

CIA seeks to widen assassination campaign in Yemen

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The US Central Intelligence Agency is seeking to expand its authority to carry out remote-control assassinations in Yemen, according to a report Thursday in the *Washington Post*. CIA Director David Petraeus has made the request to the White House and the National Security Council is now discussing it, the newspaper said.

Petraeus is seeking permission to engage in “signature strikes,” using drone-fired missiles to attack targets identified “solely on intelligence indicating patterns of suspicious behavior,” the *Post* reported, without knowing exactly who was being targeted for extermination.

For all practical purposes, this means turning large parts of Yemen, a sovereign country whose government has a military alliance with the United States, into a free-fire zone, in which US missiles could be fired at virtually any gathering of men thought to be armed. The country is awash in weapons, particularly in the rural areas where tribal sheiks, rather than the central government, hold sway.

The request marks a significant escalation of the US operations in Yemen, which are conducted both by the CIA and the Pentagon’s Joint Special Operations Command. Both agencies use remote-controlled missiles as their primary weapons, selecting targets based on satellite intelligence and reports from on-the-ground spotters. According to published estimates, US agencies have conducted at least 27 strikes against Yemeni targets in the last three years, killing some 250 people.

Petraeus greatly increased the role of special forces in Afghanistan during his year as the commander of US military forces there, and he has continued this focus on covert paramilitary operations since becoming CIA director in 2011. “Signature strikes” have been a staple

of CIA operations in the tribal regions of Pakistan, and now Petraeus wants to extend these methods into Yemen.

The *Post* report quoted an unidentified “senior administration official” to the effect that up to now the White House had opposed extensive strikes against targets in Yemen, limiting drone attacks to “only those who have a direct interest in attacking the United States.” The CIA was required to select “personality” targets from a hit list approved by Obama, and fire missiles only when those individuals were being targeted.

This was the official story of the drone attack last September that killed Anwar al-Awlaki, a US citizen born of Yemeni parents who had moved back to Yemen and become a propagandist for Islamic fundamentalism, posting English-language sermons online.

The Obama administration claimed that al-Awlaki was a leader of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), linked to several attacks inside the US, including both the November 2009 shootings at Fort Hood in Texas and the attempt to bomb a Detroit-bound jetliner a month later. Al-Awlaki and another US citizen were killed in a drone missile strike last September 30. Two weeks afterwards, al-Awlaki’s teenage son, also a US citizen, was killed in another strike, allegedly aimed at a different AQAP figure.

The murder of al-Awlaki became the occasion for the assertion of an extraordinary expansion of presidential power. Obama claimed the “right” to assassinate any American citizen based on his own determination that the citizen was an enemy combatant, without any legal proceeding or judicial review of his actions.

Another “senior US official” quoted anonymously by the *Post* expressed concern that the expanded military

intervention could have wider political repercussions, given the political turmoil in Yemen, whose longtime president Ali Abdullah Saleh stepped down in February after a year of anti-government demonstrations and bloody repression. “I think there is the potential that we would be perceived as taking sides in a civil war,” the official said.

According to a report last month in the *Los Angeles Times*, which gave details of a missile strike in Yemen conducted by the Joint Special Operations Command, “As the pace quickens and the targets expand, however, the distinction may be blurring between operations targeting militants who want to attack Americans and those aimed at fighters seeking to overthrow the Yemeni government. US officials insist that they will not be drawn into a civil war and that they do not intend to put ground troops in Yemen *other than trainers and small special operations units*” (emphasis added).

This article both confirmed the growing US intervention in the civil war, and revealed that the Obama administration has begun, without any public announcement, the same type of operation that was conducted last year in Libya: US troops are already on the ground in Yemen and playing a key role in directing and facilitating air strikes.

By this account, the main targets of the US attacks are three southern Yemeni provinces, Abyan, Shabwa, and Bayda, which have been largely outside central government control for several years. Even the US government admits that most of the armed men in these provinces are local Yemeni tribesmen who oppose the government in Sana, and resent the longstanding US military aid and support for that dictatorial regime.

US operations in southern Yemen are closely coordinated with the government in Sana, now headed by Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi, Saleh’s vice president. Last month Yemen’s army chief of staff, Maj. Gen. Ahmed Ali Ashwal, went to Washington for talks with Pentagon officials. He was urged to reorganize the military for an offensive into the southern provinces, which will require use of tanks and artillery to dislodge tribal fighters.

More than 2,000 people were killed in the civil strife of the past year in Yemen, according to the country’s Ministry of Human Rights, the vast majority of them slaughtered by military forces or paramilitary gunmen

loyal to Saleh. Yemen is the poorest of the Arab countries and one of the poorest in the world, with the second highest rate of chronic malnutrition; only US-occupied Afghanistan is worse.

Whether or not the White House approves the current CIA request, the United States is moving inexorably towards greater military involvement in Yemen and its surrounding region, including the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, key waterways for international trade, and particularly for the supply of oil from the Persian Gulf to Europe, with tankers traveling for hundreds of miles along the Yemeni coast on their way to the Suez Canal.

The region includes a number of geopolitical flashpoints, including Somalia, where the US military has conducted a series of drone strikes and commando raids targeting Islamic groups battling the US-backed regime in Mogadishu, and the Sudan, which this week declared war on South Sudan, the country formed through the secession of its southern half. Sudan and South Sudan have been in conflict for months over disputed territory along their border, the location of oil fields that are a major source of supply to China.



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