

DRONE STRIKES: MISUNDERSTANDING ASYMMETRY

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I guess the moment of the Senate Judiciary Committee hearing on drones when I got really frustrated was when Retired Colonel Martha McSally said we didn't need any special rules for drones (which she tried to insist be called Remotely Piloted Aircraft; though she admitted the military has used two different acronyms incorporating "unmanned," she suggested it amounts to an Al Qaeda PsyOp to call drones drones because that implies they're unmanned). In particular, we didn't have to think specially about the asymmetric advantage drones give us.

McSally: [drones] are an asymmetrical advantage we have. It's okay to use our asymmetrical advantage. Rules should not be different.

Don't get me wrong. If the issue is about winning an all out battle for the physical survival of the US, I can see using America's asymmetrical advantage.

But McSally was sitting four seats away from Farea al-Muslimi, who had just described how his Yemeni village of Wessab had responded when Hameed Al-Radmi was droned to death in his home village less than a week ago.

Just six days ago, this so-called war came straight to my village. As I was thinking about my testimony and preparing to travel to the United States to participate in this hearing, I learned that a missile from a U.S. drone had struck the village where I was raised. Ironically, I was sitting with a group of American diplomats in Sana'a at a farewell dinner for a dear American

friend when the strike happened. As I was leaving my American friends, both of my mobile phones began to receive a storm of text messages and calls.

For almost all of the people in Wessab, I'm the only person with any connection to the United States. They called and texted me that night with questions that I could not answer: Why was the United States terrifying them with these drones? Why was the United States trying to kill a person with a missile when everyone knows where he is and he could have been easily arrested?

[snip]

After the strike, the farmers in Wessab were afraid and angry. They were upset because they know Al-Radmi but they did not know that he was a target, so they could have potentially been with him during the missile strike. Some of the people that were with Al-Radmi when he was killed were never affiliated with AQAP and only knew Al-Radmi socially. The farmers in my village were angry because Al-Radmi was a man with whom government security chiefs had a close connection. He received cooperation from and had an excellent relationship with the government agencies in the village. This made him look legitimate and granted him power in the eyes of those poor farmers, who had no idea that being with him meant they were risking death from a U.S. drone.

[snip]

In the past, most of Wessab's villagers knew little about the United States. My stories about my experiences in America, my American friends, and the American values that I saw for myself helped the villagers I talked to understand the America that I know and love. Now,

however, when they think of America they think of the terror they feel from the drones that hover over their heads ready to fire missiles at any time.

It's not that I question McSally's uber-competence; her competence and intelligence were clear from her testimony.

It's just that she – and Lindsey Graham, who had a gleam on his face as he said something virtually identical about asymmetry – seems to misunderstand the relationship here. Indeed, Lindsey even dismissed al-Muslimi's testimony by suggesting that, after invoking a visit to Yemen, he knew that Pakistan and Yemen's governments were unreliable counterterrorism partners and therefore we had to use drone strikes.

But that all forgets that we're trying to do two things: neutralize the few terrorists who are legitimately targeting the United States in Pakistan and Yemen, and convincing Yemenis and Pakistanis and others not only that their government better represents their interests than al Qaeda, but that we have their best interests in mind, too.

And yet neither McSally nor Lindsey seemed to get that using asymmetric weapons against Hameed Al-Radmi also communicated to the villagers of Wessab that we felt entitled to use asymmetric weapons against them, too.

So here we had a young man who we've invested a lot of energy and money into preparing to be an American-friendly leader going forward, testifying before the Senate, and two of the participants in that hearing responded to a story (really, multiple stories) about how drones impact on completely innocent people we're trying to persuade by boasting that we prefer to use these drone strikes because no one in his country can do anything about them.

I don't think you can separate this – the gleeful use of asymmetry against those we're

trying to kill from the impact that asymmetry has on those we're trying to persuade.