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The United States Drone Campaign in Yemen

This research project is concerned with the use of militarized drones in the Middle East, specifically Yemen. The first part of my research project explored the history of militarized drone use as well as the current state of civil liberties and political transparency in Yemen. Yemen is a particularly interesting location for the study of drone strikes for a variety of reasons. For one, it has been an openly visible battleground for the long tradition of Arab nationalism and Islam with the seemingly contradictory practice of communism. Yemen has been host to its own extensive and effective series of citizen motivated political protests. The capital is currently held by the Houthis Rebels, threatening Yemen's relationship with the United States. The US benefits greatly from a positive alliance with Yemen as the country's location makes it imperative for oil exportation as well as counter-terrorism efforts.

This secondary portion of the paper will be concerned with the specifics of drone use and the advantages and disadvantages of the technology. I will examine the effects of drone strikes on Yemen national security, the personal safety of citizens, the relationship of Yemen to the United States and perhaps most importantly the effectiveness of US drone strikes against terrorist movement. I will conclude the essay with recommendations both personal and media driven for the use of militarized drone technology in Yemen.

Subsection A

The most pertinent argument in favor and opposition of drone strikes is that concerned with national security. When considering the issue of drone strikes as anti-terrorism action, the national security of both Yemen and the United States is relevant. The strongest national security argument in favor of using drones to fight extremism in Yemen is the lack of risk to foot soldiers who would have otherwise been charged with carrying out raids and attacks in person. The removal of these troops from the ground relieves the burden on the US military while still maintaining jobs for military personnel. From a US perspective the drone strikes are extremely low risk and high gain. However, there are many opinions to suggest that the harm of drone strikes towards the relationship of Yemeni citizens to the United States government could outweigh much of the benefit. The United States government has not taken the responsibility of these attacks completely lightly. In response to high initial noncombatant deaths, president Barack Obama organized a panel system which he is involved closely in, for determining the targets of drone strikes. "It is the strangest of bureaucratic rituals: Every week or so, more than 100 members of the government's sprawling national security apparatus gather, by secure video teleconference, to pore over terrorist suspects' biographies and recommend to the president who should be the next to die" (Becker, Jo 2012).

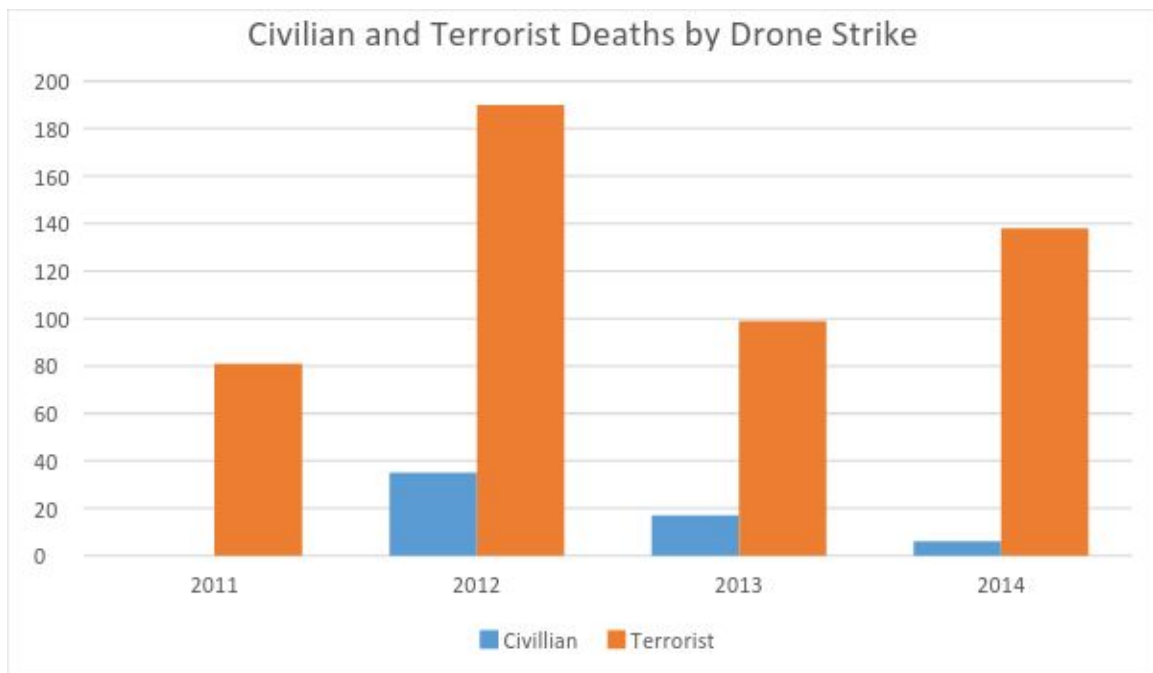
The behavior of political extremists in Yemen is complex and hard to predict. Some extremists who previously participated in organized violence very closely associated with Al Qaeda have now adopted nonviolent approaches that have been

seen as successful in inciting revolutions such as Arab Spring. An example of such a revolutionary is Rashad Mohammed Saeed, who fought alongside Osama Bin Laden but has since returned to his home in Yemen and become involved in nonviolent political organizations which seek to encourage Al Qaeda to lay down arms and give power to revolutionaries through other means. Figures such as Saeed are often greatly respected within their communities and vital to a sense of political empowerment within individuals. However, Saeed could certainly qualify as a drone strike target and if that were to happen his death would embitter many Yemeni's towards the United States ideal of reform. Ibrahim Mothana is a young Yemeni man who has extensively voiced his opinion on drone warfare in his country. His opinion has been so valuable that he has been invited previously to speak in front of the US senate. He condemns the extensive use of drones as counter-terrorism effort, stating "*Drone strikes are causing more and more Yemenis to hate America and join radical militants; they are not driven by ideology but rather by a sense of revenge and despair. . .*" (*The Guardian*).

Saeed is a potential example of this sort of loss of trust, but there are victims of drone warfare that already have deteriorated this relationship. In 2010 a drone strike was approved by the president of the United States which resulted in the death of the deputy governor of the Mareb province in Yemen (Fleishman 2012). His death was not the United States goal in the strike, but he was certainly the most culturally high profile loss. This strike raised many questions towards the transparency of information between the United States and cooperating Yemeni government as the entirety of the intelligence for the strike was provided by Yemen and it was not included that the

governor would be present at the targeted event. This sort of behavior shows the potential for airstrikes to be manipulated by clans and political parties to target opposing groups which do not pose a terrorist threat to the United States.

Through the lens of clan warfare, which has plagued nations across the globe, this sort of interventionist action which relies heavily on whoever is currently in power presents a threat to the national security of Yemen. As the poorest nation in the Middle East, and one which has undergone a particularly high amount of political upheaval over the past two decades, Yemen is vulnerable to such internal chaos and destruction. This threat is particularly potent since signature strikes have been approved to take place in Yemen as of 2012. Signature strikes are the most controversial form of drone strike because they are planned according to suspicious behavior rather than known location of a wanted terrorist. This form of strike has the largest potential to result in the deaths of citizens not affiliated with terrorist organizations.



This graph shows the breakdown of deaths in Yemen by drone strike from 2011 through 2014 with information from The Long War Journal. Although the bulk of deaths are considered terrorism related, it is important to consider how easily radicals within Yemen can be grouped with terrorist organizations. Yemen is an impoverished nation with much political upheaval and a strong history of individual activism. There is a lack of subtlety in the classification of terrorist threats to the United States, and the strong culture or religious motivation can cloud a necessary understanding of the differences in citizens' approaches to reform. Some critics of the use of drones have accused Barack Obama of "presidential acquiescence in a formula for counting civilian deaths that some officials think is skewed to produce low numbers" (Becker, Jo). The method used by the white house in categorizing these deaths is a model put forth by the CIA, which counts all men of military age as combatants unless posthumously proven innocent. When considering the weight of civilians' deaths in Yemen, it is important to view it through our own standard of justice in the United States. In 2012 Yemen suffered 35 civilian deaths to 190 terrorist casualties. That means that at least 15% of the total deaths were innocent. Although the drone program does focus on figures who pose an imminent threat, there are still multiple intended checks before the execution of a strike. In our own territory this percentage of innocent loss of life would likely be enough to counter the benefits of such anti-terrorist actions.

The issues of national security and personal safety are inseparable in a country as tumultuous as Yemen. Since the Houthi rebel takeover in the beginning of 2015 it has become clear that the state of the government is extremely fluid and heavily

influenced by the needs of small groups of rebels and individuals. In a state such as this, working with whichever power currently holds government against the needs of smaller groups is very risky for the United States.

The issue of internal political and clan warfare within Yemen is also relevant to the issue of personal access to information and privacy. When a government is as fluid as Yemen's currently is, the citizens have no guarantee from day to day towards their rights and freedoms. This puts them in a position of insecurity, where political action may be stifled for fear that they will be labeled as a terrorist threat. It also means that individuals who have valuable information have no stable means for the protection of their privacy. Depending on which groups the current power holders consider oppositional, innocent civilians could be subject to observation and information gathering by drones. This unfairly increased attention, encouraged for political reasons, could result in their harm or death.

Opinions on the behavior of the United States government in the war on terrorism have evolved since the presidency of Barack Obama. Before entering office, few expected that he would be so productive in his use of force and so adamant on the destruction of terrorist threats. In the United States support of his war efforts is divided. Many human rights organizations are outraged, as deaths have increased and the safeties for innocents have not necessarily been improved. Others support the actions taken by the drone program, and argue that for a realistic end to Al Qaeda terrorism the United States must act with brutal force.

The issue of the expanded drone use under Obama's presidency is particularly intriguing from a leader who shamed the existence of Guantanamo prison and verbally pushed for stricter human rights standards. On the morale of US citizens this contradiction inflicts some confusion and hesitation. Many liberally minded citizens want to accept the violence as necessary and assume that a liberal president uses strong discretion in kill-list decisions. The form of killing is easily kept out of the sight of most United States citizens. Although drone strikes are often peppered throughout news, few grasp the impact that this depersonalized attacks have on those who live in Yemen.

The strongest points of contention among those who agree with the level of force used against terrorism is the secrecy of decision making and the reliance on the personal opinion of the president. Many have criticized the importance of a the idea of a single man signing off on the deaths of targets, but it is not president Obama who develops the list, he simply has final recall of any targets that he feels uncertain about. The extensive meetings of the council exist to narrow down targets to those that pose imminent threat to the United States, and Obama maintains his final word as a way to bare responsibility for campaigns that have the highest potential of involving non combatants.

Ibrahim Mothana provides an excellent and clear counter argument to drone warfare in Yemen. As a citizen he has experienced first hand the realities of these strikes, and he illustrates several reasons why reform is necessary for the war on terror. The most prominent is that the victims of these strikes leave families and

friends who in economic and emotional desperation are encouraged to join Al Qaeda. Mothana also argues that the killing of suspected targets is a way for the Obama administration to avoid the issue of imprisoning targets and having to deal with the human rights fallout of that on United States soil. Instead, the United States is able to quietly dispose of suspects and count them as militants unless somehow it is proven they were innocent.

Mothana points out that the number of citizens truly involved with Al Qaeda was in the hundreds at the beginning of the drone campaign, and has since raised into the thousands. Citizens like Mothana who are active in Yemeni politics call for an end to drone strikes and instead ask that counter terrorism efforts be motivated by those invested in the safety of the country. Mothana would like to see the United States work with the many Yemenis who agree with a democratic and nonviolent future for the nation, so that they can stand more strongly against any future threats of terrorism.

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