

AFTER FIVE YEARS, SAUDIS WILL FINALLY GET THEIR DRONES TO STRIKE HOUTHIS

Thanks to Chelsea Manning, we know that almost exactly five years ago, the US Ambassador to Saudi Arabia James Smith met with the then Assistant Minister for Defense Khalid bin Sultan about a disastrous Saudi air attack on a Houthi hospital on the Yemeni-Saudi border that killed a thousand people, many civilians. Prince Khalid used the American scolding not only to redouble his requests for US satellite assistance targeting Houthis – with more accuracy, Khalid suggested, the Saudis might kill fewer civilians – but also to ask for Predator drones.

IF WE HAD THE PREDATOR, THIS MIGHT NOT
HAVE HAPPENED

¶3. (S/NF) Upon seeing the photograph, Prince Khalid remarked, “This looks familiar,” and added, “if we had the Predator, maybe we would not have this problem.” He noted that Saudi Air Force operations were necessarily being conducted without the desired degree of precision, and recalled that a clinic had been struck, based on information received from Yemen that it was being used as an operational base by the Houthis. Prince Khalid explained the Saudi approach to its fight with the Houthis, emphasizing that the Saudis had to hit the Houthis very hard in order to “bring them to their knees” and compel them to come to terms with the Yemeni government. “However,” he said, “we tried very hard not to hit civilian targets.” The Saudis had 130 deaths and the Yemenis lost as many as one thousand. “Obviously,” Prince Khaled

observed, “some civilians died, though we wish that this did not happen.”

The attack on the hospital and the Saudi request for more war toys all took place amid assurances that the strikes on the Houthis would “bring them to their knees” which would in turn lead to a lasting ceasefire, which would free up Saudi attention to go after al Qaeda, the ostensible purpose for US intelligence cooperation in the first place.

In the interim five years, a few key developments have happened. Back in 2011, after JSOC couldn’t seem to get clean intelligence on Anwar al-Awlaki, the US built a drone base on the Saudi border that magically managed to find and kill the cleric within months.

More recently, Houthis have brought their fight to Sanaa and beyond, overthrowing the US and Gulf Cooperation Council selected President Abdo Rabi Mansour Hadi. In the wake of what the government has deemed (unlike Egypt) a coup, the US and most western governments have withdrawn embassy personnel, an action that will have little effect on their security but significant effect on the legitimacy of the Houthi-run government.

And now, just in time, the State Department has rolled out a framework under which the US will sell drones to our allies.

But don’t worry! State has included a bunch of rules that cover precisely the same concerns Ambassador Smith voiced 5 years ago in the face of evidence the Saudis were targeting civilians in an effort to “bring them to their knees.”

As the most active user of military UAS, and as an increasing number of nations are acquiring and employing UASs to support a range of missions, the United States has an interest in ensuring that these systems are used lawfully and responsibly. Accordingly, under the new UAS export policy, the United States

will require recipients of U.S.-origin military UAS to agree to the following principles guiding proper use before the United States will authorize any sales or transfers of military UASs:

- Recipients are to use these systems in accordance with international law, including international humanitarian law and international human rights law, as applicable;
- Armed and other advanced UAS are to be used in operations involving the use of force only when there is a lawful basis for use of force under international law, such as national self-defense;
- Recipients are not to use military UAS to conduct unlawful surveillance or use unlawful force against their domestic populations; and
- As appropriate, recipients shall provide UAS operators technical and doctrinal

training on the use of these systems to reduce the risk of unintended injury or damage.

Compare those guidelines with the assessment Ambassador Smith conducted 5 years ago to clear the Saudis for increased sharing of satellite data.

¶2. (S/NF) Ambassador Smith delivered points in reftel to Prince Khaled on February 6, 2010. The Ambassador highlighted USG concerns about providing Saudi Arabia with satellite imagery of the Yemen border area absent greater certainty that Saudi Arabia was and would remain fully in compliance with the laws of armed conflict during the conduct of military operations, particularly regarding attacks on civilian targets. The Ambassador noted the USG's specific concern about an apparent Saudi air strike on a building that the U.S. believed to be a Yemeni medical clinic. The Ambassador showed Prince Khaled a satellite image of the bomb-damaged building in question.

[snip]

¶6. (S/NF) Prince Khaled, in addressing the Ambassador's concerns about possible targeting of civilian sites appeared neither defensive nor evasive. He was unequivocal in his assurance that Saudi military operations had been and would continue to be conducted with priority to avoiding civilian casualties. The Ambassador found this assurance credible, all the more so in light of Prince Khaled's acknowledgment that mistakes likely happened during the strikes against Houthi targets, of the inability of the Saudi Air Force to operate with adequate precision, and the

unreliability of Yemeni targeting recommendations. Based on these assurances, the Ambassador has approved, as authorized in reftel, the provision of USG imagery of the Yemeni border area to the Saudi Government. While the fighting with the Houthis appears to be drawing to a close, the imagery will be of continuing value to the Saudi military to monitor and prevent Houthi incursions across the border as well as enhancing Saudi capabilities against Al-Qaeda activities in this area.

Call me crazy, but given Prince Khalid's determination to bring the Houthis to their knees, I'm unimpressed with Ambassador's Smith assessment that the Saudis were adequately protecting civilians (indeed, some of our most catastrophic strikes in Yemen appear to have relied on Saudi intelligence).

Nothing has changed in the interim 5 years – beyond even more tolerance for Saudi repression amid the rise of an Islamic State for which KSA has been an ideological fount.

I assume the Saudis will be among the first that get approved for a set of drones. Hell, they've surely got practice in using them at the Saudi drone base, and they already have their base from which to target the Houthis.

The question is whether that will do anything for Yemen, or even for US interests.

Aside from the drone manufacturers, of course.