

US steps up air strikes as conflict deepens in Yemen

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Heavy fighting continued in southern Yemen this week between the armed forces loyal to President Ali Abdullah Saleh and anti-government fighters.

In the capital, Sanaa, there are ongoing protests by workers and students against the regime. Demonstrators have gathered in the city since mid-January to call for the resignation of Saleh. Protesters have also demanded jobs, education and other social services. Yemen, the poorest country in the Arab world, has unemployment and poverty rates as high as 50 percent.

Government security forces have killed hundreds of unarmed protesters. Hundreds more have been killed in fighting between the armed forces and tribal militants.

Since March, tribal militiamen opposed to the regime have joined the anti-government protests in Sanaa, and are now in control of much of the capital. President Saleh fled the country over a week ago after he was injured in an assassination attempt, with Vice President Abd al-Rab Mansur al-Hadi temporarily assuming power.

The departure of Saleh has brought no let-up in the violence in Yemen. In the city of Hawta, in Lahij province, militants attacked government buildings with rocket-propelled grenades on Wednesday.

Yemeni state television reported that fighting was continuing in the southern city of Zinjibar, the provincial capital of Abyan province and a center of opposition to the regime. The government claimed that Al Qaeda militants in the nearby city of Aden had killed two civilians and injured another, and that the Yemeni army had captured 10 Al Qaeda members in the city.

One government official told China's Xinhua news agency on Wednesday that the Yemeni army planned to "cleanse Abyan's provincial capital from the armed terrorists." Xinhua reported that some 30,000 civilians

had fled Abyan as Yemeni air force fighter jets bombed the province.

The Yemeni regime has banned independent media from much of the south of the country, but reports from residents indicated that Zinjibar and nearby towns have been devastated by the fighting.

The Obama administration is backing the Yemeni regime in this civil conflict, launching cruise missile and Predator drone attacks against targets in the country. Though Washington has been secretive about the extent of its operations, there are reports in the US and Arab media of an increased use of US air strikes in southern Yemen, with six alleged Al Qaeda militants killed in such attacks over the past month.

One such air strike led to the killing of an alleged mid-level Al Qaeda militant in the country last week. The Obama administration is also attempting to assassinate US citizen Anwar Awlaki, a Muslim cleric believed to be living in Yemen, accused of playing a leading role in the group Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).

There are reports of US Special Forces troops on the ground in Yemen providing intelligence for air strikes and carrying out assassinations of alleged Islamist militants. The Obama administration has denied that any US troops are involved in active operations in the country, but has acknowledged that some armed forces personnel are engaged in providing weapons, advice and training to Yemeni counterterrorism forces.

On Thursday, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton announced that US forces were targeting another individual linked to AQAP in Yemen, Othman al-Ghamdi. Clinton declared that al-Ghamdi was a "specially designated global terrorist," and therefore subject to an executive order authorizing his killing.

In recent years, Washington has increased its collaboration with the Yemeni regime substantially.

The US awarded some \$200 million in military aid to Yemen over the past four years, and has been training Yemeni Special Forces troops.

Indicating that this cooperation would continue, despite the Yemeni government's brutal suppression of opposition across the country, US Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Admiral Mike Mullen told reporters on Thursday that the unrest in Yemen had "gotten in the way" of joint counterterrorism operations. "The Yemeni forces are very focused on their own country right now," Mullen added.

Mullen's comments echoed the position laid out by State Department official Mark Toner on Sunday. Regardless of who held the presidency in Yemen, Toner told reporters, "We're going to continue to work with the government" in carrying out "robust counterterrorism cooperation."

Beyond concerns in Washington about the activities of AQAP—whose forces in Yemen are said to number only in the low hundreds—the Obama administration is working to secure the long-term interests of US imperialism in the oil-rich region.

Yemen's location makes it of enormous importance to US strategic interests. Washington fears that the various tribal conflicts and mass protests in Yemen could spread into neighboring Saudi Arabia, destabilizing the biggest oil-exporting country and the principal US ally in the Persian Gulf region. In addition, southern Yemen faces the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, one of the most important choke points for the shipment of oil from the Middle East to Europe.

The joint aerial campaign being carried out by the Pentagon and the CIA in Yemen provides a template for future operations. In addition to the Pentagon's military installations across the region, from Djibouti, to Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait and Iraq, the CIA is reportedly developing a permanent location at a secret location in the Middle East, from which the agency can launch aerial drone attacks over an even wider range.

The US bombardment of southern Yemen has also created a precedent for the US president to deploy military assets with even less legislative oversight, let alone public scrutiny. Writing in the *New York Daily News* on Thursday, Micah Zenko of the Council on Foreign Relations think tank warned that the Obama administration must "clarify the division of labor between Defense and the CIA as they carry out

America's shadow wars."

"The CIA flies largely below Congress' radar; its operations require prior presidential notification to the closed-door Senate and House intelligence committees, but in practice the committees do not constrain its covert operations. With respect to the Defense Department, on the other hand, the Senate and House armed services committees are more diligent," wrote Zenko.

He continued: "Moreover, if a Defense Department operation is revealed in public, the Pentagon will usually acknowledge its role and provide some justification; the CIA will never do so—because under US law, its operations are, by definition, covert."

The refusal of the Obama administration to seek the approval of Congress for its war in Libya shows that it has no regard for existing constraints on the use of US armed forces abroad. Meanwhile, the appointments of CIA head Leon Panetta to head the Pentagon and General David Petraeus to lead the CIA indicates that the blurring of lines between the spying agency and the armed forces is official White House policy.

The merging of Pentagon operations with those of the CIA marks a new stage in US imperialism's junking of democratic norms. With the president able to justify keeping US military actions secret as they might be tied in with "covert" CIA operations, the sole constitutional authority of Congress to declare war is eviscerated.

What is to stop a campaign similar to the one in Yemen being waged by the president, behind the backs of the American people, against any other country?



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