

License to Kill? Intelligence Chief Says U.S. Can Take Out American Terrorists

Director of National Intelligence Says Intelligence Community Can Target Citizens Presenting a Terrorist Threat

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The director of national intelligence affirmed rather bluntly today that the U.S. [intelligence community](#) has authority to target American citizens for assassination if they present a direct [terrorist threat](#) to the United States.

“We take direct actions against [terrorists](#) in the intelligence community; if ... we think that direct action will involve killing an American, we get specific permission to do that,” Director of National Intelligence Dennis Blair told the House Intelligence Committee.

Rep. Peter Hoekstra D-Mich., addressed the issue at today’s hearing.

“The targeting of Americans — it’s a very sensitive issue, but again there’s been more information in the public domain than what has been shared with this committee,” he said.

“There is no clarity.” Hoekstra said. “What is the legal framework?”

“Whether that American is involved in a group that is trying to attack us, whether that American has — is a threat to other Americans. Those are the factors involved.” Blair explained. “We don’t target people for free speech. We target them for taking action that threatens Americans.”

According to U.S. officials, only a handful of Americans would be eligible for targeting by U.S. intelligence or military operations. The legal guidance is determined by the National Security Council and the Justice Department.

In the past, the U.S. has killed Americans overseas but they were viewed as “collateral damage.” In 2002, the CIA killed American-born Kamal Derwish, a member of the “Lackawanna 6” terror group during a CIA Predator drone strike. Derwish was driving in a car with other members of al Qaeda, the government said.

In 2008, a missile strike in Somalia killed American Ruben Shumpert, a Seattle man suspected of being an Islamist radical. Shumpert was wanted by federal authorities on gun and counterfeit currency charges. He had agreed to plead guilty but fled the country days before sentencing in 2004.

The Yemeni-American cleric Anwar al Awlaki, who has become a prominent influence with al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, was at a meeting with leaders of the terror group when U.S.

officials knowingly launched a cruise missile strike to eliminate the terror leaders. Several people were killed but Awlaki survived.

Terrorism an Emergent Threat, Recruitment Efforts Grow

The disclosure about detailed guidance to target Americans as part of terror plots comes amid fresh warnings about increased threats and concerns about new al Qaeda attacks.

“We have been warning in the past several years that al Qaeda itself and its associated affiliates and al Qaeda-inspired terrorists remain committed to striking the United States,” Blair said today, “and in the past year we have some names that goes behind these warnings.”

Blair cited the cases of Colorado terrorism suspect Najibullah Zazi, the accused Christmas Day bomber Farouk Abdulmutallab and Major Nidal Hasan, who was charged in the November 2009 Fort Hood shooting that killed 13 people.

“We have made complex, multi-team attacks very difficult for al Qaeda to pull off, but as we saw with the recent rash of attacks last year...identifying individual terrorists, small groups with short histories using simple attack methods, is a much more difficult task,” Blair said.

Blair added that radicalization and recruitment foments suicide bombers. “Al Qaeda’s radical ideology seems to appeal strongly to a group of disaffected young Muslims, and this is a pool of potential suicide bombers and this pool unfortunately includes Americans,” Blair said.

The DNI said that Internet and social media sites have become critical to terrorism recruitment efforts. Speaking about the Hasan case and his alleged Internet communications with al Awlaki, Blair said, “The homegrown radicalization of people in the United States...is a relatively new thing.”

Blair said U.S. intelligence was rapidly working to counter the emerging problem. “There are some technical things, which are making it more difficult, with the use of social networking as opposed to simply looking at a Web site and responding by e-mail.”

Increasing Threat?

Blair said this is “a threat, which may be increasing. We’re taking it more and more seriously and this is a — this is something that is very — is potentially very dangerous to us because of all of the — for all of the reasons of the rights that American citizens have.

“We may be shooting behind the rabbit here and it’s moving faster than we thought and we’re spending a lot of additional effort on that, to try and understand it.” Blair said.

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