

Obama Prepares to Expand Military Attacks in Yemen

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The Obama administration is preparing to escalate its intervention in Yemen, placing US military units under CIA control to facilitate intensified drone attacks and death squad killings.

Citing unnamed government officials, the Wall Street Journal reported Monday that the administration has responded to the alleged airplane mail bomb plot by stepping up its consideration of “military options” inside Yemen.

According to the report, these plans would include placing “elite US hunter-killer teams that operate secretly in the country under Central Intelligence Agency authority.” The Journal added, “The White House is already considering adding armed CIA drones to the arsenal against militants in Yemen, mirroring the agency’s Pakistan campaign.”

The purpose of placing the US intervention in Yemen (now largely conducted by US military special operations forces) under CIA command, the report states, would be to “streamline US decision-making, giving the White House more direct control over day-to-day operations.”

What this means in practice is that making the growing intervention in Yemen a CIA operation would allow the Obama administration to cloak in even greater secrecy its escalation in yet another front in the “global war on terrorism.” It would be able to operate with less congressional oversight, while concealing its actions from the American people.

Equally important, placing the operation under the command of the US spy agency would circumvent the need for explicit approval by Yemen’s government. While such approval is required for the deployment of the US military, outside of an outright war, the covert character of CIA’s activities would provide both Washington and the corrupt and autocratic regime of President Ali Abdullah Saleh with “deniability.”

Popular hostility in Yemen to US operations is overwhelming, forcing Saleh to publicly declare his opposition to foreign military intervention and to refuse permission for some US missile strikes.

Washington’s aim is to create a similar arrangement as the one it forged with the government in Pakistan, which has tacitly accepted drone missile attacks—allowing US forces to operate from Pakistani territory—while publicly condemning them.

The Obama administration ordered an increase in US attacks in Yemen following the abortive Christmas Day bombing attempt on a Detroit-bound US passenger jet last

December. Now it is invoking the reported discovery of explosives in packages sent from Yemen aboard international air carriers to justify a further escalation.

Both alleged plots have been blamed publicly on the Yemen-based group Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. Yet both are surrounded by unanswered questions and anomalies.

In the incident last Christmas, Nigerian student Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab was allowed to board the US-bound flight even after he had been identified to the CIA by his own father, someone well known to the agency, who warned that his son was working with Al Qaeda elements in Yemen and posed a threat. Intercepts of Al Qaeda communications from Yemen included discussion of using a Nigerian named "Umar Farouk" for an upcoming operation and indicated December 25 as the planned date of the attack.

Subsequently, State Department Undersecretary Patrick F. Kennedy acknowledged during a congressional hearing that US authorities did not revoke Abdulmutallab's visa because it could interfere with a wider ongoing intelligence operation.

In the latest incident, which has been given saturation coverage by the US media, the devices sent from Yemen were initially described as crude and amateurish, only later to be declared "highly sophisticated." While supposedly designed to blow up in midair, the packages were addressed to Jewish synagogues in Chicago, which, coming from Yemen, was tantamount to raising a red flag for security officials.

What is suggested in both cases is that these alleged terrorist attempts were staged or allowed to unfold to further the aims of either Washington or another regime in the region. Both Israel and Saudi Arabia, each for its own purposes, want to see a greater US military intervention in Yemen.

In terms of US strategic interests, Yemen's importance lies in its geography, with the country bordering both Saudi Arabia, the number one oil exporter, and the Bab al-Mandab strait, through which three million barrels of Middle East oil pass daily, bound for Europe via the Suez Canal.

To secure US interests, Washington has aligned itself with one of the most reactionary regimes in the region. Widely hated by the Yemeni people, President Saleh's government is waging a war in the north of the country against dissident Shia tribes in which thousands of civilians have been killed and over 130,000 driven from their homes. Saudi Arabia, which has backed this military campaign with air strikes and funding, has joined with Saleh in making unsubstantiated claims that Iran is somehow behind the Shiite revolt.

In the country's south, the government is waging a similarly repressive campaign against a secessionist movement. Until 1990, Yemen was divided into two countries, with the south enjoying the backing of Moscow. With the Stalinist bureaucracy's move to dissolve the USSR, this support ended, leading to unification. The Saleh government's ruthless repression of protests against the dismissal of southern government officials and military personnel and other forms of regional discrimination provoked an armed insurgency.

It is largely to secure US backing for these repressive campaigns that Saleh has collaborated with the US "war on terrorism," directed against Islamist elements with whom the president was formerly allied. The Yemeni government has invoked terrorism as a justification for suppressing all opposition, with the imprisonment, torture and disappearance of political

dissidents, journalists, lawyers and human rights advocates.

When oil refinery workers struck last month in protest over wages and working conditions, nearly 50 of them were rounded up by troops and thrown into al-Qatta'a prison.

Simmering unrest is fueled by the country's desperate poverty. Nearly half the population lives on \$2 or less a day, while a quarter suffers from chronic hunger.

Also provoking opposition and generating support for Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula is the US intervention in the country. Hundreds of US special operations troops and intelligence operatives are deployed in Yemen, carrying out assassination missions and training Yemeni security forces.

US missile attacks, which are apparently now to be escalated, have sparked public outrage. In the worst of these, 41 civilians, 14 of them women and 21 of them children, were slaughtered last December 17. A US Navy Tomahawk missile carrying cluster bombs ripped through the victims' homes in the southern district of Abyan.

A subsequent drone missile attack reportedly aimed at an alleged Al Qaeda member in Marib province last May instead killed the province's deputy governor, Sheikh Jaber al-Shabwani, and members of his family, prompting members of his tribe to attack an oil pipeline operated by the government.

In a statement given to the Yemen Observer last Thursday, Sheikh Ibrahim al-Shabwani, brother of the deputy governor killed in the US drone attack, reported that US drones are now flying daily over Marib province.

"The drones are flying over Marib every 24 hours and there is not a day that passes that we don't see them over Wadi Abida," said al-Shabwani. "Occasionally they fly at a lower altitude while at other times they fly at a higher altitude. The atmosphere has become wary because of the presence of US drones and fear that they could strike at any time."

The New York Times on Monday quoted unnamed US officials as saying that the Al Qaeda group in Yemen "might pose the most immediate threat to American soil." Such claims are the likely precursor to a major US military attack.

For its part, the Wall Street Journal editorial page invoked the Yemeni terror allegations as justification for the Obama administration's declared intention to carry out the "targeted killing" of a US citizen, Anwar al Awlaki.

Without presenting any evidence, the administration has accused the New Mexico-born Muslim cleric of involvement in terrorist plots and ordered him killed. It marks the first time in history that the US government has publicly called for the assassination of one of its own citizens.

The Journal editorial denounced a lawsuit brought by the man's family and the American Civil Liberties Union, which challenges the right of Obama to act as judge, jury and executioner, without presenting any charges, much less allowing a defense, for the man he has ordered killed. The Obama administration has insisted that the authorization to use military force passed by Congress in the wake of the 2001 terrorist attacks gives it the right to summarily kill anyone it deems a terrorist, including US citizens.

The attempt “to thwart these attacks in a lawsuit could get Americans killed,” the Journal warns, ignoring the obvious fact that failing to thwart them will certainly result in the death of at least one American and potentially many more who fall afoul of Washington.

The editorial further argues that the latest terror scare “underscores how crucial it is that US intelligence be able to eavesdrop on email and phone conversations” without having to obtain a warrant.

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