

OBAMA'S SIGNATURE

Obama's signature national security policy may well be the embrace of signature strikes. First in Pakistan—until they killed 38 civilians in Shiga, Pakistan, and had to rethink the strategy—and now, according to the WSJ, in Yemen.

The Obama administration has given the Central Intelligence Agency and U.S. military greater leeway to target suspected al Qaeda militants in Yemen with drones, responding to worries a new haven is being established from which to mount attacks on the West.

Mind you, the anonymous sources in this story claim this is “signature lite.” Targets need to fit the profile of High Value Targets, sources claim, to be targeted.

But Obama's (IMO) ill-considered decision is not the most interesting part of this story.

Rather, it's a detail that directly contradicts with the WaPo's version of this story (besides the timing, which also suggested the decision had not yet been made, though it may have been made since). The WaPo said JSOC wasn't all that interested in having these authorities.

The JSOC has broader authority than the CIA to pursue militants in Yemen and is not seeking permission to use signature strikes, U.S. officials said.

WSJ says JSOC did ask.

The CIA and JSOC asked last year for broader targeting powers, however, which would include leeway to conduct what are known as “signature strikes,” in which targets are identified based on patterns of behavior, such as surveillance showing they are transporting weapons.

[snip]

Recently the CIA and JSOC, citing the fears about an al Qaeda haven, renewed requests to the White House.

Perhaps the most interesting bit, though, is this backwards discussion of how you need to use signature strikes to avoid border incursions against a legitimate defensive issue.

U.S. counterterrorism officials said they are currently tracking several direct threats to the U.S. connected to AQAP. The officials wouldn't provide further details because that information is classified.

[snip]

Administration officials said the White House has no plans to allow strikes in Yemen to be as broad as those in Pakistan. CIA strikes against low-level fighters in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas, or FATA, are meant to prevent them from crossing the border into neighboring Afghanistan, where they are waging an insurgency against U.S. and Afghan forces.

"This is distinct from the FATA," a senior administration official said of Yemen. "We're using these tools judiciously and carefully to scope this as a counterterrorism effort and not an all-out counter-insurgency campaign."

Granted, US sources claim that this use of signatures is different than the FATA and Pakistan. But given that I suspect the Saudis may be dictating this change to us, I'm rather interested in the suggestion that border incursions present the need to use signature strikes.

Because these are, after all, happening across the border from the Saudis.