

THE REAL BLOWBACK: DRONE INSTABILITY

In addition to saying something I've said for a while—that our poor education outcomes are a bigger threat to our country than al Qaeda—Stanley McChrystal also had this story to tell at the Aspen Ideas Festival.

“I hope we won't be a country that uses [drones] to the exclusion of” trained personnel on the ground, he said. He noted the importance of U.S. forces living in foreign countries and learning the local languages. To hit home his point, he described a chilling account of the wrongful execution of a civilian farmer in Afghanistan by a U.S. drone strike. “We fired a missile and killed him and found out he was a farmer,” McChrystal said. After the assassination, McChrystal replayed the event to Afghan President Hamid Karzai on a laptop who told McChrystal **the farmer was engaged in routine irrigation work just prior to the missile strike—an activity the U.S. military should've been familiar with.** “You have to know these sorts of things,” McChrystal told the crowd. [my emphasis]

On Twitter I joked that assassinating farmers in arid countries who try to irrigate their fields is a plot to sell Monsanto seeds (the guy we killed with Fahd al-Quso was reportedly also a farmer tending his fields); that was, of course, just snark.

But consider what it is: an example of the way that our drone strikes terrorize the kinds of productive activities Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Yemen need to reestablish some kind of stability.

Which brings me to this point from a guest poster at Tom Ricks' blog: the targeting rules

in Afghanistan (the farmer described by McChrystal notwithstanding) are far more strict than they are in Yemen, Pakistan, and Somalia because our troops are there.

Panelists noted that in Afghanistan, ISAF has been very effective at using drones as part of the larger military campaign. Strict rules govern the use of drones under ISAF command. Under no conditions, for example, are drones used to attack buildings, given the possibility that unidentified civilians may be inside. **Such rigidity results not solely from a belief in abiding by the rules of war, but from a conviction that any civilian deaths threaten greater instability.** In the hinterlands of Pakistan, Somalia, and Yemen, where ground troops are unable to help vet potential targets or engage with local populations to redress errors, drones have struck more fear and resentment in local populations than confidence, one panelist concluded. [my emphasis]

The implication is that our troops are there and therefore we have firsthand knowledge, and I'm sure that's a big part of things (though I suspect one reason McChrystal recognizes the need to improve education is that our troops will only figure out things like local irrigation customs if they've got a more sophisticated education than most American high school grads). But I wonder, too, whether having troops stationed locally makes the value of stability more readily apparent to American planners.

It's always the people on the ground—whether they're Pakistani, Afghan, Yemeni, or American—who best recognize the value of stability.

With the importance of stability in mind, consider this post from Chris Swift, which purports to refute the “drone blowback fallacy.”

It starts by acknowledging that AQAP has tripled in size since the drone campaign intensified in Yemen and suggests that drone opponents are drawing a direct connection solely between the burgeoning numbers and the drone strikes (as some definitely are).

The ranks of al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) have tripled to 1,000 in the last three years, and the link between its burgeoning membership, U.S. drone strikes, and local resentment seems obvious.

It then describes a series of interviews that attribute rising AQAP ranks to money and dignity, not revenge over drone killings.

From al Hudaydah in the west to Hadhramaut in the east, AQAP is building complex webs of dependency within Yemen's rural population. It gives idle teenagers cars, khat, and rifles – the symbols of Yemeni manhood. It pays salaries (up to \$400 per month) that lift families out of poverty. It supports weak and marginalized sheikhs by digging wells, distributing patronage to tribesmen, and punishing local criminals. As the leader of one Yemeni tribal confederation told me, "Al Qaeda attracts those who can't afford to turn away."

But note the focus of all this (and this is a problem among both drone opponents and boosters). What Swift treats is the increase in **domestic recruits** to AQAP, not foreign recruits.

As a number of sources have confirmed, the intelligence-created UndieBomb 2.0 notwithstanding, AQAP is increasingly less of a threat to us because it attracts fewer foreign recruits who could target us directly.

In his story describing the lowered standards for drone strikes the other

day, Greg Miller described multiple officials admitting that we're increasing the number of drone strikes in Yemen even though there's no evidence more people are "migrat[ing]" to join AQAP.

U.S. officials said the pace has accelerated [in the last five months] 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 may conflict with John Brennan's claims that AQAP has tripled in size since the UndieBomber 1.0. It may suggest that that growth all took place before the last year. Or it may suggest—particularly given the use of the word "migration"—that these officials are distinguishing between non-Yemenis and local insurgents allying with AQAP.

Whichever it is, the NCTC just reported, last year attacks from AQAP didn't go up either—in fact, they went down slightly.

Attacks by AQ and its affiliates increased by 8 percent from 2010 to 2011. A significant increase in attacks by al-Shabaab, from 401 in 2010 to 544 in 2011, offset a sharp decline in attacks by al-Qa'ida in Iraq (AQI) and a smaller decline in attacks by al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).

Everyone but John Brennan—who has a history of lying about drone

strikes—seems to be saying that the risk from terrorism, while still real, is going down in Yemen, not up.

And yet, even though AQAP is increasingly a local issue—a fight over who can turn the electricity back on most quickly and provide a livelihood for the poor—we still are increasing our military commitment there.

Why?

Saudi interests. The threat AQAP might establish a safe haven in Yemen. Al Qaeda's aspirations to a caliphate.

A bunch of different things—but they all amount to a local insurgency that we nevertheless claim is a direct threat to us. Which then makes the problem a problem of Yemeni state power.

And therein lies the problem—and the reason why Swift misses where the blowback comes.

In their view, public opposition to drones had little to do with a desire for revenge or increasing sympathy for al Qaeda. Instead, they argued, ordinary Yemenis see the drones as an affront to their national pride. "Drones remind us that we don't have the ability to solve our problems by ourselves," one member of the Yemeni Socialist Party said. "If these were Yemeni drones, rather than American drones, there would be no issue at all."

It never worked when we pretended the drone strikes were Yemen's. It's surely not going to work now that some Yemeni officials admit they are ours. But every drone strike is a reminder that the state does not exercise sovereignty over the country—to say nothing of the difficulties drones present to those trying to turn on the electricity.

Therein lies the blowback—and, presumably, the explanation behind the opposition in Pakistan

toward both the US and toward Pakistani counterterrorism efforts.

We can argue about whether we've beaten al Qaeda or not. But if we haven't, we need to be fighting it as an insurgency. And repeatedly demonstrating the impotence of state government is not a way to beat an insurgency.