us that insight, social media, other types of things. So I want to see if we can expand beyond the sodestra (ph) collection capabilities that have served us very well, and see what else we need to do in order to take into account the changing nature of the global environment right

now, the changing nature of the communication systems that exist worldwide. [my emphasis]

The implicit suggestion here is that because we relied on Omar Suleiman and other top Egyptian intelligence partners for our intelligence on Egypt, we were unlikely to have a very good sense of what was happening on the ground. While this problem always existed, it was probably exacerbated when, with the Gloves Come Off Memorandum of Notification, George Bush formalized our financial support for Egypt's (and Jordan's, among others) intelligence service as a way to get better intelligence on potential terrorists. That is, we "bought" (a word actually used by Cofer Black, in some accounts) Egypt's intelligence service, and we bought it to learn about terror, not rebellions that might overthrow the Egyptian Administration.

And to his credit, Brennan admits there are limitations to getting all your intelligence from people deemed sufficiently powerful that they might have an incentive or a natural inclination to misread movements seeking to replace them.

But Brennan's solution, it appears, is to read more Twitter and Facebook.

While that may help, given how heavily repressive regimes (like our uber partners the Saudis) are monitoring the opposition bubbling up on social media, it's not clear this will provide the necessary intelligence.

And ultimately, this is also a problem for drones.

To his credit, retired General James Cartwright yesterday admitted the drone program does get in trouble when we don't have precise intelligence.

Cartwright: W/o precise intell on ground, that's generally when we have errors. We need to look at that end of

process.

He also said that CIA has better intelligence than DOD outside of active military theaters.

But we know there have been important failures in both.

It seems that, to a significant extent, the problem here is the same as the problem with the Arab Spring. The intelligence we're going to get from the ISI or Ali Abdullah Saleh is, at times, going to be bad by design. And CIA is not going to fix that by trolling Twitter.

This really is not a novel or revolutionary observation. CIA's HUMINT failures arise in part from a model of knowledge that relies on elites that simply doesn't work, particularly not now.

But those failures may well be independent of – in fact, exacerbating – the problems with drones.