

## Adam Baron Testimony for CPC Ad Hoc Hearing on Drones – May 8, 2013

My name is Adam Baron, I am a Yemen-based freelance journalist. I was born and raised in Baltimore, Maryland but have lived in Yemen for the last two years, covering political, social and economic news from Yemen for outlets including the Christian Science Monitor, the Daily Telegraph, the Economist, Foreign Policy and McClatchy Newspapers.

There are two interconnected questions I'd like to focus my remarks on. First: is the policy of targeted killings in Yemen as the US administration describes it? Second: is the policy indeed working? In short, does the administration's **rhetoric** line up with Yemen's reality?

### BACKGROUND: YEMEN

I'd like to start by making a quick note about Yemen itself, my home for more than two years now. In the eyes of most Americans, Yemen is seen through the prism of Al Qaeda, known only as a battleground in the "War against Terrorism." Obviously, I'm not here to argue that Al Qaeda doesn't exist. But if one is to speak of crimes committed against the Yemeni people, its hard to think of any greater than the propagation of the idea that their country is nothing more than an "Al Qaeda hotbed."

Sanaa, where I live, is one of the oldest and most beautiful cities on earth. Yemenis, as a rule, are nearly unfathomably friendly and welcoming. Over the course of 2011, hundreds of thousands of Yemenis took to the streets as part of the Arab Spring, filled with dreams of a brighter future, motivated to call for greater democracy and better governance. It's important to remember these things when we discuss Yemen; its crucial to avoid dehumanizing the people of this country,

### BACKGROUND: AQAP

Nevertheless, Yemen is base to Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). The group has been implicated in attempted attacks on the US, although the bulk of the group's activities have largely been in Yemen itself; AQAP's deadliest attack to date was in May last year, when they killed 100 people in a suicide bombing.

### BACKGROUND: TARGETED KILLINGS

The first American drone strike in Yemen took place in 2002 killing six men. It took place in full cooperation with the Yemeni government. The United States would continue to launch sporadic airstrikes in Yemen in the following years, but a marked uptick in their frequency began in 2011. According to estimates published by the Long War Journal, there were 10 strikes in 2011, more than double the total from the previous year. In 2012, their estimate reached 40. To date, they put they put the count for 2013 at 8.

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### THE OFFICIAL LINE

The American government's military and intelligence operations in Yemen are mostly shrouded in secrecy, but Obama Administration officials have, on occasion, broken their silence, largely to defend the program. They cast targeted killings of Al Qaeda-affiliated operatives in Yemen as an essential counterterrorism tool. Targets, they say, consist only of high-level militants who represent a threat to the United States who cannot be apprehended otherwise. They've vocally pushed back against claims that the strikes have spawned anti-American sentiment or sympathy with Al Qaeda.

### BUT DOES IT MATCH REALITY?

While administration officials have cast targeted killings as a tool of last resort used only against the most dangerous targets, the circumstances surrounding a number of strikes have raised questions regarding whether this is, indeed, the case. I'll focus my remarks on the November 7<sup>th</sup>, 2012 strike targeting suspected Al Qaeda operative Adnan al-Qadhi in the village of Beit al-Ahmar due to my familiarity with this specific case. Roughly nine miles outside of the Yemeni capital, Beit al-Ahmar is the birthplace of former president Saleh and a number of other prominent figures in the Yemeni military. In light of the strike site's proximity to Sanaa and the relative ease of access to the village itself, many Yemeni observers have questioned claims that alternative means of apprehending Qadhi were unfeasible. Qadhi was killed in view of the compounds of the former president and other leading military officials. Qadhi's relatives told me they were unaware that he was on any kill list; if they were, they said, they would have forced him to cooperate with authorities. Local villagers still seemed to be aghast that the strike had taken place, noting the contradiction between extra-judicial killings and so-called "American values" of human rights and the rule of law.

Qadhi was certainly a man with a rather unsavory ideology. But did he represent a threat to the United States? Was he truly a senior, dangerous AQAP militant? And was it necessary that he was killed without trial, rather than apprehended in some other fashion? Information from local residents raises doubts about these questions, which the US government **is yet to answer.**

### ARE THE KILLINGS EFFECTIVE?

These questions arguably extend to most of those killed in American strikes in Yemen. The US may say that targeted killings are reserved solely for the most dangerous and senior AQAP militants. But despite the sharp uptick in strikes, men like AQAP leader Nasir al-Wuhayshi, deputy emir Said al-Shihri and chief bomb-maker Ibrahim al-Asiri remain alive. The irony is lost on few Yemenis.

"To kill top AQAP leaders—Wuhayshi, Shihri, those guys—is one thing," a tribal leader from east of Sanaa told me. "But its quite obvious that most of the people being killed in the strikes are anything but senior leaders."

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Clearly, the question that follows is whether said policy—regardless of whether it is as it is described—is working. The continued presence of members of AQAP’s top leadership—epitomized by Shihri’s ability to defy reports of his death on no less than *three* separate occasions—raises questions regarding intelligence gathering operations and the true identities of those who have been killed in strikes.

In December 2009, a US cruise missile attack targeting what was thought to be an Al Qaeda training camp instead hit a bedouin encampment, killing 41 civilians. (It’s worth noting that Abdulelah Haidar Shaye, the Yemeni journalist who first determined that it was US-launched missiles, rather than bombs launched by Yemeni planes, that were responsible for the strike remains jailed at the behest of the American government. Sentenced to five years in prison as a result of terrorism charges after a trial condemned as unfair by groups like Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, he was on the verge of being pardoned in February 2011, but the opposition of American officials, citing the allegations that he assisted AQAP, have effectively blocked his release). Last fall, an airstrike in the province of al-Baydah targeting the vehicle of a suspected Al Qaeda operative instead hit a Toyota landcruiser functioning as mini-bus, killing 12 civilians, including 3 children. The October prior, 16 year old, Denver-born Abdulrahman al-Awlaki was killed in a CIA-led drone strike in the province of Shabwa; though his father was alleged AQAP ideologue Anwar al-Aulaqi, the teenager had no proven links to the terrorist group. A 2010 airstrike that killed respected tribal leader and politician Jabir al-Shabwani continues to linger in popular memory, as does an August 2012 strike in eastern Yemen that accidentally killed an outspoken anti-Al Qaeda cleric. The US stresses its excellent intelligence and analysis, arguing that mistakes are rare. Yet, repeatedly, they are made.

For the civilians under the crossfire, anxieties provoked by fears of another ‘mistake’, continue to fuel distrust and resentment against the US and Yemeni governments, rather than against AQAP. In some areas, AQAP has managed to reap the benefits from such sentiments. The situation in al-Baydah is particularly telling. In a recent military offensive, swaths of tribesmen in the area opted to fight the government on the side of Al Qaeda, rather than cooperate with US forces to push the militants out.

"Some tribesmen are fighting the army even more than Al Qaeda is," a contact from the area told me at the nascence of the winter military push. "People are angry about drone strikes and condemn foreign intervention. Al Qaeda has really been able to build popular sympathy."

Its important to note that Yemen's president has offered public support of the program. But the battle against AQAP will not be won from Sanaa, nor will it be won solely through military means. "At best, the US is trimming hedges; at worst, they're inflaming things," a Yemeni politician told me last week.

Instead of covert actions, many Yemenis say, what most Yemenis say is needed is open cooperation: between Washington and Sanaa, between politicians and tribal leaders. Few

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Yemenis I've spoken to believe that Al Qaeda will be defeated by current policies. But at the same time, few disagree that the group's eradication is—in the long run—possible.