

“Dozens” of US Citizens on Assassination List, White House Adviser Hints

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When it was [confirmed](#) last winter by then-Director of National Intelligence Dennis Blair that the Obama administration had authorized the assassination of American citizens working with terrorist groups overseas, it appeared that no more than three Americans were being targeted in this manner.

In an [interview](#) last week with the *Washington Times*, however, Deputy White House National Security Adviser for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism John O. Brennan suggested that the number might actually amount to “dozens.”

“There are, in my mind, dozens of U.S. persons who are in different parts of the world, and they are very concerning to us,” Brennan stated, “not just because of the passport they hold, but because they understand our operational environment here, they bring with them certain skills, whether it be language skills or familiarity with potential targets, and they are very worrisome, and we are determined to take away their ability to assist with terrorist attacks,”

“If an American person or citizen is in a Yemen or in a Pakistan or in Somalia or another place, and they are trying to carry out attacks against U.S. interests, they also will face the full brunt of a U.S. response,” Brennan continued. “What we need to do is to apply the appropriate tool and the appropriate response.”

Salon’s Glenn Greenwald quickly seized upon Brennan’s remarks as a fresh example of the extension of unrestrained presidential powers. “I’ve written at length about the reasons why targeting American citizens for assassination who are far away from a ‘battlefield’ is so odious and tyrannical, and I won’t repeat those arguments here,” Greenwald [wrote](#). “Suffice to say — and I’m asking this literally — if you’re someone who believes, or are at least willing to acquiesce to the claim, that the U.S. President has the power to target your fellow citizens for assassination without a whiff of due process, what unchecked presidential powers wouldn’t you support or acquiesce to?”

As an expert in constitutional law, Greenwald’s primary concern is with the implications of this policy for civil liberties and the potential circumvention of constitutional restraints on government action. What may be even more troubling, however, is the extent to which Brennan’s remarks reflect an expansion of US military activity into new areas of the globe, such as Yemen and Somalia.

Last month, the *New York Times*’ Mark Mazzetti [reported](#) on a secret directive signed in September by General David Petraeus that “ordered a broad expansion of clandestine

military activity in an effort to disrupt militant groups or counter threats in Iran, Saudi Arabia, Somalia and other countries in the region.”

According to Mazzetti, the Joint Unconventional Warfare Task Force Execute Order “authorizes the sending of American Special Operations troops to both friendly and hostile nations in the Middle East, Central Asia and the Horn of Africa to gather intelligence and build ties with local forces. ... While the Bush administration had approved some clandestine military activities far from designated war zones, the new order is intended to make such efforts more systematic and long term.”

Mazetti also suggested that this order was behind the “surge of American military activity in Yemen that began three months later.” That surge was the subject of the [article](#) by Dana Priest in the *Washington Post* last February which first revealed that American citizens had been targeted for assassination and which prompted the Blair confirmation.

“The operations, approved by President Obama and begun six weeks ago, involve several dozen troops from the U.S. military’s clandestine Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC), whose main mission is tracking and killing suspected terrorists,” Priest wrote. “The American advisers do not take part in raids in Yemen, but help plan missions.”

“As part of the operations,” Priest continued, “Obama approved a Dec. 24 strike against a compound where a U.S. citizen, Anwar al-Aulaqi, was thought to be meeting with other regional al-Qaeda leaders. Although he was not the focus of the strike and was not killed, he has since been added to a shortlist of U.S. citizens specifically targeted for killing or capture by the JSOC.”

Priest’s story also included the intriguing note that “a steady stream of high-ranking officials has visited [Yemen’s president, Ali Abdullah} Saleh, including the rarely seen JSOC commander, Vice Adm. William H. McRaven; White House counterterrorism adviser John O. Brennan; and Gen. David H. Petraeus, head of U.S. Central Command.”

The Joint Special Operations Command has been at the center of most of the recent stories about United States assassination efforts. In March 2009, investigative reporter Seymour Hersh [described](#) JSOC as “a special wing of our special operations community that is set up independently. ... They do not report to anybody, except in the Bush-Cheney days, they reported directly to the Cheney office. ... Congress has no oversight of it.”

A few months later, when it was reported that General Stanley McChrystal would be taking over command of US forces in Afghanistan, journalist Gareth Porter [noted](#) that McChrystal had been commander of JSOC from April 2003 to August 2008 and commented that his “long specialisation in counter-terrorism operations suggests an officer who is likely to have more interest in targeted killings than in the kind of politically sensitive counterinsurgency programmes that the Obama administration has said it intends to carry out.”

“In 2005, JSOC’s parent command, the Special Operations Command (SOCOM), was directed by Rumsfeld to ‘plan, synchronize and, as directed, conduct global operations against terrorist networks in coordination with other combatant commanders’, Porter wrote. “That directive has generally been regarded as granting SOCOM the authority to carry out actions unilaterally anywhere on the globe.”

McChrystal has now lost his Afghanistan command, but the other architects of this

globalization policy for special ops — Brennan, Petraeus, and McRaven remain firmly in place. As a result, it appears that the authorization for target assassinations of American citizens will prove to be only one of many potential extensions of covert US military power.

This video is from the *Washington Times*, June 24, 2010.

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