

CIA Assassination Squads Target US Citizens

U.S. Citizen in CIA's Cross Hairs

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The agency builds a case for putting Anwar al Awlaki, linked to the Ft. Hood shootings and Christmas bomb attempt, on its hit list. The complications involved are a window into a secretive process.

Reporting from Washington – The CIA sequence for a Predator strike ends with a missile but begins with a memo. Usually no more than two or three pages long, it bears the name of a suspected terrorist, the latest intelligence on his activities, and a case for why he should be added to a list of people the agency is trying to kill.

The list typically contains about two dozen names, a number that expands each time a new memo is signed by CIA executives on the seventh floor at agency headquarters, and contracts as targets thousands of miles away, in places including Pakistan and Yemen, seem to spontaneously explode.

No U.S. citizen has ever been on the CIA's target list, which mainly names Al Qaeda leaders, including Osama bin Laden, according to current and former U.S. officials. But that is expected to change as CIA analysts compile a case against a Muslim cleric who was born in New Mexico but now resides in Yemen.

Anwar al Awlaki poses a dilemma for U.S. counter-terrorism officials. He is a U.S. citizen and until recently was mainly known as a preacher espousing radical Islamic views. But Awlaki's ties to November's shootings at Ft. Hood and the failed Christmas Day airline plot have helped convince CIA analysts that his role has changed.

"Over the past several years, Awlaki has gone from propagandist to recruiter to operational player," said a U.S. counter-terrorism official.

Awlaki's status as a U.S. citizen requires special consideration, according to former officials familiar with the criteria for the CIA's targeted killing program. But while Awlaki has not yet been placed on the CIA list, the officials said it is all but certain that he will be added because of the threat he poses.

"If an American is stupid enough to make cause with terrorists abroad, to frequent their camps and take part in their plans, he or she can't expect their citizenship to work as a magic shield," said another U.S. official. "If you join the enemy, you join your fate to his."

The complications surrounding Awlaki's case provide a rare window into the highly secretive process by which the CIA selects targets.

CIA spokesman Paul Gimigliano declined to comment, saying that it is “remarkably foolish in a war of this kind to discuss publicly procedures used to identify the enemy, an enemy who wears no uniform and relies heavily on stealth and deception.”

Other current and former U.S. officials agreed to discuss the outlines of the CIA’s target selection procedures on the condition of anonymity because of their sensitive nature. Some wanted to defend a program that critics have accused of causing unnecessary civilian casualties.

Decisions to add names to the CIA target list are “all reviewed carefully, not just by policy people but by attorneys,” said the second U.S. official. “Principles like necessity, proportionality, and the minimization of collateral damage — to persons and property — always apply.”

The U.S. military, which has expanded its presence in Yemen, keeps a separate list of individuals to capture or kill. Awlaki is already on the military’s list, which is maintained by the U.S. Joint Special Operations Command. Awlaki apparently survived a Dec. 24 airstrike conducted jointly by U.S. and Yemeni forces.

The CIA has also deployed more operatives and analysts to Yemen. CIA Deputy Director Stephen Kappes was in the country last month, just weeks before a Nigerian accused of training with Al Qaeda in Yemen boarded a jetliner bound for Detroit on Christmas Day.

From beginning to end, the CIA’s process for carrying out Predator strikes is remarkably self-contained. Almost every key step takes place within the Langley, Va., campus, from proposing targets to piloting the remotely controlled planes.

The memos proposing new targets are drafted by analysts in the CIA’s Counter-Terrorism Center. Former officials said analysts typically submit several new names each month to high-level officials, including the CIA general counsel and sometimes Director Leon E. Panetta.

Former officials involved in the program said it was handled with sober awareness of the stakes. All memos are circulated on paper, so those granting approval would “have to write their names in ink,” said one former official. “It was a jarring thing, to sign off on people getting killed.”

The program is governed by extensive procedures and rules, but targeting decisions come down to a single criterion: whether the individual in question is “deemed to be a continuing threat to U.S. persons or interests.”

Given that standard, the list mainly comprises Al Qaeda leaders and those seen as playing a direct role in devising or executing attacks. Espousing violence or providing financial support to Al Qaeda would not meet the threshold, officials said. But providing training to would-be terrorists or helping them get to Al Qaeda camps probably would.

The list is scrutinized every six months, officials said, and in some cases names are removed if the intelligence on them has grown stale.

“If someone hadn’t popped on the screen for over a year, or there was no intelligence linking him to known terrorists or plans, we’d take him off,” the former official said.

The National Security Council oversees the program, which is based on a legal finding signed after the Sept. 11 attacks by then-President George W. Bush. But the CIA is given extensive latitude to execute the program, and generally does not need White House approval when adding names to the target list.

The only exception, officials said, would be when the name is a U.S. citizen's.

The CIA has at times considered adding Americans' names to the target list. None were ever approved, the officials said, not because their citizenship protected them but because they didn't meet the "continuing threat" threshold.

Adam Gadahn, a California native now believed to be hiding in Pakistan, has been indicted on charges of treason and providing support to Al Qaeda. But Gadahn, former officials said, has mainly served in a propaganda role.

Officials said that whether Awlaki is added to the list hinges more on intelligence agencies' understanding of his role than any concern about his status as a U.S. citizen.

"If you are a legitimate military target abroad — a part of an enemy force — the fact that you're a U.S. citizen doesn't change that," said Michael Edney, who served as deputy legal advisor to the National Security Council from 2007 until 2009.

Awlaki, 38, was known for delivering fiery sermons at mosques in San Diego and suburban Virginia before moving to Yemen in 2004. Because of his radical online postings, he has been portrayed as a catalyst or motivator in nearly a dozen terrorism cases in the U.S. and abroad.

But it was his involvement in the two recent cases that triggered new alarms. U.S. officials uncovered as many as 18 e-mails between Awlaki and Nidal Malik Hasan, a U.S. Army major accused of killing 13 people at Ft. Hood, Texas. Awlaki also has been tied to Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, the Nigerian accused of attempting to detonate a bomb on a Detroit-bound flight.

"Awlaki's interested in operations outside of Yemen, and he's trying to recruit more extremists, including Westerners," said the U.S. counter-terrorism official. "His knowledge of Western culture and language makes him valuable to [the offshoot] Al Qaeda on the Arabian Peninsula.

"Taking him off the street," the official said of Awlaki, "would deal a blow to the group."

The CIA has carried out dozens of Predator strikes in Pakistan over the last year. The program is not foolproof, as drone strikes often kill multiple people even when the intended target escapes. The CIA has also made grievous mistakes in counter-terrorism operations, including capturing individuals misidentified as terrorism suspects. But the program remains valuable to U.S. officials.

President Obama alluded to the campaign in his State of the Union speech last week, saying that during his first year in office, "hundreds of Al Qaeda's fighters and affiliates, including many senior leaders, have been captured or killed — far more than in 2008."

Many of those strikes were aimed at gatherings of militant groups or training complexes, current and former officials said. In such cases, the CIA is free to fire even if it does not have

intelligence indicating the presence of anyone on its target list.

The CIA has carried out Predator attacks in Yemen since at least 2002, when a drone strike killed six suspected Al Qaeda operatives traveling in a vehicle across desert terrain.

The agency knew that one of the operatives was an American, Kamal Derwish, who was among those killed. Derwish was never on the CIA's target list, officials said, and the strike was aimed at a senior Al Qaeda operative, Qaed Sinan Harithi, accused of orchestrating the 2000 attack on the U.S. destroyer Cole.

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