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Drone Strikes in Yemen, 2011: A Preliminary Analysis

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The Dominant Narrative: Blow-back

- Drone strikes increase terrorist recruitment and support
 - Because of casualties (full-time, part-time combatants; civilians)
 - Because of violations of sovereignty, ‘fairness’ in warfare, external/US support for corrupt regimes
- Drone strikes increase terrorist attacks
 - Short and/or long-term
 - Conflict displacement and proliferation effects
- Drone strikes undermine the efficiency of integrated CT/COIN operations
 - Because of conflict displacement/proliferation effects
 - Because of potential interlocutors being targeted



Data Problems

- Limited open-source data available
 - Bureau of Investigative Journalism
 - New America Foundation
 - Long War Journal
- Sources: news reports from international wire agencies, leading regional newspapers, Western media with in-country presence
- Contradictory counts, e.g., for US strikes in Yemen in 2011
 - Bureau of Investigative Journalism
 - Drone strikes: 12-15 confirmed, 10-12 possible
 - Additional attacks: 7-44
 - New America Foundation: 12 drone strikes
 - Long War Journal: 10 airstrikes



Methods Problems

- Counting what?
 - Strikes vs. drone strikes
 - Drone strikes as shorthand for “targeted killings”?
 - Casualties: combatants vs. non-combatants/civilians vs. p-t/f-t combatants
 - Flying hours vs. sorties vs. actual strikes vs. single/multiple strikes
- Counting how?
 - Reliability of sources
 - Lack of “official” confirmation (e.g., of strikes, casualties, etc. in Yemen)
 - Incompleteness of data (e.g., flying hours, sorties, etc. in Yemen)



Analysis and Interpretation Problems

- Even if we accept data, the sources on which they are based, and the methods used to collect them, is the blow-back narrative credible?
- Preliminary analysis of data from Yemen, 2011, raises three issues:
 - Statistical analysis alone (including lagged by 1, 2, 3 months) reveals no pattern between strikes against, and increased attacks by, AQAP.
 - By the end of 2011, AQAP/Ansar al Sharia offensive was grinding down, and eventually defeated in spring 2012 (albeit temporarily only).
 - Anecdotal evidence of support for AQAP from southern separatists in the first half of 2011, but began to drop in second half of 2011 (and more so in first half of 2012), whereas majority of strikes occur from June onwards.



A Counter-narrative?

- Available data are insufficient to disprove the blow-back narrative per se, but they cast significant doubt on the accuracy of its underlying logic:
 - We cannot conclude with any certainty that strikes by RPAs/UAVs (or strikes/targeted killings more generally) are causally related to an increase in recruits or supporters for AQAP/Ansar al Sharia: an equally plausible explanation is a marriage of convenience between terrorists and separatists and disaffected tribes in the context of a rapidly failing Yemeni state in the wake of the Arab Spring.
 - Neither is it possible to link any strikes directly to an increase in attacks: almost half of all terrorist attacks in 2011 take place before the first strike. There is some evidence of attacks being justified with reference to strikes but we don't have evidence to rule out that this was done on an opportunistic basis.
 - Nor is there any evidence to suggest that strikes undermine integrated COIN/CT efforts in Yemen. They have had some success in the temporary defeat of AQAP/Ansar al Sharia by spring 2012, but are not sufficient for permanent success other than in the sense of threat containment.



The Way Forward

- A counter-narrative can only be established credibly on the basis of a conceptually grounded, empirically robust, and analytically sound investigation, that deals with:
 - Data and methods problems
 - Increased transparency within confines of operational prerogatives
 - More nuanced and balanced use of data, including more reflexivity on underlying assumptions
 - Analysis and interpretation problems
 - Limitations of statistical analysis
 - Need for more careful, in-depth process tracing and structured-focused cross-case and in-case comparisons that account for broader range of contextual factors



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