

Obama boasts of assassinating American citizen in Yemen

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In a speech before a military audience in Virginia Friday, President Barack Obama boasted of the role of the CIA and US special operations units in the killing of Anwar al-Awlaki, a 40-year-old, New Mexico-born Muslim cleric.

It marked the first time in history that an American president has publicly applauded the government's assassination of a US citizen, who in Awlaki's case has never been charged or indicted for any crime, much less tried and convicted in a court of law.

"The death of Awlaki is a major blow to Al Qaeda's most active operational affiliate," Obama said during a ceremony for the outgoing chief of US Joint Chiefs of Staff, Adm. Michael Mullen, at Joint Base Myer Henderson Hall in Virginia.

According to witnesses in Yemen as well as officials in Washington, Awlaki was killed by a Hellfire missile fired from a US pilotless drone as he was traveling in a convoy between Marib and al-Jawf provinces in northern Yemen.

Also killed in the strike was another US citizen, Samir Khan, a Pakistani-American who was identified as an editor of the Internet magazine, *Inspire*, which has been linked to Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). Several others also died in the missile strike.

US sources indicated that the operation was directed by the CIA, utilizing assets of the Pentagon's Special Operations Command, implicating both the main US intelligence agency and the military in the extra-judicial killing of an American citizen.

In his remarks Friday, Obama charged that Awlaki "took the lead in planning and directing efforts to murder innocent Americans" and had "repeatedly called on individuals in the United States and around the globe to kill innocent men, women and children to advance a murderous agenda."

US officials have called attention to Awlaki's alleged email exchanges with Maj. Nidal Malik Hasan, who is

accused of killing 13 people in a mass shooting at Fort Hood, Texas in 2009. They have also claimed that he was involved in two abortive terrorist attempts: that of the so-called "underwear bomber," the former Nigerian student Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, accused of trying to detonate explosives aboard Northwest Flight 253 as it was landing in Detroit, Michigan on December 25, 2009, and an attempt to mail bombs to Chicago-area synagogues.

While Awlaki has made numerous videotapes advocating armed attacks on American targets both within the US and abroad, the government has presented no evidence of his alleged role in actual terrorist operations.

An earlier attempt to carry out the targeted assassination of Awlaki was made last May, just five days after the US commando raid in which Al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden was shot to death. As in his killing on Friday morning, the failed attempt last May was carried out with a drone missile strike.

Obama placed Awlaki on a "kill or capture" list of people targeted for assassination in January 2010 after his administration asserted a right not even claimed by the Bush White House: to carry out the summary execution of any US citizen deemed by the president to be a "specially designated global terrorist," without presenting any evidence or securing any judicial sanction.

The Council on American-Islamic Relations issued a cautiously worded statement on the killing, repudiating Awlaki's "incitement to violence" while calling on "our nation's leaders to address the constitutional issues raised by the assassination of US citizens without due process of the law."

The American Civil Liberties Union and the Center for Constitutional Rights both condemned the killing. The two organizations had joined in a federal court case challenging on constitutional grounds the White House's claim that it had the right to target US citizens for assassination. They sought to represent Awlaki's father, a

former agriculture minister and prominent member of Yemen's ruling party, who claimed that his son was not a terrorist.

The government sought the dismissal of the suit on the grounds that it would expose state secrets and that the president had the unreviewable power to kill any American that he deemed a threat. A federal judge threw the case out last December, ruling that Awlaki's father had no standing to bring such a claim and that the court was not qualified to question the government's decisions on national security.

In response to Friday's killing of Awlaki, ACLU deputy legal director Jameel Jaffer said that the "targeted killing program violates both US and international law." He charged that under this program, "American citizens far from any battlefield can be executed by their own government without judicial process, and on the basis of standards and evidence that are kept secret not just from the public but from the courts."

Jaffer warned, "It is a mistake to invest the President—any President—with the unreviewable power to kill any American whom he deems to present a threat to the country."

Vince Warren, the executive director of the Center for Constitutional Rights, said in response to Awlaki's assassination: "The targeted assassination program that started under President Bush and expanded under the Obama administration essentially grants the executive the power to kill any US citizen deemed a threat, without any judicial oversight, or any of the rights afforded by our Constitution. If we allow such gross overreaches of power to continue, we are setting the stage for increasing erosions of civil liberties and the rule of law."

Calling the death of Awlaki "another significant milestone" in the campaign to eliminate Al Qaeda, Obama declared in his speech Friday, "Furthermore, the success is a tribute to our intelligence community and to the efforts of Yemen and its security forces, who have worked closely with the United States over the course of several years."

Obama further praised "the government and the people of Yemen" for having "joined the international community in a common effort against Al Qaeda."

These statements were echoed by Defense Secretary Leon Panetta. The Pentagon's press agency quoted Panetta as saying that the murder of Awlaki was a "testament to the close cooperation between the United States and Yemen."

On the same day that the Yemeni regime and the Obama administration announced the killing of Awlaki, over 100,000 demonstrators were in the streets of the Yemeni capital, Sanaa, calling for the downfall of the country's US-backed dictator Ali Abdullah Saleh. Hundreds if not thousands of Yemenis have died over the last eight months, fighting for the ouster of the three-decade old regime.

President Saleh returned to Yemen just a week before the killing of Awlaki, after spending three months in Saudi Arabia recovering from wounds suffered in a rocket attack on his presidential palace.

There is mounting speculation in Yemen that the link between his return and Awlaki's death was more than coincidental; that the regime provided assistance in the killing of the US-born cleric in return for Washington's aid in suppressing the mass popular upheavals that have shaken the country. Last year, the Obama administration doubled US military aid to the Saleh regime.

Many in Yemen dismissed the significance of the killing. "It will not be a blow to Al Qaeda of the Arabian Peninsula from any perspective," Hakim al Masmari, editor in chief of the *Yemeni Post* told the Al Jazeera network. "We don't feel they will suffer, because [Awlaki] did not have any real role in [AQAP]."

The assassination of Awlaki in Yemen, together with the celebratory reaction of the American political establishment and the media, demonstrate once again that there exists no constituency within the American ruling elite and two major parties for the defense of the most basic democratic and constitutional rights, including the Fifth Amendment's protection against being "deprived of life ... without due process of law."

The Bush administration held that such rights could be suspended in the name of a "global war on terrorism," and now the Obama administration has taken the crimes of its predecessor a significant step further with the extra-judicial murder of a US citizen.

Having crossed this line, the precedent has been set for the White House, the Pentagon and the CIA using military violence and assassination not only as instruments of US imperialist policy abroad, but as the means of dealing with those deemed "enemies of the state" at home.



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