

JOHN BRENNAN'S INCREDIBLE CLAIMS

I'm working on a longer post on John Brennan's Yemen speech yesterday. But I wanted to point to both Gregory Johnsen and Yemen Peace Project's responses to his speech. Johnsen calls Brennan's claim we spend over 50% of our Yemen funds on develop and transition aid "fuzzy math" (Micah Zenko has been making similar points on Twitter). YPP challenges Brennan's claim that drone strikes don't "generat[e] widespread anti-American sentiment or recruits of AQAP" (as does Johnsen less directly).

I've long said that the State Department's plan for Yemen looks good on paper. That was true before the revolution, and it's still somewhat true. But anyone who is honest about it can tell you that what's on paper is not what's going on on the ground. Even the most well-intended policies are worthless if they cannot be implemented. More importantly, the Yemeni people no longer believe a word of what Brennan and his colleagues have to say. I almost choked when Brennan said the following (quoted also by Gregory Johnsen):

"Contrary to the conventional wisdom, we see little evidence that these actions are generating widespread anti-American sentiment or recruits of AQAP."

Well, Mr. Brennan, there's a reason why that wisdom is conventional. I have no idea—literally none—how Brennan arrived at his conclusion. There has, to my knowledge, been no polling done on the subject recently. Mr. Brennan doesn't talk to ordinary Yemenis when he goes

over there, and neither do the embassy staff. But I do, and I can tell you that Yemeni public opinion about America and American policies has never been lower than it is right now. Go ask a Yemeni if you don't believe me. Yemenis I've talked to recently about this topic include intellectuals, activists, western-educated scholars, shop-keepers, bus drivers, students, and unemployed college graduates. They all believe that US CT efforts are killing innocent civilians on a regular basis, that the US has never stopped supporting 'Ali Saleh, and that John Brennan and Ambassador Feilerstein are essentially operating as imperial viceroys of the country. What's more, most of the Yemenis I've talked to believe wholeheartedly that the ill consequences of US policy are completely intended, and that the US is driving the total mess that passes for a transition in post-revolutionary Yemen.

Now, it's my belief that most of the negative consequences of US policy are unintended, but this doesn't mean they're unpredictable.

Now, while I agree with these points, I also think they are too credulous of Brennan's frame. If we spend even just 50% of our budget sowing chaos, does it really matter that we spend an equal amount trying to fix the chaos? If we sow chaos or discredit the government, does it matter that people aren't joining AQAP in response?

But there's a bigger issue here.

Why is it that the DC establishment accepts Brennan's speech as a good faith statement of facts on the ground? Even putting aside Brennan's notorious briefing after the Osama bin Laden killing—in which the stories he spun were debunked within a day—this is the guy who

claimed there had been no civilian casualties in the previous year just three months after the US took out a village jirga called to mediate a land dispute on March 17, 2011. After a range of sources—including the hawkish Long War Journal—disputed Brennan’s claim, he backed off of it slightly.

John O. Brennan, clearly referring to the classified drone program, said in June that for almost a year, “there hasn’t been a single collateral death because of the exceptional proficiency, precision of the capabilities we’ve been able to develop.”

[snip]

In a statement on Tuesday for this article, Mr. Brennan adjusted the wording of his earlier comment on civilian casualties, saying American officials could not confirm any such deaths.

“Fortunately, for more than a year, due to our discretion and precision, the U.S. government has not found credible evidence of collateral deaths resulting from U.S. counterterrorism operations outside of Afghanistan or Iraq, and we will continue to do our best to keep it that way,” Mr. Brennan said.

I’m curious: did Brennan mean we’ve used our precision and discretion to not find credible evidence of collateral deaths? Because it seems the Administration used their discretion to define all military aged males as terrorists and avoided interviewing all the people who journalists interviewed to sustain this incredible claim.

And yet, in spite of the fact that Brennan has stopped short of making such obviously false claims in recent days, he has never corrected the record on this point. Until he does, his credibility should always be questioned.

John Brennan has a history of saying things about which he's not entirely certain so they'll get printed in the press. But until such time that someone who retains more credibility (like Hillary, though some of her claims on Syria have eroded her credibility too) decides they're willing to make these claims, we'd be well served to presume the reason Brennan is saying them is because he's the only one who's willing to make such claims with a straight face.

We shouldn't spend time carefully debunking Brennan's claims until such a time he has regained credibility from his past demonstrably bogus claims. And until then, the response should simply be, "the same guy who claimed there were no civilian casualties just claimed drone strikes don't generate anti-American sentiment. Right."