



Written by [Joe Wolverton, II, J.D.](#) on May 14, 2014

Deadly U.S. Drone War Creating Problems for Yemen's President

After a brief respite, U.S. drones are buzzing above Yemen once again, reportedly killing six al-Qaeda "militants" on May 12.

Hellfire missiles launched from the U.S.-piloted unmanned aircraft destroyed a car driving through the Marib province, according to a statement made by unnamed local officials. The identities of the dead were not readily available, however.

Including strikes conducted early this year, the drone war in Yemen has resulted in the death of at least 12 suspected al-Qaeda operatives.



As if these airborne assassinations were not enough to stir the animosity of Yemenis, the *New York Times* reported on May 9 that a U.S. Special Operations commando and a Central Intelligence Agency officer fatally wounded two Yemeni civilians who reportedly tried to kidnap the pair of Americans while they waited for a haircut. The *Times* reports that the incident occurred two weeks ago in Sana'a, the country's capital.

Reportedly, the Special Ops officer and the CIA agent responsible for the killings were "whisked out of the volatile Middle East nation within a few days of the shooting." While the whisking would have been enough to rile up the locals, it's the participation of Yemeni president Abdu Rabbu Mansour Hadi (shown) that has summoned the "seething resentment" of his countrymen.

Hadi, president since 2012 of the American ally in the "War on Terror," is known to frequently turn a blind eye to activities of Americans that trouble Yemenis. As the *New York Times* explains:

Yemenis believe, with some evidence, that the drone strikes often kill nearby civilians as well as their targets, so any indication that Mr. Hadi's government helped conceal the killing of Yemenis by American commandos could be problematic.

The problem, apparently, is that blowback is not just something that vexes Americans, but it seems to be threatening the Hadi administration, as well. Since Hadi's inauguration, the number of sorties sent to Yemen has spiked.

Although U.S. officials typically do not comment on this or any other drone strike in Yemen or elsewhere, Hadi isn't quite so close-mouthed about the arrangement between the two "allies."

In a statement made to the *Washington Post* in an interview published September 29, 2012, President Hadi said he "personally approves every U.S. drone strike in his country."

Hadi's praise for the Predators continued during a speech delivered at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. "They [drones] pinpoint the target and have zero margin of error, if you know what target you're aiming at," Hadi said, according to the *New York Times*.



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As the *Washington Post* rightly posits, it is likely this personal interest in promoting President Obama's drone war that has influenced U.S. officials to consider Hadi "one of the United States' staunchest counterterrorism allies."

Beyond the effect the winnowing of the president's kill list is having on domestic politics in Yemen, there is a larger threat to security from blowback. Blowback in this case is defined as violent counter-attacks carried out as revenge for covert operations.

After a drone attack killed 13 Yemenis by "mistake" in September, 2012, relatives of those killed in the strike spoke with the clarity and carelessness that comes from the mixture of mourning and rage.

"You want us to stay quiet while our wives and brothers are being killed for no reason. This attack is the real terrorism," said Mansoor al-Maweri, whom CNN reported as being "near the scene of the strike."

Then there was this from "an activist" who lives near the site of the September 2012 massacre: "I would not be surprised if a hundred tribesmen joined the lines of al Qaeda as a result of the latest drone mistake," said Nasr Abdullah. "This part of Yemen takes revenge very seriously."

The *Times* reports that the bloodbath that is flooding Yemen is threatening to drown the diplomatic ties between the two countries.

The Yemeni government is a staunch counterterrorism ally, and administration officials are no doubt seeking to avoid a replay of the 2011 debacle. "There will certainly be an investigation, and one would have to assume it will be informed by what happened in Pakistan," one American official said.

American officials have voiced fears about the violence erupting in Yemen. The State Department announced on Wednesday that it had closed its embassy in Sana to the public because of security concerns, citing recent attacks against Western interests in Yemen as the reason for temporarily suspending operations.

No matter how the violence in Yemen increases, there are those who insist that the concomitant increase in militancy isn't a relevant consideration. Many observers argue that the goal of the drone war is not to reduce AQAP's strength, but to increase the safety of the United States by reducing the number of al-Qaeda "militants" living in Yemen.

Since the drone war began there in 2002, there have reportedly been 85 deadly strikes since that year in Yemen. The number of dead is not verifiable, but LongWarJournal reports that 401 "al-Qaeda commanders" and 99 "civilians" have been killed during the duration of the program.

For President Obama and those pulling the triggers on the joysticks guiding the missiles toward their human targets, "suspected militants" are officially defined as "all military-age males in a strike zone."

For those of us concerned with the Constitution, due process, and the rule of law, however, "suspected militant" is just a euphemism for a person not charged with any crime, not afforded even the most perfunctory due process protections, but executed by presidential decree anyway. In this way, we are no better than those we kill in the name of safety.

The problem with this arrangement is that there is no way to tell who is a "militant" and who isn't.

More to the point, when did militancy become a crime? If it is a crime, where is it defined? How can anyone know if he is guilty of militancy if such a crime is not defined? Could one hypothetically be a militant without knowing it?



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What is clear, however, is that President Obama's nearly daily approval of drone-delivered assassinations is an effrontery to over 650 years of our Anglo-American law's protection from autocratic decrees of death without due process of law.

When any president assumes the power to create a kill list, add names to that kill list, keep that kill list secret, and assassinate people on that kill list, he places our Republic on a trajectory toward tyranny and unbounded, unaccountable, unending government-sponsored terrorism.

In Yemen, it seems the realization that the drone war is being waged in their country and that their own president is permitting it is being channeled by al-Qaeda leadership as its primary recruitment message.

Few acts seem more likely to convince young Yemenis that the United States is their enemy — a far away menace that routinely murders innocent men, women, and children — than the near constant killing of their loved ones by an invisible drone. As reported by the U.K.'s *Guardian* on December 12, 2013:

Farea al-Muslimi, a Yemeni activist who testified to the US Senate about the impact of the drone strikes in 2013 predicted the strike would drain Yemeni citizens' outrage over the recent attack on the defense ministry by al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula that killed more than 50 people.

"The strike today literally saved AQAP's image and shorted by months the PR work [they] would have needed to do," al-Muslimi said. "Nothing could have made Yemenis forget the horrible images of the attack in Sanaa more than the images of this current drone strike that targeted a wedding party."

Muslimi refers to the murder in December, 2013 of 15 people [attending a wedding in Yemen](#).

Citing "local security authorities," Reuters reported that the families celebrating the wedding "were killed in an air strike after their party was mistaken for an al-Qaida convoy."

Another unnamed official told Reuters that 10 people were killed immediately by the missiles, while five died later of injuries they sustained in the attack. Five more members of the wedding party were wounded, but survived the strike.

The Pentagon, predictably, told a different story. "This was not a wedding," said an unnamed congressional aide quoted by the *Los Angeles Times*. "These were bad guys."

Again, this misses the point. The issue is not whether someone is bad or good; the key consideration for constitutionalists is, has this person who is being targeted for assassination had his guilt or innocence declared by a court of law? There is no such thing — under the rule of law — as anyone who is bad or good, unless sufficient proof of those accusations has been presented in a courtroom before an impartial judge.

The White House has assumed all power over life and death — at home and abroad — and has created a brand-new category of individual — one who can be indiscriminately deprived of all rights.

Photo of Yemeni president Abdu Rabbu Mansour Hadi: AP Images

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