

US drone strikes continue in Yemen

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Two US drone strikes in Yemen on December 24 killed six people and wounded at least three others, according to an Associated Press report. A missile struck a vehicle travelling in the central Bayda province carrying two men—one Yemeni and one Jordanian. The same day, three missiles killed four men travelling on motorbikes in Hadhramaut province.

While unnamed Yemeni officials claimed that all six victims were members of the local Al Qaeda affiliate, Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), only one has been identified. Yemeni and US officials, along with the international media, routinely label civilians and government opponents killed in drone strikes as AQAP “militants.”

During 2012, the Obama administration escalated its drone campaign in Yemen, which is aimed at maintaining US dominance in the strategic region and propping up the loyal and widely-despised regime of President Mansour Al Hadi. His government confronts armed tribal groups in the north and south of the country.

Under its policy of “signature strikes,” adopted in April, the Obama administration has blown up buildings, vehicles and people without even identifying who is being targeted—based solely on so-called activity patterns from satellites and spies. Under the guise of the “war on terror,” these attacks are carried out without public oversight, making it impossible to know the actual number of civilian casualties.

The recent strikes are the first since November. According to the *Long War Journal* online blog, which tracks media reports of US military strikes, there were at least 40 drone attacks in 2012—a four-fold increase from 2011. Analysing separate data compiled by the New America Foundation, AFP counted 53 strikes in 2012.

The real figure is likely to be far higher. The Yemeni government claims that its aged air force carries out

every bombing, so confirmation of US drone attacks can often only be made by witnesses. The Obama administration refuses to officially acknowledge the drone war in Yemen. At least 35 civilians have been killed in the attacks in the last 12 months, according to the *Long War Journal*, but the toll is certain to be greater.

In a rare admission, unnamed US officials confirmed to the *Washington Post* late last month that a drone had blown up a truck carrying 14 civilians on September 2. Thirteen people, including a woman and two children (7 and 12 years old) were killed, in one of the deadliest strikes since the December 2009 cruise missile attack that killed dozens of civilians.

The Yemeni government had previously claimed responsibility for the September 2 strike, labelling the civilians as AQAP “militants.” According to the *Post*, the villagers were travelling to Radda to sell Khat, a narcotic leaf chewed by many people in Yemen, when a missile explosion flipped the truck over. Seconds later, a second missile struck. Friends and relatives of the deceased attempted to carry their bodies to a government office in protest, but were blocked by security forces. The government was then forced to admit that civilians had been killed.

Since coming to power last February, Hadi has sought to prove himself an even more reliable US stooge than former President Ali Abdullah Saleh. Hadi became president when Saleh stepped down as part of a deal organised by the US and its allies to salvage the regime and shut down mass demonstrations. At the same time, the former opposition Joint Meeting Parties (JMP) and anti-government defectors within the tribal and military elite were incorporated into the regime.

Unlike Saleh, who denied that US drone strikes took place in the country, Hadi gave an interview with the *Washington Post* in September praising their use and insisting that he personally authorised every strike. The

Post noted that Hadi “has come to be regarded by Obama administration officials as one of the United States’ staunchest counterterrorism allies.”

The US provided at least \$112 million in military aid last year, approximately the same amount that had been given to the Saleh regime over the entire decade from 2001. Last month, Washington announced it would donate 25 small manned surveillance planes, which will be piloted by Yemenis trained by US troops. The Pentagon and CIA have an unknown number of personnel in Yemen, directing drone strikes and Yemeni military operations. Significantly, *Defence Tech*, a military analysis web site closely linked to the US army, reported in September that Yemeni officials claimed the government expected to receive four Raven drones of its own from the US.

Widespread hostility toward Hadi’s regime continues. While media reporting is scant, for the past two Fridays, hundreds of thousands of people joined protests following prayers in Sanaa and other cities. They called for the removal and trial of members of the security forces and the Saleh regime, including Saleh himself, who continues to wield significant political power.

In an attempt to appease the public opposition, Hadi announced a restructuring of the military on December 19, removing at least 10 military and security officials from their posts, including Saleh’s son, who headed the Central Security forces. Hadi also disbanded a military division that had attempted to overthrow the government during the protests in 2011, and removed its commander, General Ali Mohsen. Nine soldiers from a military division that defected to the opposition were placed on trial this month and given seven-year jail terms.

Far from being punished for killing protesters last year, however, the former heads of the security forces, including Saleh’s son and Ali Mohsen, are likely to be given new positions in the defence ministry or military. The military restructuring is aimed, above all, at uniting the different factions of the security and military apparatus, including those directly connected to Saleh through his family network, in order to better meet US needs and ruthlessly suppress any internal opposition in the future. For this reason, the Obama administration has given the reorganisation its full support.



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