

AT WHAT POINT WILL THE ADMINISTRATION ADMIT “AMERICAN INTERESTS” EQUAL “WHAT THE SAUDIS WANT”?

There are a couple of stories this weekend on our undeclared war in Yemen that deserve some close focus.

As I pointed out in the wake of the NYT and Daily Beast stories on drone targeting, the Administration had been successfully distracting attention from Obama’s embrace of signature strikes directed out of John Brennan’s office by focusing on the vetting that goes (or went) into the Kill List.

With that in mind, compare how Greg Miller reports on those issues in this story. A key source or sources for the story are one or more former US official who describe a liberalization of the Kill List.

Targets still have to pose a “direct threat” to U.S. interests, said a former high-ranking U.S. counterterrorism official. “But the elasticity of that has grown over time.”

[snip]

One of the U.S. objectives in Yemen has been “identifying who those leaders were in those districts that were al-Qaeda and also in charge of the rebellion,” said a former senior U.S. official who was involved in overseeing the campaign before leaving the government. “There was a little liberalization that went on in the kill lists that allowed us to go after them.”

[snip]

The effort nearly ground to a halt last year amid a political crisis that finally forced Yemen's leader for three decades, Ali Abdullah Saleh, to step down. As he fought to cling to power, U.S. officials said they became concerned that he was trying to direct U.S. strikes against his adversaries under the guise of providing locations of supposed terrorist groups.

"There were times when we were intentionally misled, presumably by Saleh, to get rid of people he wanted to get rid of," said the former U.S. official involved in overseeing the campaign.

Now, as I noted, both the AP and Daily Beast emphasized the importance of Mike Mullen (who left on September 30, the day we killed Anwar al-Awlaki) and James Cartwright (who left on August 3) to Kill List vetting. That was an aeon ago in our war on Yemen, though the discussion of pulling back on targeting because we finally admitted to ourselves that Ali Abdullllah Saleh was playing a double game with us did happen while they were still around. And, for the moment, I can't think of any other similarly high-ranking people who have left.

Now compare what these former officials said with what current officials are telling Miller (well, ignore Tommy Vietor, because he's obviously blowing smoke).

"We're pursuing a focused counterterrorism campaign in Yemen designed to prevent and deter terrorist plots that directly threaten U.S. interests at home and abroad," said Tommy Vietor, spokesman for the National Security Council. "We have not and will not get involved in a broader counterinsurgency effort."

But other U.S. officials said that the administration's emphasis on threats to interests "abroad" has provided latitude for expanding attacks on al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), as the Yemen affiliate is known. In early May, a U.S. attack killed an operative, Fahd al-Quso, tied to the latest AQAP plot to smuggle explosives-laden underwear onto a flight to the United States. But officials said the campaign is now also aimed at wiping out a layer of lower-ranking operatives through strikes that can be justified because of threats they pose to the mix of U.S. Embassy workers, military trainers, intelligence operatives and contractors scattered across Yemen.

[snip]

U.S. officials said the pace has accelerated even though there has not been a proliferation in the number of plots, or evidence of a significantly expanded migration of militants to join AQAP.

That is, we seem to have lowered the bar to targeting, based on general threats to US personnel in Yemen, not any increase in operatives joining AQAP for operations targeting the US.

Remember when, in April, I noted that by putting more "trainers" in Yemen, we were effectively providing more Americans that AQAP and insurgents could target? Well, it seems to have worked. And this Reuters story—which I'll get to in a moment—puts the number of "military advisors" at "several hundred," which is higher than other estimates I've seen.

Curiously, Miller's story separates his discussion of the approval of signature strikes from the discussion of this expanded targeting. Equally curiously, he chooses to focus on the targeting of Kaid and Nabil al-Dhahab—he calls them members of the "al-Qaeda insurgency" rather

than the killing of up to eight civilians in Jaar; that is, he focuses on killings pursuant to a liberalized Kill List rather than signature strikes. Finally, Miller makes no mention of the centralization of targeting—such as it still exists—within the White House.

Which brings me to the Reuters article. On Twitter (in this tweet and following), Gregory Johnsen refuted a number of points it makes: that Saleh had refused to leave, that protests had ended, that promises for humanitarian funding made by the Friends of Yemen can be taken seriously, and that the US has any kind of strategy in Yemen.

Given those problems, perhaps all of it should be dismissed. But I'm rather interested in the focus on the Houthis and Saudi interests.

The aim, foreign powers say, is to help the Yemeni government stand on its own feet and avoid the country becoming a Somalia-style failed state.

That means not just ousting AQAP from territory it seized last year in southern Yemen but also tackling a separate northern Shi'ite tribal revolt. There is also an urgent need to address other longer-term problems including widespread corruption and growing food and water shortages.

[snip]

For Yemen and its Saudi neighbors in particular, the northern uprising is seen as at least as much of a concern. Allegations it might in part be backed by Iran have attracted some U.S. attention, but conclusive evidence has proved largely elusive.

Experts say there is little or no sign of AQAP involvement in the northern revolt, with the largely Sunni militant group periodically attacking Shi'ite leaders in some of their bloodiest attacks so far.

Miller's article makes it clear that the definition of "American interest abroad" has been vastly expanded. The oil-producing regions of the Persian Gulf have been included in our formal definition of US vital interests since 1980. So it is really not even an expansion of definition to include "what Saudi Arabia wants" in our treatment of what national interests might justify US presence (including, Greg Miller confirms what two other sources have already reported, manned planes).

Sure, by placing more targets to be attacked in Yemen, by having the Saudis create another UndieBomb plot (given that—as US officials admit—"there has not been a proliferation in the number of plots," the Saudis had to provide their own), we have "US interests" to point to to justify entering a war to shore up Yemen's unpopular government. But at some point, they're just serving as cover.