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# U.S. Expands Its Drone War Into Somalia

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WASHINGTON — The clandestine American military campaign to combat Al Qaeda's franchise in Yemen is expanding to fight the Islamist militancy in Somalia, as new evidence indicates that insurgents in the two countries are forging closer ties and possibly plotting attacks against the United States, American officials say.

An American military drone aircraft attacked several Somalis in the militant group the Shabab late last month, the officials said, killing at least one of its midlevel operatives and wounding others.

The strike was carried out by the same Special Operations Command unit now battling militants in Yemen, and it represented an intensification of an American military campaign in a mostly lawless region where weak governments have allowed groups with links to Al Qaeda to flourish.

The Obama administration's increased focus on Somalia comes as the White House has unveiled a new strategy to battle Al Qaeda in the post-Osama bin Laden era, and as some American military and intelligence officials view Qaeda affiliates in Yemen and Somalia as a greater threat to the United States than the group of operatives in Pakistan who have been barraged with hundreds of drone strikes directed by the Central Intelligence Agency in recent years.

The military drone strike in Somalia last month was the first American attack there since 2009, when helicopter-borne commandos killed Saleh Ali Saleh Nabhan, a senior leader of the group that carried out the 1998 attacks on the American Embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. Although it appears that no senior Somali militants were killed in last month's drone strike, a Pentagon official said Friday that one of the militants who was wounded had been in contact with Anwar al-Awlaki, the American-born radical cleric now hiding in Yemen. The news that the strike was carried out by an American drone was first reported in The Washington Post this week.

American military officials said there was new intelligence that militants in Yemen and Somalia were communicating more frequently about operations, training and tactics, but the Pentagon is wading into the chaos in Somalia with some trepidation. Many are still haunted by the 1993 “Black Hawk Down” debacle, in which 18 elite American troops were killed in Mogadishu, the Somali capital, battling fighters aligned with warlords. Senior officials have repeatedly said in private in the past year that the administration does not intend to send American troops to Somalia beyond quick raids.

For several years, the United States has largely been relying on proxy forces in Somalia, including African Union peacekeepers from Uganda and Burundi, to support Somalia’s fragile government. The Pentagon is sending nearly \$45 million in military supplies, including night-vision equipment and four small unarmed drones, to Uganda and Burundi to help combat the rising terror threat in Somalia. During the Ethiopian invasion of Somalia in 2007, clandestine operatives from the Pentagon’s Joint Special Operations Command initiated missions into Somalia from an airstrip in Ethiopia.

Even as threat warnings grow, American officials say that the Shabab militants are under increasing pressure on various fronts, and that now is the time to attack the group aggressively. But it is unclear whether American intelligence about Somalia — often sketchy and inconclusive — has improved in recent months.

This week, Vice Adm. William H. McRaven, who was until recently in charge of the Joint Special Operations Command, told lawmakers that planners were “looking very hard at Yemen and at Somalia,” but he said that the effectiveness of the missions there was occasionally hampered by limited availability of surveillance aircraft like drones.

One day later, President Obama’s top counterterrorism adviser, John O. Brennan, said that Al Qaeda’s badly weakened leadership in Pakistan had urged the group’s regional affiliates to attack American targets. “From the territory it controls in Somalia, Al Shabab continues to call for strikes against the United States,” Mr. Brennan said.

Over the past two years, the administration has wrestled with how to deal with the Shabab, many of whose midlevel fighters oppose Somalia’s weak transitional government but are not necessarily seeking to battle the United States. Attacking them — not just their leaders — could push those militants to join Al Qaeda, some officials say. “That has led to a complicated policy debate over how you apply your counterterrorism tools against a group like Al Shabab, because it is not a given that going after them in the same way that you go after Al Qaeda would produce the best result,” a senior administration official said last fall.

American officials said this week that they were trying to exploit the Shabab's recent setbacks. Fazul Abdullah Mohammed, Al Qaeda's leader in East Africa and the mastermind of the 1998 bombings, was killed on June 7 in a shootout at a security checkpoint in Somalia.

Somali clan militias, backed by Kenya and Ethiopia, have reclaimed Shabab-held territory in southwestern Somalia, putting more strain on the organization, said Andre Le Sage, a senior research fellow who specializes in Africa at the National Defense University in Washington.

Still, American intelligence and military officials warn of increasing operational ties between the Shabab and the Qaeda franchise in Yemen, known as Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, or A.Q.A.P. The group orchestrated a plot to blow up a jetliner headed to Detroit on Dec. 25, 2009, and another attempt nearly a year later to destroy cargo planes carrying printer cartridges packed with explosives. Both plots failed.

American intelligence officials say that the Shabab so far have carried out only one attack outside of Somalia, a series of coordinated bombings that killed more than 70 people in Uganda as crowds gathered to watch a World Cup match last year.

In statements in recent months, the Shabab have pledged allegiance to Al Qaeda and its new leader, Ayman al-Zawahri. American officials said that Mr. Awlaki had developed close ties to senior Shabab leaders.

“What I'd be most concerned about is whether A.Q.A.P. could transfer to Shabab its knowledge of building I.E.D.'s and sophisticated plots, and Shabab could make available to A.Q.A.P. recruits with Western passports,” said Mr. Le Sage, referring to [improvised explosive devices](#).

More than 30 Somali-Americans from cities like Minneapolis have gone to fight in Somalia in recent years. Officials say they fear that Qaeda operatives could recruit those Americans to return home as suicide bombers.

“My main concern is that a U.S. citizen who joins, trains and then gains experience in the field with organizations such as Al Shabab returns to the U.S. with a much greater level of capability than when he left,” said a senior law enforcement official. “Coupled with enhanced radicalization and operational direction, that person is now a clear threat.”

*Souad Mekhennet contributed reporting from Frankfurt, Germany.*

