



Written by [Joe Wolverton, II, J.D.](#) on October 20, 2012

Drone War Creating More Enemies Than it Destroys

Part of President Obama's daily briefing must include the report of the number of "suspected militants" killed by his drones. That is, it would be part of the briefing but he [reportedly doesn't count the casualties](#).

In the pre-dawn hours Thursday Hellfire missiles fired from a U.S. drone turned a farmhouse in rural Yemen into a smoldering heap of charred wood that served as a bier for at least eight of those "suspected militants."



For President Obama and those pulling the triggers on the joysticks guiding the missiles toward their human targets, "suspected militant" means (presumably) "all military-age males in a strike zone." For those of us more concerned with the Constitution and with the rule of law than the president, "suspected militant" means nothing other than a person not charged with any crime, not afforded even the most perfunctory due process protections, but summarily executed upon order of the president anyway.

The president's lexicon is apparently shared by some of his functionaries, as well. Harold Koh was sent by the president to make a pitch to the United Nations for the United States to maintain its seat on the UN's Human Rights Council (HRC). During a brief question and answer period after Koh's presentation, a reporter from *Inner City Press* asked Koh if the United States would use its position on the HRC to investigate the use of drones in executions. [Koh's answer was faithful to the party line](#):

He said that killings by drone "in the course of armed conflict or in self defense is consistent with international law." He cited Al Qaeda, the Taliban and "associated forces" — presumably including Al Shabab in Somalia and forces in northern Mali or Azawad — and said it is "not illegal to target an individual who is leader of an opposing force."

Was Abdulrahman al-Awlaki a "leader of an opposing force"? No. He was a 16-year-old American citizen searching for his father in Yemen. He and some relatives with whom he was eating supper were killed nonetheless by a U.S. drone. Presumably that's because his cousins were old enough to be considered by the president terrorists by default.

That question is crucial, but this pretext for the killings brings up another question: When did militancy become a crime? If it is a crime, moreover, 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, given that the crime is nowhere defined?

[Reuters reports](#) the scene in the southern Yemeni town of Jaar where the hiss of incoming missiles and the explosions that follow shattered the stillness of the dawn:

The farmhouse just west of Jaar, one of two southern towns that Yemen's army took back from rebel control this summer, was hit by three separate missile strikes at dawn, they said.

The residents said they found six charred bodies and the scattered remains of three other people, including Nader al-Shaddadi, a senior al Qaeda militant in the southern Abyan province who led the



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group that occupied Jaar.

The security source confirmed that Shaddadi was among the dead and that four others were from the town of Jaar.

A “senior al Qaeda militant” was reportedly found among the dead — thus qualifying one-ninth of the victims for execution by the president — but what of the others? [News Track India reports](#):

Some of the dead were believed to be foreign fighters, but the security sources did not know where they were from.

“The identities of the terrorists killed in the aerial attack were not immediately clear. Some of the dead were foreigners,” the source said.

According to [data published by Long War Journal](#), since 2002, 358 people have died in Yemen in U.S. drone strikes.

That tally is low when compared to Pakistan, but the number has spiked significantly since the inauguration of Yemeni President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi.

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, 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](#).

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.”

While Hadi’s self-identification as the decider of drone strikes is likely designed to cement his support among voters in Yemen, there is evidence that his decision to close the blinds of his office when the drones go airborne is alienating many of his countrymen who see this as a surrender of sovereignty. On October 17, [Reuters reported](#):

Bashraheel Hesham Bashraheel, chairman of the al-Ayyam newspaper group, said Hadi had won short-term respect from some Yemenis for being more open about drones than Saleh.

“He wants to make a clear distinction, he wants to say I approved every raid. It gives the impression he is in control and not the Americans,” Bashraheel said. “It impressed people and earned him some respect. He’s not lying like Saleh used to.”

However, with public anger rising, politicians are becoming more vocal in their opposition to U.S. operations.

The Shi’ite Islamist Houthi movement and influential Sunni cleric Abdul-Majeed al-Zindani — on a U.S. terrorism list — have stepped up criticism of drones in the past month.

“At first people didn’t talk, but after Radaa, things have changed, said Ali Abd-Rabbu al-Qadi, a parliamentarian from Maareb where many attacks have taken place. “These air strikes prepare the ground for al Qaeda and terrorism.”



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Yemenis complain the U.S. focus on militants is a violation of sovereignty that is driving many towards al Qaeda and diverting attention from other pressing issues such as unemployment, corruption, water depletion and economic revival.

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 is defined as violent counter-attacks carried out as revenge for covert operations.

After a drone attack killed 13 Yemenis by "[mistake](#)" in September, relatives of those killed in the strike spoke with the clarity and carelessness that comes from the mixture of mourning with 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 reports](#) as being "near the scene of the strike."

Then there was this from "an activist" who lives near the site of the September 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."

Reuters explains that "Western diplomats in Sanaa say al Qaeda is a threat to Yemen and the rest of the world." An argument can be made that a bigger threat to the world is the United States' daily drone attacks that destroy our own dedication to the rule of law and serve as effective recruiting tool for those seeking revenge for the killing.

The former CIA Pakistan station chief agrees. Speaking of the rapid expansion of the drone war in Yemen, [Robert Grenier told the Guardian \(U.K.\)](#):

That brings you to a place where young men, who are typically armed, are in the same area and may hold these militants in a certain form of high regard. If you strike them indiscriminately you are running the risk of creating a terrific amount of popular anger. They have tribes and clans and large families. Now all of a sudden you have a big problem.... I am very concerned about the creation of a larger terrorist safe haven in Yemen.

And:

We have gone a long way down the road of creating a situation where we are creating more enemies than we are removing from the battlefield. We are already there with regards to Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Photo: AP Images

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