

FOR ALL THE TARGETING “TRANSPARENCY” WE STILL DON’T KNOW HOW AL-MAJALA WAS TARGETED

I realized something as I read this Gregory Johnsen post. For all the so-called transparency on targeting we’ve gotten since the AP first revealed John Brennan was seizing control of the targeting process, we still don’t know what went wrong with the al-Majala targeting.

Johnsen captures a significant chronological point about signature strikes in Yemen: the

Both tell basically the same story: portraying Obama as a president who is deeply involved in the details of drone strikes in Yemen and yet, despite his best efforts to limit the strikes, continues to be pulled deeper and deeper into a war he had no intention of fighting.

After the “sloppy strike” in December 2009, Obama “overruled military and intelligence commanders who were pushing to use signature strikes (in Yemen) as well.”

According to the NYT, he said the US was “not going to war with Yemen.”

After the success of the bin Laden raid in 2011, the US military along with the CIA once again began pushing for “signature strikes” in Yemen. Again, Obama pushed back, wary of getting sucked into a mess in Yemen from which there was no foreseeable exit.

As the NYT describes it, shortly after the al-Majala disaster and “within two years” of the

time—understood to be April of this year—that Obama ultimately approved signature strikes in Yemen, “military and intelligence commanders” asked to use signature strikes in Yemen too.

The very first strike under his watch in Yemen, on Dec. 17, 2009, offered a stark example of the difficulties of operating in what General Jones described as an “embryonic theater that we weren’t really familiar with.”

It killed not only its intended target, but also two neighboring families, and left behind a trail of cluster bombs that subsequently killed more innocents. It was hardly the kind of precise operation that Mr. Obama favored. Videos of children’s bodies and angry tribesmen holding up American missile parts flooded You Tube, fueling a ferocious backlash that Yemeni officials said bolstered Al Qaeda.

The sloppy strike shook Mr. Obama and Mr. Brennan, officials said, and once again they tried to impose some discipline.

[snip]

Now, in the wake of the bad first strike in Yemen, Mr. Obama overruled military and intelligence commanders who were pushing to use signature strikes there as well.

“We are not going to war with Yemen,” he admonished in one meeting, according to participants.

His guidance was formalized in a memo by General Jones, who called it a “governor, if you will, on the throttle,” intended to remind everyone that “one should not assume that it’s just O.K. to do these things because we spot a bad guy somewhere in the world.”

Mr. Obama had drawn a line. But within two years, he stepped across it.

Daniel Klaidman doesn't describe (at least in that excerpt) that memo. He describes Jeh Johnson watching the al-Majala strike in real time.

After approving his first targeted killings one evening, he watched the digital images of the strike in real time—"Kill TV," the military calls the live battlefield feed. Johnson could see the shadowy images of militants running drills in a training camp in Yemen. Then suddenly there was a bright flash. The figures that had been moving across the screen were gone. Johnson returned to his Georgetown home around midnight that evening, drained and exhausted. Later there were reports from human-rights groups that dozens of women and children had been killed in the attacks, reports that a military source involved in the operation termed "persuasive." Johnson would confide to others, "If I were Catholic, I'd have to go to confession."

And then Klaidman describes John Brennan and Obama, in June 2011, pushing back against a "military advisor" discussing a campaign in Yemen.

But in May 2011, the military proposed killing 11 AQAP operatives at once, by far the largest request since it stepped up operations in Yemen. The Arab Spring's turmoil had spread to the country, and al Qaeda was moving quickly to take advantage of the chaos. Gen. James Mattis, who heads U.S. Central Command, warned darkly of an emerging new terror hub in the Horn of Africa. Obama and a few of his senior advisers, however, were wary of getting dragged into an internal conflict—or fueling a

backlash—by targeting people who were not focused on striking the United States. Obama and his aides reduced the target list to four people, all of whom were eliminated.

The pressure didn't abate, however. Brennan came to believe that the commander in chief needed to make an unequivocal statement—to brush back the people calling for more and larger attacks. The chance came in mid-June, during a regularly scheduled "Terror Tuesday" briefing. At one point during the discussion, one of the president's military advisers made a reference to the ongoing "campaign" in Yemen. Obama abruptly cut him off. There's no "campaign" in Yemen, he said sharply: "We're not in Yemen to get involved in some domestic conflict. We're going to continue to stay focused on threats to the homeland—that's where the real priority is."

Now I raise all this to point out what these stories don't address. While NYT claims that we got our unnamed target in al-Majala along with those Bedouin families, it doesn't mention the purported imminent attack it targeted. Nor does it mention David Petraeus' claim, to Ali Abdullah Saleh, that he was mistaken when he said women and kids were killed. That is, it doesn't point to the bad intelligence that we clung to even after Saleh knew better. Al-Majala wasn't a drone strike—it was a ship-launched strike—so we didn't have drones to check (though we had satellite and the kill cam). Why did we persist in claiming that those killed in the al-Majala attack were legitimate targets.

Nor does the NYT situate it's report of the clamor for signature strikes in the context of the May 2010 killing of Jabir Shabwani, a Saleh rival who was trying to forge a peace agreement. Later reporting suggested Saleh deliberately fed us bad information to eliminate Shabwani. If the

first request to use signature strikes came “within two years” of the time Obama eventually approved signature strikes but not long after the al-Majala killing, it either happened around that same time, or Obama gave approval for signature strikes before April.

And it’s not like sources aren’t talking about it. Greg Miller, for example, quotes a former US official finally admitting Saleh was feeding us bad information.

“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, it’s possible the timing is off, and Obama’s sole push-back on signature strikes in Yemen took place after May 2011—that is, after we started rethinking signature strikes in Pakistan.

But there’s something funky with the presentation of the targeting. It reportedly affected Obama, Brennan, and Johnson significantly. And yet none of this so-called transparency describes what that really meant.

That’s a really significant point given that—aside from the remorse over the civilian casualties in al-Majala—the problem appears to derive from deliberately bad intelligence, not significant squeamishness about signature strikes.