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In Yemen, "If Not Drones, Then What?"

Adam C. Seitz

The use of unmanned drones for the targeted killing of suspected terrorists remains a hotly debated topic among academics, human rights groups, and policymakers alike. Drone strikes following the December 4th 2013 attack on the Yemeni Defense Ministry have reinvigorated the debate, especially as the Yemeni government's security committee and local officials appear divided on the details of the December 12th drone strike. Much of the debate continues to revolve around the legality of extrajudicial targeted killings and the associated collateral damage, including civilian casualties, rising anti-Americanism and the undercutting of Yemen's political transition. Such arguments, however, miss the mark when it comes to the overall effectiveness of drones when compared to the alternatives, and fail to put forth a convincing answer to the question: "If not drones, then what?" The reality in a case like Yemen, at least in the near-to-medium term, is that no viable alternative options exist for combating Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and its affiliates, especially given the post-2011 political and security environment.

U.S.-Yemen Counterterrorism Partnership Under Saleh: Sowing Seeds of Division

Many of the critics of drone strikes largely ignore the unparalleled role drones have played in the aftermath of the 2011 Arab uprisings. A combination of political instability and military factionalization has created security and political vacuums, which have allowed terrorist groups like al-Qaeda to flourish, and has challenged counterterror operations in the region. Such an environment has only increased the utility of drones as a tool for disrupting al-Qaeda's ability to plan and conduct attacks against U.S. partners, assets, and interests when compared to alternatives that depend upon military-to-military partnerships.

MES Notes

Visiting Research Scholar

MES is hosting a visiting Research Scholar from the Swedish National Defence College. See page 4 for an introduction to Ms. Tamara Tawaefi and her research while visiting MES at MCU.

MES at MCU Disclaimer

The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are those of the individual author and do not necessarily represent the views of either the Marine Corps University or any other governmental agency. Any references to this newsletter should include the foregoing statement.

Soon after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh met with U.S. President George W. Bush in Washington. Following their meeting President Saleh agreed to partner with the U.S. in its Global War on Terror. With the exception of a U.S. drone strike that killed six militants in November 2002, the counterterrorism partnership between presidents Bush and Saleh focused on advising, training, equipping and providing intelligence to the Yemeni military.

In the years that followed, Saleh used his relationship with Washington and the counterterrorism aid his government received to build up the Republican Guard forces commanded by his son, and heir apparent, General Ahmed Ali Saleh, and to create specialized counterterrorism and internal security units outside of the existing military and intelligence command structures. During this time Saleh was essentially using U.S. counterterrorism funds to create praetorian forces and sideline potential opposition to the regime, including Major-General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, who was then the commander of the Yemeni Army's 1st Armored Division. These praetorian forces and the rivalry between the Salehs and General al-Ahmar played a significant role in dividing the military during the 2011 uprisings and in the continuing factionalization within the Yemeni armed forces under the transitional government.

Political Instability, Military Factionalization and Counterterrorism

It was not until December 2009 after an attempt by AQAP to bring down a U.S. bound commercial airliner on Christmas Day that Saleh agreed to permit counterterrorism strikes by U.S. drones, cruise missiles, and manned aircraft. The timing of the decision also coincided with the U.S. reassessment of the Yemeni military's inability to combat the growing threat from AQAP. The Saleh regime had become increasingly focused on the domestic challenges posed by the Houthi insurgency in the North and a secessionist movement in the South. The growing internal instability came to a head in 2011 when protestors took to the street calling for Saleh to step down. This resulted in Saleh's handing over power to a transitional government headed by then Vice President Abdo Rabo Mansour Hadi, as part of the U.S. backed Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Initiative.

When Hadi took office, he did so with a deeply divided military at his disposal, with many commanders remaining loyal to either Ali Abdullah Saleh and his son or General al-Ahmar. Also, AQAP and its affiliate, Ansar al-Sharia, were making gains amid the security vacuum presented by a weak and divided security sector. President Hadi seems to have recognized this in his taking of ownership of the drone program in Yemen soon after his election in February 2012. He stressed that he had knowledge of every drone strike conducted by the U.S., going as far as saying that he approved each mission prior to execution. Furthermore, Hadi himself has repeatedly underscored the lack of viable alternatives to drone strikes. In a September 2012 speech at the Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars in Washington DC, President

MES Notes (cont.)

4 December 2013

Amin Tarzi presented a lecture entitled "Southern Afghanistan: Birthplace of a Country and an Ideology" to 1st Cavalry Division Command Group, Fort Hood, TX.

6 December 2013

Amin Tarzi presented a lecture entitled "South Asia" to the Senior Executives in National and International Security Course at Harvard Kennedy School, Cambridge, MA.

20 December 2013

Amin Tarzi presented a lecture entitled "Iranian Strategy After Rouhani" to National Defense University's Eisenhower School, Fort McNair, Washington DC.

Hadi acknowledged this, stating that the United States “helped with their drones because the Yemeni Air Force cannot carry out missions at night.” Hadi went on to assert that drones “pinpoint the target and have zero margin of error, if you know what target your aiming at,” and that “the electronic brain’s precision is unmatched by the human brain.”[1]

One of the principal tasks bestowed upon Hadi’s transitional government was the restructuring and reforming of the Yemeni armed forces. This was not only stipulated in the GCC Initiative, but was also a major demand of the protesting Yemeni citizens in 2011. Since taking office, Hadi has announced a number of significant decrees that address the restructuring and reforming the armed force as well as aim to wrestle military support from Saleh and al-Ahmar.[2] Such moves, however, have come at cost, with continued military defections, corruption, discontent and factionalization raising concerns as to the effectiveness and reliability of the Yemeni armed forces, not only as a national security asset for the government, but also as a viable counterterrorism partner for the U.S.

The December 4, 2013 attack on the Yemeni Ministry of Defense in Sanaa underscores the weakness of the Yemen security sector. Through this action, AQAP is sending the message that it has the ability to hit the Yemeni government where it is strongest. Furthermore, this was not the first attack against Yemeni military targets, but is part of an increasingly alarming trend of assassinations of military officers, soldiers and foreign trainers, and attacks on security installations. These actions should raise concerns as to AQAP’s penetration of the Yemeni security apparatus and give pause to those advocating for a deeper military-to-military partnership to counter terrorism in Yemen.

An Alternative Counterterrorism Approach in Yemen?

The case of Yemen highlights a reality, no matter how inconvenient it may be, that in certain cases there may be no viable alternative to drones for combating terror groups. This is especially true in countries where indigenous security forces do not have the ability to effectively combat the threat posed by such groups. In the long term a comprehensive plan that includes building governance, development capacity and military-to-military cooperation is needed to dismantle and ultimately destroy AQAP. However, given the current realities of Yemen’s security sector and dire security situation in general, drones should remain a major part of any short term strategy seeking to disrupt AQAP’s ability to plan, coordinate and conduct attacks against the U.S and its allies.

Notes:

[1] Scott Shane, “Yemen’s Leader Praises U.S. Drone Strikes,” *New York Times*, September 29, 2012.

[2] See Adam C. Seitz, “Military Restructuring and Yemen’s Stalled Transition,” *MES Insights*, Volume 3, Issue 6, November 2012.

Swedish National Defence College Research Scholar at MES: Introducing Tamara Tawaefi

Tamara Tawaefi is a visiting Research Scholar at the Middle East Studies at Marine Corps University where she is researching the tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTP) used by Hezbollah to generate a psychological response in Israeli society to gain the upper hand in the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah War. She argues that the strength of Hezbollah's TTPs was that they were built on Hezbollah's cultural understanding of the Israeli populace. This enabled that organization to specifically target the emotional state and cognitive dimension of the Israeli nation, effectively influencing the Israeli psychological process during the war. The psychological response that Hezbollah managed to provoke within the Israeli society allowed for isolated tactical successes to have strategic implications that impacted the outcome of the war.

Ms. Tawaefi comes to MES from the Swedish National Defence College in Stockholm, Sweden, where she is a research representative and lecturer at the Information Operation Section in the Department of War Studies. Ms. Tawaefi started her career at the United Nation's Office of Drugs and Crime, (UNODC) in Cairo, Egypt. She then joined the Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) in Stockholm, Sweden. Before starting her work at her current position, she was with the European Public Law Center, working in India and Bangladesh, as well as in Karachi and Lahore, Pakistan. During the last two years Ms. Tawaefi has been collaborating on a project with the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) researching the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah War.

Ms. Tawaefi holds a Master's degree in Political Science from Karlstad University, Sweden. In addition, Ms. Tawaefi has studied peace and conflict resolution at American University in Washington DC, conflict transformation and applied studies in peacemaking at the Initiatives of Change programme for peace and trust-building in Caux, Switzerland, and Modern Standard Arabic at American University in Cairo, Egypt.

To contact Ms. Tawaefi, please email her at: tamara.tawaefi@fhs.se.

Middle East Studies at Marine Corps University

Dr. Amin Tarzi • Director, MES • tarzia@grc.usmcu.edu

Adam C. Seitz • Senior Research Associate, MES • seitzac@grc.usmcu.edu