

AMERICA'S DRONE BATTLEFIELD: US steps up drone war in Yemen

By [Patrick Martin](#)

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President Barack Obama has approved much wider use of drone-fired missiles in Yemen, according to press reports Thursday, quoting unnamed US government officials. The result will be a much higher death toll from American attacks in that country, which has joined Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Libya and Somalia as a battlefield for the US military and CIA.

The *Wall Street Journal* reported that Obama had given the green light to a request by CIA Director David Petraeus to allow the agency to fire missiles at buildings, cars and armed groups without identifying exactly who is being targeted, based simply on a pattern of activity observed by US surveillance satellites or on-the-ground informants.

These “signature” strikes are a marked escalation from the previous “personality” strikes, which were restricted to individuals targeted as alleged leaders of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, a militant Islamist group that Washington claims has attempted terrorist attacks against US targets.

The *Journal* quoted a US official with reservations about the new policy, which he considered so broad that it was likely to provoke widespread opposition in Yemen which could undermine the US-backed government of newly installed President Abdu Rabu Mansour Hadi. “Every Yemeni is armed, so how can they differentiate between suspected militants and armed Yemenis?” the official asked.

The Yemeni government must approve the missile strikes, thereby taking responsibility for them in the eyes of the Yemeni people, who overwhelmingly oppose US military intervention in their country.

The *Washington Post* reported that the first such signature strike took place last Sunday in Yemen’s Marib province, identifying the target as Mohammed Saeed al Umda, an AQAP commander whom US officials claimed was linked to the bombing of the USS Cole in the Yemeni port city of Aden in 2000. No evidence was presented to demonstrate that supposed connection.

Obama administration officials who confirmed the missile strikes claimed that they were aimed at “terrorists” who were planning attacks on US targets, not on the tribal or factional opponents of the US-backed Yemeni regime. But according to the *Post*, “In recent months, U.S. spy agencies have collected intelligence indicating plots against American diplomats or U.S. special operations troops who are working alongside Yemeni counter-terrorism units.”

In other words, the so-called “terrorists” are Yemenis who oppose the intervention of

American military forces into their country to prop up the decades-long dictatorship of President Ali Abdullah Saleh, who turned over his office to Hadi in February, but remains the principal power behind the scenes.

A Lebanese newspaper, the *Daily Star*, reported that another US drone strike killed three militants allegedly linked to Al Qaeda on Thursday, when a missile hit their car in the southern Yemen city of Madiyah. Residents told the newspaper they saw two drones in the sky after the explosion.

It was not known whether this drone strike was conducted under the expanded authority just provided by the White House, or under the targeting rules previously in place. The CIA and the Pentagon's Joint Special Operations Command have carried out at least nine missile strikes in Yemen so far in 2012, as many in four months as in the entire previous year.

The stepped-up drone strikes come as both the US and Yemeni government have issued warnings about a supposed upsurge of Al Qaeda activity in Yemen. The Hadi government warned that AQAP was planning an assault on Sana'a, the capital city, although nearly all known AQAP activity has been confined to the southwestern part of the country, far from Sana'a and much closer to the virtually unpoliced border between Yemen and Saudi Arabia's "empty quarter."

White House counterterrorism adviser John Brennan, in a speech last week at New York police headquarters, described AQAP as "very, very dangerous," claiming it has grown to more than 1,000 members since the assassination of one of its alleged top leaders, US-born Islamic cleric Anwar al-Awlaki, last September.

Awlaki was killed by a CIA drone missile, an attack approved by Obama under the doctrine, later elaborated by Attorney General Eric Holder, that the president has the authority to order the killing of any American citizen who is deemed an "enemy combatant," without any legal process or judicial review.

FBI director Robert Mueller was in Sana'a Tuesday for talks with Hadi and Yemeni security officials. The FBI chief promised that the US government would continue to support Yemen "with full force" adding, "The US will provide the possible assistance in various aspects bilaterally with the international community to achieve stability in Yemen."

On the same day, the Yemeni defense ministry said that an offensive in the southern province of Abyan had killed 52 militants in two days, mostly in the city of Zinjibar, which was captured by AQAP fighters last May. Yemeni troops, backed by artillery and tanks, pushed into the center of Zinjibar in the middle of the night Monday, destroying at least four tanks that had been previously captured by the militants.

Other Yemeni military operations against supposed AQAP militants are ongoing in Shabwa, Marib and Baitha provinces.

Drone missile attacks in Yemen have resulted in numerous atrocities in which innocent men, women and children, including entire families, and even the deputy governor of a province, were exterminated by "mistake," because CIA or Pentagon targeters claimed they were opening fire on Al Qaeda targets.

The Center for Constitutional Rights, a US civil liberties group, has just filed a Freedom of Information request into the legal basis for a cruise missile attack in Al Majalah in Yemen in

2009, which killed 41 people, 21 of them children.

Cables released by WikiLeaks revealed the US State Department's role in covering up the Al Majalah killings, for which the Yemeni government agreed to take responsibility, claiming the attack was carried out by Yemeni jet fighters, in order to conceal the use of US missiles.

According to the British-based Bureau of Investigative Journalism, US drone strikes in Pakistan since Obama took office have killed 535 civilians, including more than 60 children.

The escalation of drone attacks in Yemen means a death toll on that scale or even higher, justified by the Obama administration with the claim that it is preventing "imminent attacks" on the United States—although now, under the expanded authority approved by Obama, the US government need not even identify in advance those it is murdering.

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