



Written by [Joe Wolverton, II, J.D.](#) on November 4, 2012

Counterterrorism Czar: Yemen Drone War is “Model” for Expansion

In a [recent Washington Post article](#) covering the drone war, White House counterterrorism “czar” John Brennan (pictured) was quoted as saying, “There are aspects of the Yemen program that I think are a true model of what I think the U.S. counterterrorism community should be doing” to fight the spread of al-Qaeda in Northern Africa.



Before turning to the expansion of the death-by-drone program in North Africa, one should consider the case against Brennan’s claim of success for the policy in the Yemeni theatre.

First, as we have reported, President Obama began ordering drone strikes in the Arab nation in 2009. Since that initial attack, [Long War Journal reports](#) that “the CIA and the US military’s Joint Special Operations Command are known to have conducted at least 50 air and missile strikes inside Yemen.”

Given Brennan’s praise of the prosecution of the drone war in Yemen, one would imagine that al-Qaeda in the Arab Peninsula (AQAP) forces in Yemen have been eliminated or at least significantly weakened as a result of the U.S. drone attacks.

Not so much.

As Gregory Johnsen [writes in BigThink.com](#):

Estimates of the group’s size vary widely. But both US and Yemeni officials estimates in December 2009 suggested that AQAP was around 200-300, while today official US estimates range from 1,000 to several thousand. Yemenis who are close to AQAP suggest that the group has as many as 6,000 fighters.

But even taking the most conservative official estimate of AQAP’s current strength, which happens to be Brennan’s: the group still went from 200-300 fighters in 2009 to 1,000 today.

This should not be surprising in light of recent reports that the drone campaign in Yemen is [serving better to recruit al-Qaeda than defeat them](#).

Since the inauguration of Yemeni President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi, 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, 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



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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.”

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.”

Perhaps an increase in militancy isn’t a relevant consideration. There are some who argue that the goal of the drone war is not to reduce AQAP’s strength, but to increase the safety of the United States.

The problem with that premise is that there is no way to tell who is a “militant” and who isn’t.

Besides, 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, given that the crime is nowhere defined? Incidentally, it is this very vagueness that dilates the grey area and makes the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) such a fearsome weapon in the arsenal of the seemingly all-powerful president.

Knowing what we know, then, about AQAP growth in Yemen since the initiation of the drone war there, can we expect the future of al-Qaeda to follow this “model” trajectory in North Africa now that we will soon be sending sortie after sortie into and out of Somalia?

[The Washington Post is reporting](#) that CIA officials are leaning on President Obama to green light the expansion of the intelligence agency’s fleet of drones. The increasing militarization of the CIA has accelerated its “decade-long transformation into a paramilitary force” according to a government official quoted in the *Post* article.

CIA Director and retired Gen. [David Petraeus](#) (a member of the internationalist Council on Foreign Relations) claims that a beefed up drone presence would help his agents keep up with the “threats in North Africa.”

It’s not like North Africa hasn’t seen its share of drone sorties. On July 24, [the Washington Post published an article](#) describing the congestion of the skies over Somalia caused by drone traffic. The situation is so bad, says the *Post*, that there is a “danger to air traffic” in the area.

An additional problem posed by the proliferation of the unmanned aircraft above the east African nation is that their presence might be evidence of a violation of a [1992 United Nations Security Council arms embargo](#) still in effect.



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The article in the *Post* cites a UN report in which officials of the international body recount several instances where collisions between drones and commercial aircraft or objects on the ground were “narrowly averted.” One such incident involved a drone and a passenger plane flying above Mogadishu, the capital of Somalia.

According to the report, there have been 64 unauthorized drone deployments, fighter jet missions, or attack helicopter flights recorded in Somalia since June 2011. At least 10 of the documented flights involved drones.

While the U.S. military keeps mum about its use of drones around the world, it is known that drones are deployed and launched from American military bases in Djibouti, the Seychelles, and Ethiopia. In fact, in a statement released in June, the Obama administration admitted that it “is engaged in a robust range of operations to target Al-Qaeda and associated forces, including in Somalia.”

In 2011, the military acknowledged that as part of that operation a drone strike was launched against two suspected leaders of al-Shabaab, an alleged al-Qaeda affiliate based in Somalia. Again, the use of these drones and the firing of missiles at militants seemingly violates the 1992 embargo, as drones carrying Hellfire missiles are inarguably deployed for uses that are “exclusively military,” in direct contravention of the terms of the embargo.

Despite the official gag order, the truth about the turning of North Africa into the latest theatre in the never-ending War on Terror is percolating up through [a report in the *Washington Post*](#).

On October 25, Craig Whitlock wrote:

Around the clock, about 16 times a day, drones take off or land at a U.S. military base here, the combat hub for the Obama administration’s [counterterrorism wars in the Horn of Africa](#) and the Middle East.

And:

Camp Lemonnier, a sun-baked Third World outpost established by the French Foreign Legion, began as a temporary staging ground for U.S. Marines looking for a foothold in the region a decade ago. Over the past two years, the U.S. military has clandestinely transformed it into the busiest Predator drone base outside the Afghan war zone, a model for fighting a new generation of terrorist groups.

Reading the past as prologue to the future, soon al-Qaeda will not need a recruitment program; the Predators will do it for them — in North Africa as they are doing in Yemen and in Pakistan.

Photo of John Brennan: AP Images

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