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Inter Service Press

US Escalating Drone War in Yemen

By Jim Lobe

April 27, 2012

Even as President Barack Obama touts his progress in extracting the U.S. from wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, his administration appears to be deepening its covert and military involvement in strife-torn Yemen.

Washington is worried about recent advances by Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), particularly in the southern part of the country.

Since the failed "Christmas Day" bombing by an AQAP-trained Nigerian national of a U.S. airliner over Detroit in December 2009, the group has been regarded here as a greater threat to the U.S. homeland than its Pakistan-based parent.

Quoting senior officials, the *Wall Street Journal* and other major U.S. publications reported Thursday that the administration has relaxed constraints on both the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the Pentagon in conducting drone strikes against suspected AQAP-affiliated militants in the Arab world's poorest nation.

Henceforth, the CIA and the Pentagon's Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC), which conduct parallel counterterrorist campaigns in Yemen, will be able to strike suspected militants whose precise identity may not be known but whose "behavior" suggests that they are either "high-value" operatives or engaged in plots to strike U.S. interests.

Such assessments will be based on intelligence acquired from such sources as informants on the ground, aerial surveillance, and phone intercepts, as well as circumstantial evidence regarding their associations, according to the reports.

The new guidelines are apparently a compromise between those in the administration who favored that the previous policy of authorizing strikes only against positively identified militants who appeared "kill list" and others, including CIA director Gen. David Petraeus (ret.), who wanted a further easing of the rules of engagement.

They are raising concerns among some experts that Washington is slipping ever more deeply into a conflict – or a series of conflicts – it knows relatively little about.

"There is a dangerous drift here, and the policymakers in the U.S. don't appear to realize they are heading into rough waters without a map," wrote Gregory Johnsen, a Yemen specialist at Princeton University and editor of the Waq Al-Waq blog.

"In Yemen, drones and missile strikes appear to have replaced comprehensive policy," he noted. "...Since late 2009, the number of U.S. strikes in Yemen have increased and, as the strikes have grown in frequency, AQAP has grown in recruits."

"What does the U.S. do if AQAP continues to gain more recruits and grow stronger even as the number of missile strikes increase?" he asked. "Does the U.S. bomb more? Does the U.S. contemplate an invasion?"

Other critics have worried that escalating the drone war in Yemen, where the U.S.- and Saudi-engineered resignation of President Ali Abdullah Saleh in February has so far done little to calm the country's many regional, tribal, political and sectarian conflicts, could further poison public opinion against the U.S. much as it has in Pakistan. The CIA has carried out more than 250 drone strikes in Pakistan since 2009, according to the Long War Journal website.

Many of those were so-called "signature" strikes against targets whose observed behavior, or "pattern of life", suggested that they were active members of either the Afghan or Pakistani Taliban insurgencies. Under the prevailing rules of engagement, the CIA did not have to know either the precise identity or importance of the target before ordering a strike.

According to published accounts, Petraeus has repeatedly requested similar rules of engagement for the CIA, which works closely with JSOC, in Yemen.

He reportedly pressed his case with increasing urgency as militants and tribal militias allegedly associated with AQAP, which, according to U.S. officials, has adopted the name of Ansar al-Sharia, expanded their control over several southern provinces in the last months of Saleh's reign and in the immediate aftermath of his replacement by Vice President Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi.

His pleas were initially rebuffed, but Obama reportedly approved the new rules – which some officials have been quoted as calling "signature lite" – earlier this month. They give the two

agencies authority to target unknown individuals and groups whose "pattern of life" suggests that they are "high-value" targets or are plotting against U.S. interests.

Officials argue that the new rules are justified in part by improved CIA and JSOC intelligence-gathering capabilities on the ground in recent months. Because Washington did not want to be seen as supporting an unpopular dictator as Saleh tried to hang on, it reduced its presence in the country – among other things pulling out most of its military personnel – thus making intelligence collection more difficult.

Better intelligence, according to these officials, should reduce the possibility that civilians will be hit by missile or drone strikes.

They also argue that looser rules of engagement are essential to help the Hadi government is to regain control over the southern provinces of Abyan, Shabwa and Bayda from AQAP and Ansar al Sharia.

Indeed, the tempo of such strikes has sharply increased in recent months. At least three suspected AQAP-affiliated individuals were reportedly killed in a drone strike in the southern city of Madiyah Thursday. Two other strikes were carried out since last weekend, including one that killed a senior AQAP commander, Mohammed Said al-Umdah, in northern Yemen and another that killed at least three other suspected militants in Shabwa province, according to the Long War website.

The website reported at least 13 U.S. air and missile strikes in Yemen since Mar. 1 this year, compared to only 10 in all of 2011, the best known and controversial of which killed Anwar al-Awlaki, a Yemeni-American imam whose on-line sermons on behalf of Al-Qaeda were considered particularly effective in gaining Anglophone recruits and who was alleged by the administration to have also played leadership role in operations directed against the U.S.

While Awlaki was on the CIA's "kill list", a second U.S. citizen slain in that strike, Samir Khan, was not.

Washington had hoped that Awlaki's death would constitute a major blow to AQAP's recruitment and direction. But many Yemen experts argued that his importance to the organization had been greatly exaggerated, and Johnsen noted Thursday that the group's threat to the U.S. "has grown stronger ...even after the death of Anwar al- Awlaki, which apparently surprises some people."

"...I believe drones and air strikes should be used extremely sparingly and only in situations where the U.S. knows beyond a shadow of a doubt who it is hitting," he wrote. "Now, the U.S. will say that is what it is doing, but tens of strikes in four months and a number of mistakes in the past three years suggest that these strikes have neither been sparing or surgical."