

War in Yemen: CIA to Get Control of Special Forces, Drones?

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The *Wall Street Journal* reports today that the White House and the Pentagon are considering [stepping up covert action in Yemen](#) [1], giving the CIA operational control over US military's Special Forces units. They'd operate what the *Journal* calls "elite US hunter-killer teams" to go after Al Qaeda and others allegedly responsible for terrorist attacks and attempts against the United States.

In addition, the plan includes using drone attacks, a la Pakistan, to target Al Qaeda operatives.

By giving the CIA control over the Special Forces units, the United States can claim that the whole enterprise is "covert," that is, that it doesn't need the permission of Yemen's government to be carried out. Or, as the *Journal* puts it, the CIA get "get around restrictions placed on military operations."

Adds the report:

"An increase in US missile strikes or combat ground operations by American commando forces could test already sensitive relations with Yemen, which US officials believe is too weak to defeat al Qaeda. Such an escalation could prompt Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Saleh to end the training his military receives from US special operations forces."

This is a really bad idea. Notoriously [unruly and fractious](#) [2], Yemen is already plagued by two separate civil wars, one in the north and one involving the potential breakaway of what used to be South Yemen, the leftist-populist state that merged with North Yemen to form the country that exists today. It's a hornet's nest, yet unlike Somalia—just across the Red Sea—Yemen actually has a government that tries to juggle the conflicting tribal and clan rivalries that have plagued it for decades. By bungling into Yemen with a massive US covert operation, the result is guaranteed to be an intensified crisis that will collapse and split the Yemeni government and lead to a Somalia-like state of disorder.

In fact, despite recent small-scale terrorist attempts, from the underwear bomber to the recently discovered bomb plot, Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula is [not primarily focused on the United States](#) [3], as the *New York Times* acknowledged this weekend. Instead, its focus is on Saudi Arabia and its royal family. A small number of American Muslims, including the infamous Anwar al-Awlaki, are based there, but they're hardly an existential threat.

Yemen is desperately poor. It is on the verge of being the first country in the world literally

to run out of water. Its skimpy oil reserves are drying up. All by itself, Saudi Arabia could fix Yemen by spending a few tens of billions of dollars there, and the United States could take the lead in creating an international consortium to rescue Yemen. Some in the Obama administration, such as Susan Rice, supposedly came into office with a plan to rebuild and repair so-called failed states, but now it appears as if the quicker, cheaper answer to send unofficial death squads to deal with the symptom, rather than fix the problem.

Links:

[1] <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704477904575586634028056268.html>

[2]

<http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/la-fg-yemen-al-qaeda-20101031,0,2115597.story>

[3] http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/30/world/middleeast/30yemen.html?_r=1

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