



Written by [Michael Tennant](#) on July 14, 2011

U.S. Begins Drone Strikes in Somalia

“A Pentagon official said ... that one of the militants who was wounded had been in contact with Anwar al-Awlaki, the American-born radical cleric now hiding in Yemen,” according to the [New York Times](#). Awlaki himself was the target of a U.S. drone strike in May but escaped unharmed.

“From the territory it controls in Somalia, al-Shabaab continues to call for strikes against the United States,” asserted John O. Brennan, chief counterterrorism adviser to President Barack Obama. Whether it can carry out such strikes is another matter.



The details of the drone attack remain unclear. But one thing that *is* clear is that the Somali government, such as it is, was not notified of the attack in advance. Knowing on which side his bread is buttered, Somali Defense Minister Mohamoud Haji Faqi said the government was “not complaining about” the lack of advance warning. In fact, he added, “We urge the U.S. to continue its strikes against al-Shabaab because if it keeps those strikes up, it will be easier for us to defeat al-Shabaab.”

The June 23 incident may be the first U.S. drone strike in Somalia, but it is far from the first American attack inside that country. [Alex Thurston](#), blogging at the *Christian Science Monitor*, observed:

I see the drone strikes not as something brand new, but as a continuation of earlier U.S. actions in Somalia, such as a helicopter raid in September 2009.... The idea of using drones in Somalia, moreover, has been under consideration since at least March 2010. The vehicle may have changed, but the underlying U.S. objective of assassinating key figures linked with the rebel movement Al Shabaab has not changed.

The United States has long been involved in Somalia, allegedly to keep the threat of terrorism at bay. The *Times* writes:

For several years, the United States has largely been relying on proxy forces in Somalia, including African Union peacekeepers from Uganda and Burundi, to support Somalia’s fragile government. The Pentagon is sending nearly \$45 million in military supplies, including night-vision equipment and four small unarmed drones, to Uganda and Burundi to help combat the rising terror threat in Somalia. During the Ethiopian invasion of Somalia in 2007, clandestine operatives from the Pentagon’s Joint Special Operations Command initiated missions into Somalia from an airstrip in Ethiopia.

It is not surprising, then, that al-Shabaab’s one successful attack outside its borders consisted of suicide bombings in Uganda that killed 76 people. Nor would it be surprising if al-Shabaab were indeed interested in mounting attacks against the United States for the same reason, which raises the question of whether U.S. intervention in Somalia is protecting Americans from terrorism or opening them up to even more attacks.

Many Somalis consider their government to be a U.S. puppet, and drone strikes against those opposing



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the government “will only serve to increase the local support of the militants,” Dr. Omar Ahmed, an academic and Somali politician, told [Somalia Report](#).

There is no reason for the western countries to use airstrikes against al-Shabaab. It will only increase the generations supporting al-Shabaab. For example, when the Americans killed [al-Shabaab leader] Aden Eyrow, the capability of al-Shabaab was very low. From that day forward, the militia increased in size day-after-day. They recruited many youths, persuading them that infidels attacked their country and want to capture it.

The Obama administration has faced a similar quandary, according to the *Times*:

Over the past two years, the administration has wrestled with how to deal with the Shabaab, many of whose midlevel fighters oppose Somalia’s weak transitional government but are not necessarily seeking to battle the United States. Attacking them — not just their leaders — could push those militants to join Al Qaeda, some officials say. “That has led to a complicated policy debate over how you apply your counterterrorism tools against a group like Al Shabaab, because it is not a given that going after them in the same way that you go after Al Qaeda would produce the best result,” a senior administration official said last fall.

The voices calling for treating al-Shabaab like al-Qaeda appear to have carried the day, at least for the time being. Somalia has thus become the sixth country in which the United States is known to be carrying out drone attacks; the others are Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, and Libya. With none of these countries is the United States officially at war, yet its government is undertaking acts of war against them nonetheless, with hardly a peep from Congress, the media, or the population at large about these clearly unconstitutional — not to mention unethical and dangerous — actions. As *Post* columnist [Eugene Robinson](#) put it:

There has been virtually no public debate about the expanding use of unmanned drone aircraft as killing machines — not domestically, at least. In the places where drone attacks are taking place, there has understandably been great uproar. And in the rest of the world, questions are being raised about the legal and ethical basis for these antiseptic missile strikes.

Robinson contends that drone strikes are becoming the preferred method of warfare for the U.S. government because they are “cost-effective” and don’t “[put] U.S. lives at risk.” But, he points out, there are several reasons why they ought not be employed. Besides the fact that they stand a good chance of creating new enemies for the United States, he adds:

There is also a legal question. The Obama administration asserts that international law clearly permits the targeting of individuals who are planning attacks against the United States. But this standard requires near-perfect intelligence — that we have identified the right target, that we are certain of the target’s nefarious intentions, that the target is inside the house or car that the drone has in its sights. Mistakes are inevitable; accountability is doubtful at best.

Most troubling of all, perhaps, are the moral and philosophical questions. This is a program not of war but of assassination. Clearly, someone like Ayman al-Zawahiri — formerly Osama bin Laden’s second-in-command, now the leader of al-Qaeda — is a legitimate target. But what about others such as the Somali “militants” who may wish to do us harm but have not actually done so? Are we certain that they have the capability of mounting some kind of attack? Absent any overt act, is there a point at which antipathy toward the United States, even hatred, becomes a capital offense?

In short, letting the U.S. government summarily execute people is exceptionally dangerous. It is the sort



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of policy one associates with a dictatorship, not a constitutional republic. The American people and their elected representatives would be wise to force an end to — or at least a severe curtailment of — drone warfare.

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