

Washington exploits uprising to escalate secret war in Yemen

By Bill Van Auken
10 June 2011

The Obama administration has seized upon the popular upheavals in Yemen to step up bombings and missile attacks against alleged Al Qaeda militants, effectively opening up yet another war in the region.

Citing unnamed government sources, the *New York Times* reported Thursday that Washington is “exploiting a growing power vacuum in the country to strike at militant suspects with armed drones and fighter jets.”

Testifying at a Senate confirmation hearing Thursday, CIA Director Leon Panetta, tapped by Obama to take over the Pentagon as defense secretary, acknowledged that the US military has opened up a fourth theater of war with its attacks on Yemen. He said that Washington was working “with elements there to try to develop counterterrorism.”

Later in his testimony, Panetta was more specific, confirming that Washington is continuing to work with the dictatorship that the people of Yemen are trying to topple. “We are continuing to work with those individuals in their government to try to go after AQAP [Al Qaeda of the Arabian Peninsula],” he said. “And we are continuing to receive cooperation from them.”

The objective character of this intervention is to bolster the dictatorial Yemeni regime, a long-time client of Washington, against an uprising that has rocked the country since last January. In the past five months, several hundred Yemenis have been killed, most of them unarmed protesters gunned down by security forces.

Yemen’s president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, was forced to leave the country for medical treatment in Saudi Arabia after a bomb blast in the presidential compound left him severely injured.

The US State Department had urged Saleh, who has ruled Yemen for 33 years, to accept an agreement

brokered by the Saudi-led Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) that would have had him step down within 30 days, handing power to a transitional regime headed by his vice president. In return, Saleh would be absolved of all crimes committed under his regime and he and his family would be allowed to keep the fortune they have amassed at the expense of the people of Yemen, the poorest country of the Middle East. Saleh, however, repeatedly backed out of the deal, until the June 3 bombing.

While Yemen’s opposition parties have embraced the GCC proposal, the leaders of the mass protests have rejected both the deal and the opposition parties as well.

“We would like to announce that the JMP [Joint Meeting Parties—the coalition of six opposition parties] is part of the regime that we are seeking to remove,” said Tawakkol Karman, a leader of the protests. “In any new government, if the JMP is part of it, our revolution will continue.” The protesters also reject an amnesty for Saleh and his family and want to see them tried for their crimes.

Saleh’s vice president, Abd al-Rab Mansur al-Hadi, insisted that Saleh was recovering from the bombing and would return to Yemen within days to resume power.

News of his departure brought throngs of celebrating opponents of the regime into the streets last week. Reports of his recovery saw regime supporters demonstrating with fireworks and celebratory gunfire on Wednesday.

Both sides are set to take to the streets on Friday, setting the stage for a new round of violent clashes. There are fears that a tenuous truce between regime forces and tribal militiamen of the powerful al-Ahmar clan could break down, leading to renewed bloodshed.

US officials, including Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, are calling for an “immediate, orderly and peaceful transition,” by which they essentially mean refurbishing the existing regime by easing Saleh out and bringing a few opposition figures in, while maintaining the US-backed security forces intact along with the government’s subordination to Washington’s interests in the region.

The redoubled US air strikes are being carried out to that end. As the *Times* reports, the popular upheavals have “left the government in Sanaa, a United States ally, struggling to cling to power. Yemeni troops that had been battling militants linked to Al Qaeda in the south have been pulled back to the capital, and American officials see the strikes as one of the few options to keep the militants from consolidating power.”

The use of Predator drones firing Hellfire missiles and US fighter jets to pummel targets in the south of Yemen follows what the *Times* reports as a “nearly year-long pause” in the air strikes. The strikes were suspended after a series of attacks that resulted in mass civilian casualties. A US strike in May 2010 had killed an envoy of President Saleh and a number of other civilians, while a cruise missile attack in December 2009 claimed the lives of over 40 men, women and children.

A renewal of the attacks was signaled by a Predator drone strike last month in Yemen’s Shabwa province, which was aimed at assassinating Anwar al-Awlaki, a New Mexico-born Islamic cleric and US citizen, who was declared by the Obama administration to be a “specially designated global terrorist” and condemned to extra-judicial execution. The Hellfire missile failed to kill Awlaki, but claimed the lives of two Yemeni brothers and wounded a bystander.

Another strike launched on Friday, according to US officials, killed an alleged “midlevel Al Qaeda operative,” Abu Ali al-Harithi, and several other suspected “militants.” According to residents in the area where the strike took place, four civilians also died.

US operations in Yemen include the deployment of special forces troops from the Pentagon’s Joint Special Operations Command and CIA operatives based in Sanaa. They are tasked with collecting intelligence and selecting targets for US strikes. As the *Times* report

notes, the ongoing political upheavals and clashes in Yemen make it all the more likely that “one faction might feed information to the Americans that could trigger air strikes against a rival group.”

Of course, the most likely “faction” to do so is the regime itself. In particular, the Saleh regime has claimed that the southern city of Zinjibar, with a population of about 50,000, has been taken over by Al Qaeda elements. This has been widely denied by opponents of the regime, who claim that Saleh and his supporters are attempting to use an alleged terrorist threat to win Western support and distract world opinion from the ongoing government repression.

In the fighting in Zinjibar, it was reported last week that government warplanes carried out repeated air strikes, some of which targeted residential areas. Given the revelation that the US has now sent its jet fighters into combat over Yemen, it cannot be excluded that some of these strikes were actually carried out by American aircraft.

Controversy continues to swirl around the explosion that injured Saleh and killed a number of his advisers. Initially, the government claimed that it was the result of a rocket attack launched by the regime’s tribal opponents. US officials, speaking on condition of anonymity, denied this explanation, insisting instead that the blast had resulted from a bomb planted in the presidential compound, apparently by someone with access to it and knowledge of Saleh’s schedule.

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