



Written by [Joe Wolverton, II, J.D.](#) on May 2, 2012

Obama Gives Green Light to Expanded Drone Campaign in Yemen

Just weeks ago [the CIA requested expanded authority](#) to deploy drones to target and kill suspected militants hiding in Yemen. To no one's surprise, President Obama has given them that authority.

According to U.S. government officials quoted in [various media accounts](#), the purpose of the new policy is to identify and eliminate "high value targets" suspected of working with al-Qaeda or associated forces, even though the names of those individuals are not known to the CIA.



"This was an interagency decision made based on deliberations about the growing threat from AQAP [al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula] and concerns about the safe haven," a senior Obama administration official told the [Wall Street Journal](#).

The officials did offer assurances that the "White House stopped short of authorizing attacks on groups of lower-level foot soldiers," however.

It's little wonder that the President has given the go-ahead in light of the perceived success he's having in Pakistan using drones to prosecute the "War on Terror."

The evidence is impressive. According to [reliable estimates](#), drone strikes have killed between 1,715 and 2,680 people in Pakistan since 2004. Doing the math, that means conservatively calculating there have been about 18 deaths by drone per month in Pakistan over the past eight years.

Some of those government agents responsible for overseeing the intelligence community's efforts in the region are not content with the new level of license to kill, however. A piece in the *Wall Street Journal* reports that "Some military and intelligence officials privately complain that the White House in being too cautious. They argue that more aggressive U.S. action is necessary to combat the growing threat from al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula or AQAP...."

These anonymous Predator promoters worry that membership in the AQAP is growing unwieldy, particularly in the wake of the death of an American citizen suspected by the United States of being an AQAP big wig.

Readers will remember the name of that American-cum-al Qaeda-recruiter — Anwar al-Awlaki.

Awlaki was placed on the President's infamous kill list after he was suspected of influencing the Ft. Hood shooter, Major Nidal Hassan, as well as the so-called Underwear Bomber, Umar Abdulmutallab. No official charges were ever filed against the American-born cleric. The government never attempted to apprehend him and try him for his alleged atrocities. He was placed on a proscription list and summarily murdered by remote control.

The hit reportedly went down like this: On September 30, 2011, while Anwar al-Awlaki had stopped to eat breakfast, two unmanned Predator drones fired Hellfire missiles, killing him. Two weeks later, his



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son Abdulrahman was killed in similar manner. No charges. No trial. No due process.

True enough, Awlaki openly advocated for the end of the American presence in the Middle East (including Yemen) and published screeds that were little more than pro-Islamist propaganda, but neither of those activities is criminal. But, as was revealed in our earlier article reporting on the CIA's filing of the request, the government doesn't need a crime, just a "pattern of suspicious behavior."

This disturbingly low threshold of culpability is part and parcel of the "signature strike" and it is this sort of non-surgical strike that the CIA is planning on using in Yemen. Basically, the spymasters need not be able to identify a particular person suspected of committing a particular crime, they need only demonstrate that tell-tale "suspicious behavior" and they are obliterated before they even know they are being followed.

A "high-ranking Yemeni intelligence official" quoted in the *Wall Street Journal* article explained a problem with this policy, "Every Yemeni is armed, so how can they differentiate between suspected militants and armed Yemenis?" The easy answer is that they don't bother making such a distinction.

In fact, there is something sinister in this scenario. Assuming that the CIA's sphere of influence only increases in direct proportion to the proliferation and spread of "enemy combatants," then it would seem that the quickest path toward expanding their already immense authority would be the implementation of any policy that tends to "radicalize" young Yemenis.

There are others within officialdom in the United States and Yemen that fear that the filling the skies of southern Yemen with drones will only serve to push otherwise harmless anti-American adolescents into the arms of those who truly qualify as terrorists.

Should the host country sense that the high-tech hunt is indeed improving the al-Qaeda recruiting effort, then it retains the right to "roll back the program."

Counterterrorism officials in the United States report that they are already tracking numerous "direct threats to the U.S." originating from AQAP operatives. Of course, when pressed for details, the source claimed such information was classified.

The CIA wasted no time in filling the "expanded aperture" for the use of drones with Hellfire missiles. A few weeks ago, [a Predator was used to kill](#) a Yemeni suspected of being a leader in the AQAP. American government officials confirmed that the CIA-controlled aircraft killed Mohammed Al-Umda on Sunday while he was riding in his SUV.

There were others in the car and "intelligence analysts are working to identify those killed." This is the procedure to be followed, apparently, following a "signature strike:" fire a missile and then find out who was killed.

This arrangement seems to be acceptable to the new government of Yemen. The White House seems content to take up the slack while the Yemeni military regains control of its own country and achieves the strength necessary to eliminate the scourge of suspected terrorists.

While they wait for the Yemeni armed forces to get up to speed, the CIA marches on in its mission with critical tactical assistance from the American military's Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC). The two groups are working together despite maintaining two separate kill lists.

Despite the apparent duplication on these proscription lists, chances are that regardless of its extraordinary power, it is unlikely that even the CIA can kill someone twice.



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Reportedly, the White House originally was reluctant to sign off on signature strikes, preferring to continue the then current practice of actually requiring that the target of a drone strike be specifically identified so as to avoid potential legal quandaries associated with government-approved indiscriminate killing.

Once representatives of the CIA and JSOC appealed to the President, convincing him that without the new lax guidelines, Yemen would become another Pakistan — a “haven” for al-Qaeda.

Such dire prophecies are persuasive, considering the above-noted body counts in Pakistan since 2004. Reports out of Yemen indicate that the U.S. has carried out only 23 airstrikes in Yemen since last May, according to [The Long War Journal](#), a website that tracks the drone campaign in the Middle East.

Not to worry, though, the likelihood of lamentable collateral damage is reduced by the noticeable improvement in the CIA’s intelligence-gathering apparatus. That isn’t to say that mistakes won’t be made, however. As the *Wall Street Journal* reports: “High-profile mistakes have occurred.” One such mistake killed a 16-year-old American without a single tie to terror.

On September 15, 2011 while trying to find his father, [Abdulrahman al-Awlaki was killed by a CIA-controlled drone](#). The only crime this boy committed was being “in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

In our post-NDAA world, that is apparently all that is required to qualify for being targeted and killed by the government of the United States of America.

Or, as one unidentified government official told the *Wall Street Journal*, “You don’t necessarily need to know the guy’s name....”

Photo: In this June 13, 2010, file photo a U.S. Predator unmanned drone armed with a missile stands on the tarmac of Kandahar military airport in Afghanistan: AP Images



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