

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

Yemen, Drones, and the Imperial Presidency

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Based on a [broad theory](#) of executive power, President Obama, and possibly his successor, has the authority to [target people for death](#)—including American citizens—without a semblance of transparency, accountability, or congressional consent. Since 9/11, officials and analysts have touted drone strikes as the most effective weapon against al Qaeda and its affiliates. Drones have become a tool of war without the need to declare one. The latest front is Yemen, where a dramatic escalation of drone strikes could be enlisting as many militants as they execute.

“In Yemen, U.S. airstrikes breed anger, and sympathy for al-Qaeda,” a headline [blared](#) in last week’s *Washington Post*. The evidence of radicalization comes from more than 20 interviews with tribal leaders, victims’ relatives, human rights activists, and officials from southern Yemen, an area where U.S. drone strikes have targeted suspected militants affiliated with al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). The escalating campaign of drone strikes kills civilians along with alleged militants. Tribal leaders and Yemeni officials say these strikes have angered tribesmen who could be helping to prevent AQAP from growing more powerful.

According to the *Post*, in 2009, U.S. officials claimed that AQAP had nearly 300 core members. Yemeni officials and tribal leaders say that number has grown to 700 or more, with hundreds of tribesmen joining its ranks to fight the U.S.-backed Yemeni government. “That's not the direction in which the drone strikes were supposed to move the numbers,” wrote the *Atlantic*'s Robert Wright.

As the majority of U.S. missile assaults shift from Pakistan to Yemen—allowing foreign policy planners to wage undeclared wars on multiple fronts—Americans should pay close attention to a few important and complicating factors that make the conflict in Yemen unique. First, the self-proclaimed Marxist state of the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) only merged with its northern neighbor, the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR), in 1990. In 1994, the two countries fought a bloody civil war that did not result in a smooth reunification. The International Crisis Group's “Breaking Point? Yemen's Southern Question” summarizes competing North-South narratives:

Under one version, the war laid to rest the notion of separation and solidified national unity. According to the other, the war laid to rest the notion of unity and ushered in a period of Northern occupation of the South.

Media reports asserting that AQAP is taking advantage of the South's hunger for independence should be understood in the context of this Northern-Southern divide. Rather than encourage the Yemeni government to respond to southern demands for greater local autonomy, Washington's tactics are helping the U.S.-backed Yemeni government repress Southern separatists. Indeed, many residents in Abyan, in southern Yemen, claim that the Yemeni government intentionally ceded territory to domestic enemies in order to frighten the West into ensuring more support against the indigenous uprising.

These developments are troubling, as the escalation of drone strikes could be creating the self-fulfilling prophecy of helping alleged AQAP-linked militants gain ground and increasing local sympathy for their cause. As Ben Friedman wrote recently, the misperception that comes with conflating AQAP with the broader insurgency is that it “invites a broad U.S. campaign against Yemen’s southern Islamists, which could heighten their enthusiasm for attacking Americans, creating the menace we feared.” That assessment echoes the sentiment of *The Nation*’s Jeremy Scahill, who has done intrepid reporting in Yemen. He recently said the campaign being conducted “is going to make it more likely that Yemen becomes a safe haven for those kinds of [terrorist] groups.”

The Oval Office seems to be giving this issue of sympathy short shrift. President Obama’s top counterterrorism adviser, John O. Brennan, has publicly argued that the precision of drone strikes limits civilian casualties. However, the *New York Times* revealed last week that the president and his underlings resort to dubious accounting tricks to low-ball the estimate of civilian deaths, counting “all military-age males in a strike zone as combatants” while the Department of Defense even targets suspects in Yemen “whose names they do not know.” The *Times*’ article recounts one of the administration’s very first strikes in Yemen:

It killed not only its intended target, but also two neighboring families, and left behind a trail of cluster bombs that subsequently killed more innocents. It was hardly the kind of precise operation that Mr. Obama favored. Videos of children’s bodies and angry tribesmen holding up American missile parts flooded You Tube, fueling a ferocious backlash that Yemeni officials said bolstered Al Qaeda.

As foreign policy planners in Washington deepen our military involvement in Yemen, the American people—rather than focusing on the number of senior al

Qaeda killed—should be asking whether we're killing more alleged militants than our tactics help to recruit.