

Drone strikes: America's antidote to a cancerous AQAP growth

Although some have claimed the United States' drone programme in Yemen is highly effective, having killed nine "high-value targets"¹ since the first strike in 2002, research by Peter Bergen and Megan Braun found that under the Obama administration, fewer than 13% of drone strikes killed a militant leader². Indeed, the introduction in 2012 of 'signature strikes,' where 'militants' are targeted based on patterns of movement and suspicion, has led to an increase in inaccuracies, and 473 deaths³, including civilians, fuelling Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula's (AQAP) propaganda war. This short-term solution to the presence of AQAP in Yemen has only led to a change of tactics by the militant organization, rather than a long-term solution permanently halting their existence. These changes include alterations to military and recruitment strategy, and the group capitalising on the fragile state of government left after the ousting of President Ali Abdullah Saleh.

AQAP, formed in 2009, united both Al-Qaeda in Yemen and Al-Qaeda in Saudi Arabia. The group gained notoriety after the 2003 Riyadh bombings, which killed at least 29 people (mostly expatriates), the 2009 'Underpants bomber', and the 2012 Sana'a bombings. The organization was recently described as the "most active franchise"⁴ of Al-Qaeda, leading to a robust response from the US and resumption of drone strikes on AQAP targets from 2009. Due to the remoteness of the southern Yemeni provinces in which AQAP mainly operate, it has always been difficult to assess the size of the militant group. However, most estimates suggest that in 2003 there were around 100 members, and the organization was all but finished but this number had increased to nearly 1000 despite the increased intensity of drone strikes in 2009. This suggests drone strikes have aided AQAP's appeal and popularity, but also highlights the difficulty in finding reliable figures relating to AQAP's size.

Militarily speaking, AQAP's fighting and operational strategies have changed significantly since the escalation of US drone strikes in 2009. AQAP have often engaged in violent retaliatory attacks in the following hours or days after a particularly damaging strike. In March 2012, after a drone strike killed five AQAP militants, an attack was launched on a liquid-natural gas pipeline only hours later, destroying the pipeline, damaging Yemen's economy, and hurting its main stakeholder, Total. The insurgent group also directed their violent campaigns towards Yemeni government officials, and "since March 2007... has killed several [intelligence] officers"⁵ in Marib alone, thus "detering officials from scrutinising its activities,"⁶ whilst being careful to avoid civilian casualties and divisive Western targets, such as aid workers.

¹ *Human Rights Watch*. (2013) [Online] Available from:

http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/yemen1013_ForUpload.pdf [Accessed: 30th October 2014]

² *Living Under Drones*. (2012) [Online] Available from: http://www.livingunderdrones.org/numbers/#_ftn9 [Accessed: 30th October 2014]

³ *Human Rights Watch*. (2013) [Online] Available from:

http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/yemen1013_ForUpload.pdf [Accessed: 30th October 2014]

⁴ Cruickshank, P. (2012) *CNN* [Online] Available from: <http://security.blogs.cnn.com/2012/04/20/brennan-on-bin-laden-raid-and-dangerous-yemen/> [Accessed: 30th October 2014]

⁵ Barfi, B. (2010) *Nato Review*. [Online] Available from:

http://www.nato.int/docu/Review/2010/Yemen/Yemen_AQAP/EN/index.htm [Accessed: 30th October 2014]

⁶ Barfi, B. (2010)

Furthermore, AQAP have avoided training in open areas for extended periods of time, and there is evidence that “militants set up a “pop-up” training camp, where they drove into the desert... set up targets, fired weapons... then packed up and left within a matter of hours,”⁷ avoiding surveillance drones. So, training has not stopped, militants are just being more vigilant. AQAP have also recognised the lack of ‘second strike’ tactic, realizing the drones are unlikely to strike the same place twice, thus relocating to the site of a recent hit. The new location provides a safe haven as well as a fertile recruiting ground where anti-US sentiment is also already rife. Ms Entesar al-Qadhi, a Yemeni politician, noted that drone strikes are seen as “an okay to go back into that area,”⁸ strengthening AQAP’s military strategies. Militants also tend to use technology less to communicate with one another, since the interception of conversations between Al-Wuhayshi and al-Zawahiri plotting attacks on American targets led the US to put on lockdown 22 of its embassies in the region in 2013.

Furthermore, AQAP uses the drone attacks as a tool for propaganda against Western and US interference and sees the strikes as a violation of Yemeni sovereignty. This could be one reason to explain the rise in the number of active fighters. On 17th April 2013, in the remote, agricultural village of Wessab, a strike targeted a well-known man in the village, Hammed al-Radmi, killing four other ‘militants,’ also travelling in the same car. However, Farea al-Muslimi, a Yemeni youth activist educated in the US, recently testified before the Drone Wars Senate in America describing his village, as inhabited by “simple, poor farmers,”⁹ terrified by the strike. He went on to suggest that while there was no anti-US sentiment in his village before the strike, “one drone strike accomplished in an instant.”¹⁰ These drone strikes can have a profound effect on the local population, and are then used as a propaganda tool by AQAP. US counterterrorism strategies only aid this propaganda by acting on circumstantial rather than accurate intelligence, killing innocent bystanders in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Drone strikes “help to further destabilize Yemen,”¹¹ rather than strengthen security, since the public have less faith in their central government, which seems to be acting as a puppet to the US administration, leaving “a security vacuum to be filled.”¹² Since the ousting of President Saleh in 2012, the interim president Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi, has made a farce of the Yemeni government, handing control of its country’s airspace to the US government. By providing basic services such as water, AQAP is seen, in some places, as a credible alternative, exploiting “common malcontent with the... government over injustices including corruption... political reform and unequal distribution of

⁷ Foust, J. (2013) American Security Project [Online] Available from: <http://www.americansecurityproject.org/ASP%20Reports/Ref%200110%20-%20Understanding%20the%20Strategic%20and%20Tactical%20Considerations%20of%20Drone%20Strikes.pdf> [Accessed: 30th October 2014]

⁸ Aulakh, K. (2013) *Foreign Policy Today*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.fptoday.org/drones-negative-impacts-require-targeted-strikes/> [Accessed: 30th October 2014]

⁹ *Russia Today*. (2013) [Online] Available from: <http://rt.com/usa/us-drone-senate-yemen-306/> [Accessed: 30th October 2014]

¹⁰ *Russia Today*. (2013)

¹¹ Emker, S. (2013) *The Journal of Diplomacy and International Relations*. [Online] Available from: <http://blogs.shu.edu/diplomacy/2013/01/analyzing-the-us-counterterrorism-strategy-in-yemen/> [Accessed: 30th October 2014]

¹² Emker, S. (2013)

profits from oil.”¹³ One could argue “AQAP has employed a soft power approach by fulfilling social needs... to build networks of mutual dependency.”¹⁴ If the US wishes to combat extremism, it could start by advising the Yemeni government on ways to provide improved public services, combat corruption, and form a credible, respected government.

It is obvious to see from the figures of active fighters affiliated to AQAP that US drones are merely fuelling US anti-sentiment and drawing Yemenis to AQAP’s ranks, rather than taking out ‘key figures’ as America claims. Due to its command and control structure, where the second figure replaces the first automatically, the US needs to rethink its counterterrorism strategy not only in Yemen, but in Somalia, Pakistan, and Afghanistan where it seeks fire power and unmanned drones as a deradicalization strategy. Indeed, I believe that although drones may have killed a few main targets, the “threat appears to be migrating elsewhere and taking on new forms,”¹⁵ and indeed the mutated form may be far less treatable than the original disease. The US should ask themselves why AQAP has such appeal to young Yemeni unemployed men. Could it be because they are paid \$400 a month, given a car, economic stability, and a cause to believe in, when they live on less than \$2 a day? Yemen needs an improvement in public services, education, the centralization of government control, and the eradication of corruption, but as the resurgence of AQAP suggests, this cannot come in the form of an unmanned drone.

¹³ Emker, S. (2013) The Journal of Diplomacy and International Relations. [Online] Available from: <http://blogs.shu.edu/diplomacy/2013/01/analyzing-the-us-counterterrorism-strategy-in-yemen/> [Accessed: 30th October 2014]

¹⁴ Emker, S. (2013)

¹⁵ Foust, J. (2013) American Security Project [Online] Available from: <http://www.americansecurityproject.org/ASP%20Reports/Ref%200110%20-%20Understanding%20the%20Strategic%20and%20Tactical%20Considerations%20of%20Drone%20Strikes.pdf> [Accessed: 30th October 2014]

Bibliography

CNN. (2012) *Brennan on bin Laden raid, and "dangerous" Yemen*. [Online] Available from: <http://security.blogs.cnn.com/2012/04/20/brennan-on-bin-laden-raid-and-dangerous-yemen/> [Accessed: 30th October 2014]

Russia Today. (2013) *'Growing hatred of US': Yemeni testifies to Senate on drone program fallout*. [Online] Available from: <http://rt.com/usa/us-drone-senate-yemen-306/> [Accessed: 30th October 2014]

Foreign Policy Today. (2013) *Drones: Negative Impacts require targeted strikes*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.fptoday.org/drones-negative-impacts-require-targeted-strikes/> [Accessed: 30th October 2014]

The Journal of Diplomacy and International Relations. (2013) *Analysing the US Counterterrorism strategy in Yemen*. [Online] Available from: <http://blogs.shu.edu/diplomacy/2013/01/analyzing-the-us-counterterrorism-strategy-in-yemen/> [Accessed: 30th October 2014]

Living Under Drones. (2012) *Stanford/NYU Report* [Online] Available from: http://www.livingunderdrones.org/numbers/#_ftn9 [Accessed: 30th October 2014]

NATO Review. (2010) *How Attack AQAP influenced its strategy*. [Online] Available from: http://www.nato.int/docu/Review/2010/Yemen/Yemen_AQAP/EN/index.htm [Accessed: 30th October 2014]

Human Rights Watch. (2013) *Between a Drone and Al-Qaeda: The Civilian Cost of US Targeted Killings in Yemen*. [Online] Available from: http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/yemen1013_ForUpload.pdf [Accessed: 30th October 2014]

American Security Project. (2013) *Understanding the Strategic and Tactical Considerations of Drone Strikes*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.americansecurityproject.org/ASP%20Reports/Ref%200110%20-%20Understanding%20the%20Strategic%20and%20Tactical%20Considerations%20of%20Drone%20Strikes.pdf> [Accessed: 30th October 2014]