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## **DRONEATTACKSCAMPAIGN IN YEMEN**

*Since 2009, the United States is carrying out a campaign of air strikes against al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, with an increasing use of unmanned combat aerial vehicles. This paper analyzes the causes that explain the origin of the campaign describes its main characteristics and values its consequences.*

*United States of America, Yemen, Al Qaeda, Drones, Military Technology.*

## DRONE ATTACKS CAMPAIGN IN YEMEN

The use of unmanned combat air vehicles (UCAVs) has become an increasingly attractive option for the White House. It makes it possible to carry out armed interventions with a lower military profile, without creating barely any political debate and causing a small amount of social opposition.<sup>1</sup> It is also in line with the principle of avoiding commitments that entail the prolonged presence of troops on the ground: an axiom of the current Obama Administration, also supported by academic figures of the standing of John Mearsheimer.<sup>2</sup> The increasingly prevalent use of armed drones is consistent with what Edward Luttwak, in the 1990's, called the paradigm of post-heroic war (which was again supported by the unsatisfactory experiences of Iraq and Afghanistan).<sup>3</sup> This also easily fits in with the current Revolution in Military Affairs, and it could even be the seed of a future RMA.<sup>4</sup>

In recent years, CIA drone strikes in Pakistan have stolen most of the limelight about this topic. However, the actions carried out in Yemen have gone unnoticed for many years. In 2012, there was almost equality in number of these with the ones carried out in the Pakistani tribal areas: 46 air attacks in Pakistan and 42 in Yemen. The shortage of information and the difficulty in comparing it, prevent the necessary rigour being applied in preparing a piece of research that might explain the Yemen campaign. For this reason, the nature of this article is basically descriptive in recounting the facts, and it is exploratory in its hypothesis and its conclusions. The presentation is divided into three sections: causes, main characteristics and strategic consequences of the campaign of American air strikes in Yemen. We start with the reasons that have given rise to the campaign. These are namely: the transnational threat of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and the strengthening of that organisation in Yemen.

### The transnational threat of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula

On November 3, 2002, a Predator drone ended the life of the Al Qaeda member,

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1 This article is framed within the research project CSO2010-17849 "The organisational structure of international terrorism: Analysis of its evolution and its implications for European security", which is financed by the 2008-2011 R+D+I National Plan.

2 Klaidman, Daniel, *Kill or Capture: The War on Terror and the Soul of the Obama Presidency*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012); Mearsheimer, John, "Pull Those Boots Off the Ground", *Newsweek*, December 28, 2008.

3 Luttwak, Edward N. "Give War a Chance", *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 78, No. 4, (1999), pp. 36-44

4 Jordán, Javier and Baqués, Josep, *Guerra de drones. Política, tecnología y cambio social en los nuevos conflictos [Drones War. Policy, technology and social change in new conflicts]*, (Biblioteca Nueva: Madrid, 2013) (in press).

Abu Ali Al Harizi, and of his five escorts, while his vehicle was travelling along a road in Marib, in eastern Yemen. This was the first and only action of this type that was undertaken in the country for a long time period. In the same way as happened in the Afghanistan theatre of operations, the Iraq invasion in 2003 required military and intelligence resources to be diverted. At the start of that decade, according to the calculations of the CIA Counter-terrorism Centre, some twenty commanding officers were operating in Yemen and there were roughly a hundred militants from the terrorist organisation.

The United States did not pay attention to Yemen until six years later. At the start of 2008, a small CIA station issued an alert about the regeneration of the Yemeni arm of Al Qaeda. In March of that year, its militants unsuccessfully attacked the United States embassy. Six months later, in September, several Al Qaeda operatives in the Arabian Peninsula, disguised as police officers, again fired shots against the main door of the diplomatic facility. Six attackers died along with six Yemeni police officers and seven civilians who were there.<sup>5</sup>

But the most worrying thing was that AQAP was becoming a transnational threat. This assessment was effectively confirmed by the following acts in the years after that:

- On November 5, 2009, a psychiatrist from the US Army, Nidal Malik Hasan, killed three people and wounded a further twenty-nine with his standard-issue weapon in Fort Hood (Texas). Since December of the previous year, Hasan had exchanged twenty e-mails with Anwar Al Awlaki, one of the chief instigators of contemporary Jihadism associated with Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. In those messages, Hasan had consulted Awlaki about the legitimacy of killing United States soldiers. A few days after the attack, Awlaki publicly praised the Fort Hood episode.<sup>6</sup>
- On December 25, 2009, Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, a young Nigerian who was equipped and trained by AQAP, unsuccessfully attempted to detonate an explosive concealed in his underwear on a plane coming from Amsterdam, when it was about to land in Detroit. There were 290 people travelling on the plane.
- In October 2010, two explosive devices were found in two civilian freight aircraft, hidden in printers being sent to Jewish institutions in Chicago. The bombs were discovered in time, thanks to the information obtained by Saudi intelligence. One was found in the middle of the journey, at a British airport, and the other in Dubai. A week afterwards, Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula announced its responsibility for the plot, as well as for an alleged attack on Freight Flight 6 of UPS Airlines. This latter case concerns an accident to a Boeing 747, near Dubai

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<sup>5</sup> Aid, Mathew M., *Intel Wars. The Secret History of the Fight Against Terror*, (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2012), pp. 143-144

<sup>6</sup> Heffelfinger, Christopher, "Anwar al-'Awlaki: Profile of a Jihadi Radicalizer", *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 3, Issue 3, 2010, pp. 1-4.

airport, in which two of its crew members died. Nonetheless, the subsequent investigation discarded the possibility of their having been an explosion on board.<sup>7</sup>

In March 2011, a British court sentenced Rajib Karim, a British Airways electronics engineer to thirty years in prison, for trying to attack a company plane whose destination was the United States. Rajib Karim and his brother had contacted Anwar Al Awlaki by Internet, declaring his intention to join in with the jihad abroad. However, Awlaki persuaded Rajib to take advantage of his job and put an explosive on an airplane. The British police arrested him before he could take his first steps in the plot.<sup>8</sup>

- In May 2012, the international mass media reported a new plot against commercial aviation by Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. In this case, the attempt was aborted, thanks to the fact that the suicide terrorist had been working for the Saudi secret services. In this way, the United States intelligence was even able to capture the explosive device (more sophisticated than the one used in the failed attempt of December 2009).<sup>9</sup>

In addition to these successful, aborted or failed attacks, where the link with Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula is clear, other incidents took place in Europe and the United States that were indirectly encouraged by Anwar Al Awlaki. During the last years of his life, he had become one of the most popular visible faces of global Jihadism. Born in the United States, of Yemeni parents, Al Awlaki spoke English fluently and he could handle himself easily in web 2.0. He had studied civil engineering and he had informally specialised in Islamic studies, through lectures and dealings with scholars of Islam. Furthermore, he held different positions of responsibility at Islamic centres in United States territory, and over time he became a relevant figure in radical Islamic circles. He gave several conferences in the United Kingdom in 2002, and he set up residence in Yemen in 2004. From there, once he had become a member of AQAP, he contributed towards the violent radicalisation of a large number of individuals living in the West. His speeches in English were accessible to a new generation of sympathisers with Jihadism who did not know Arabic. There were numerous individuals and cells that recognised their inspiration as Awlaki. We set out some of the most notable ones:

- In April 2010, the FBI arrested a couple of converts in Alaska who had been planning an attack in the United States. They both acknowledged the influence that the figure of Al Awlaki had exercised over them, in their respective processes

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7 UAE General Civil Aviation Authority, "GCAA eliminates the possibility of an onboard explosion regarding the crash of UPS Boeing 747 - 400 Cargo investigation", October 31, 2010

8 Vinograd, Cassandra, "BA worker jailed for 30 years for plane bomb plot", The Washington Post, March 18, 2011.

9 Shane, Scott & Scmitt, Eric, "Qaeda Plot to Attack Plane Foiled, U.S. Officials Say", The New York Times, May 7, 2012.

of violent radicalisation.<sup>10</sup>

- In May 2010, Faisal Shahzad placed a bomb in Times Square (New York), which failed to blow up. Although he had been trained and sent back to the United States by the Pakistani Taliban movement (TTP), following his arrest, Faisal Shahzad equally acknowledged in his interrogation that letters from Anwar Al Awlaki had contributed towards his radicalisation process.<sup>11</sup>
- Roshonara Choudhry was a student of King's College of London. In May 2010, she stabbed the British MP Stephen Timms in his stomach, because he had voted in favour of the Iraq war years before. She did not manage to kill him thanks to the public around them who tackled her. Choudhry acknowledged the influence that the speeches of Al Awlaki published on YouTube had had on her.<sup>12</sup>
- In December 2010, the British police arrested three groups of individuals living in Cardiff, Stoke and London who planned to commit attacks on different targets in the country, including the London Stock Exchange and the United States Embassy. According to the testimony of those arrested, their actions had been inspired by some advice they had read in the magazine called Inspire, published by AQAP with the assistance of Awlaki.<sup>13</sup>
- In June 2011, the British police arrested a Muslim couple who had intended to attack Jewish targets in Manchester. Their radicalisation process had happened during 2011 and 2010, induced by the contents of the same publication.<sup>14</sup>
- In June 2011, Joseph Anthony Davis and Frederick Domingue, two converts to Islam, were arrested by FBI agents when they were trying to buy automatic weapons in order to shoot at a military recruitment centre in Seattle. Davis admitted his admiration for Al Awlaki and the influence that his speeches had had on him.<sup>15</sup>
- In October 2012, the FBI arrested Quazi Mohammad Rezwanul Ahsan Nafis, who intended to place an explosive in the Federal Reserve Bank in New York.

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<sup>10</sup> "Cops: Alaska Couple Lied About Terror Hit List", CBS News, July 21, 2010.

<sup>11</sup> Meleagrou-Hitchens, Alexander, "Anwar al-'Awlaqi's Disciples: Three Case Studies", CTC Sentinel, Vol. 4, Issue 7, July 2011, pp. 6-9.

<sup>12</sup> Dodd, Vikram, "Roshonara Choudhry: Police interview extracts", The Guardian, November 3, 2010.

<sup>13</sup> Gardham, Duncan, "Terrorists admit plot to bomb London Stock Exchange and US Embassy", The Telegraph, February 1, 2012.

<sup>14</sup> "Muslim couple planned to bomb Jews in al Qaeda inspired plot", The Telegraph, June 20, 2012.

<sup>15</sup> Stewart, Scott, "The Seattle Plot: Jihadists Shifting Away From Civilian Targets?", Stratfor, June 30, 2011.

Nafis also acknowledged that he had been inspired by the words of Al Awlaki.<sup>16</sup>

It is understandable that in August 2010, the CIA considered Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula to be a greater threat to the United States than the terrorist affiliate in Pakistan<sup>17</sup>. This analysis would be confirmed in the months after that by new plots, and by the growing weakness of Al Qaeda Central, demonstrated, amongst others aspects, by the coating and death of its leader, Osama Bin Laden, in May 2011. Indeed, in July of that year, the then Defence Secretary, Leon Panetta, asserted that the United States was close to achieving the strategic defeat of Al Qaeda Central and that in his opinion, amongst the terrorist groups affiliated with Al Qaeda, the Yemeni branch represented the most serious threat to the interest of the United States.<sup>18</sup>

The American assessment about the dangerousness nature of the AQAP explains that Yemen has gradually become the third-placed company in terms of importance (preceded by Afghanistan and Pakistan) where the United States applies its military force in the fight against global terrorism.

### **State weakness in Yemen and the rise of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula / Ansar Al Sharia as a proto-insurgent movement**

Another fact that contributes towards the decision to carry out aerial attacks against AQAP is that the Yemeni state does not actually control its entire territory. Yemen can be considered to be an underdeveloped country, where nearly half of the population is living on less than two dollars a day<sup>19</sup>, and where roughly seventy per cent of its inhabitants live outside the large urban centres and where tribes continue having a very relevant social and political role, even though this is usually focused on very local agendas.

In political and military terms, the significance of the tribes varies. This is shown in quite a complex social map. Also, from the geographical viewpoint, this depends on their geographical distribution. The State's relationship with the tribes ranges from hostility to cooperation or mere mutual tolerance. To a large extent, the regime of the former president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, was able to perpetuate this for over thirty years, thanks to his ability to forge alliances with the different tribes. In particular, he did

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16 Candiotti, Susan, "Man arrested after plotting Federal Reserve bomb, authorities say", CNN, October 18, 2012.

17 Miller, Greg & Finn, Peter, "CIA sees increased threat from al-Qaeda in Yemen", The Washington Post, August 24, 2010

18 Bergen, Peter & Rowland, Jennifer, "Obama ramps up covert war in Yemen", CNN, June 12, 2012.

19 "Yemen Country Brief," World Bank, April 2012.

this with the most politically powerful ones, such as the tribes that are geographically closest to Sana, the capital of the country.

Even before the so-called Arab Spring began, at the start of 2011, Saleh's dictatorial regime had to face a Shiite Huzi insurgency in the north and secessionist groups in the south. Following the contagion of Arab uprisings, the forces loyal to Saleh responded brutally, killing over fifty demonstrators in the university square of the capital in March 2011. Some tribes in the region near Sana switched their loyalties, and part of the army deserted. In June of that year, a mortar was launched against the presidential complex, hitting Saleh and several of those accompanying him (which included the prime minister and the deputy prime minister). Saleh was seriously wounded and he was taken to receive medical care in Saudi Arabia, where he stayed for three months. When he went back, and following an increase in civil violence, he transferred his presidential powers to then vice-president Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi. He definitively resigned in February 2012 and Hadi became the president of the country.

Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula has taken advantage of the prevailing political instability. The proof of this was its capture of the towns of Zanzibar, Al Koud, Jaar, and Shaqra, in the province of Abyan, or Azzan in Shabwa province (which it later lost) during the course of 2011 and in early 2012. Nonetheless, the most notable thing is that the AQAP leaders have taken the lessons learned from the failure of Al Qaeda in Iraq as an insurgent movement.<sup>20</sup>

In 2009, AQAP formed the Ansar Al Sharia movement, which has a different flag and propaganda system, geared towards attracting followers amongst the tribes of the country. It has also formally created its own Islamic state but, unlike Al Qaeda in Iraq, it has not sought to impose itself from above on the tribes, a mistake that cost the Iraqi branch dearly when it faced the Al Anbar Uprising, a tribe that in turn ended up allying itself with the Americans. Conversely, AQAP utilises Ansar Al Sharia as a front organisation for inserting into the social fabric of the area where the terrorist organisation operates. With its literal meaning of 'the followers of the path of Islamic life', the members of Ansar Al Sharia, explain that their goal is to fight against the injustices that exist in the country, offering order and security, and building a society in accordance with Islamic principles. Along these lines, during the time in which it has permanently occupied some towns, Ansar Al Sharia has started up *dawa* centres for indoctrination and Islamic courts for dispensing justice.

Therefore, the speeches and actions of Ansar Al Sharia are leaving the particular globalist elements of Al Qaeda Central in the background, which is more in accordance with the local expectations of the populations. This moreover arises within the context of the wave of changes in the Arab countries. Ansar Al Sharia is trying to present

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20 As regards the experience of Al Qaeda in Iraq, you can consult Moghadam, Assaf and Fishman, Brian (ed.), *Self-Inflicted Wounds - Debates and Divisions Within Al-Qaida and Its Periphery*, New York: Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, 2010).

itself as a legitimate opposition movement against a dictatorial and corrupt regime, as was the case until the time of the downfall of the one in Tunisia, the one in Libya or that which is precariously hanging on in Syria. One example of this strategy is the way in which Ansar Al Sharia captured Jaar, in March 2011. This is a small city, the capital of the Khanfar district, in the south-west of the country. Although the AQAP militants had operated in that district for some three years, they had not launched a coordinated operation until the Arab uprisings offered them the opportunity. They also made the most of the fact that the poverty and the poor tribal links with that region had enabled them to cultivate and obtain a certain degree of sympathy and support the local population.<sup>21</sup>

Ansar Al Sharia/AQAP offers material incentives in the form of new weapons, vehicles and salaries. Its resources mostly come from armed bank robberies and attacks on government institutions, such as police stations and barracks. To a lesser extent, it also receives financing from some private Saudi Islamic associations. In March 2011, AQAP took over control of a munitions factory near Jaar. In other attacks against military garrisons in Abyan province, it managed to capture a certain number of infantry combat vehicles and some aging T-55 tanks, along with plenty of small arms. In May of that very year, three hundred Ansar Al Sharia fighters conquered the city of Zanzibar, the capital of Abyan province. They ransacked the police stations and the provincial bank during the time it was under their control for.<sup>22</sup>

In addition to creating ties of dependency, Ansar Al Sharia is trying to set off some tribes against others. It does this by deploying members of tribes different from those of the place they are interested in. The aim of this is that if deaths occur in local confrontations, as well as AQAP reprisals, the local people will fear violence from the family members of those killed. In this way, the fear of provoking stronger rival tribes makes it harder for local sheiks to oppose the AQAP presence. At the same time, since a large part of its militants are Yemenis, AQAP are not facing the problems that were created for Al Qaeda in Iraq, which was mostly made up of foreigners. The Ansar Al Sharia members speak the same language as the local population, they understand their customs and they have put down roots in their society.<sup>23</sup>

It is estimated that the international component of AQAP constitutes less than a third of its organisation. It is mostly made up of Saudis and Somalis, plus a disparate group of individuals from Jordan, Afghanistan and Pakistan, together with some exceptional cases from Europe (albeit of North African origin).<sup>24</sup>

Ansar Al Sharia managed to control several cities and territories in the southern

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21 Swift, Christopher, "Arc of Convergence: AQAP, Ansar al-Shari`a and the Struggle for Yemen", CTC Sentinel, Vol. 5, Issue 6, 2012, pp. 1-6.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.

provinces of Abyan and Shabwa for a little over a year. The Government's military offensive in spring 2012, forced most of the Ansar Al Sharia fighters to pull back to the mountainous regions of Azzan, abandoning the cities of Jaar and Zanzibar. In other cases, the territorial control was even more ephemeral, but it had a certain symbolic significance. In January 2012, AQAP took the city of Radda, just a hundred miles away from the capital of the country. It abandoned that position after negotiating and managing to get the government to release various extremists.<sup>25</sup> The taking of Radda was highly significant, because it is a town at the side of the highway that connects Sana with the eight provinces of the south of the country. In that way it showed that it could complicate the government's access to certain areas where its presence is already weak and contested. From that time onwards, it has focused on carrying out guerrilla actions and terrorist's attacks in its areas of influence, including the capital itself. In the last year it has carried out notable attacks there, such as the suicide attack on a military parade in May 2012, in which one hundred and twenty people died and a further three hundred were injured, or the assassination of Qassem Aqlani, a Yemeni in charge of security at the United States Embassy, in October of the same year.<sup>26</sup>

In that way, Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula is managing to successfully move on from an embryonic phase, as a small terrorist group with just two or three hundred members, to another stage as a proto-insurgent movement, with more than a thousand militants. Its next objective would be to become a genuine insurgent movement, an ambitious and difficult target. Daniel Byman, in his theoretical proposal on proto-insurgencies moving to become insurgencies, identifies five challenges that, in his opinion, have to be overcome by these types of groups: generate a relevant political identity, presenting an attractive cause, prevailing over rival groups, obtaining a territorial sanctuary and obtaining outside support.<sup>27</sup>

AQAP is seeking to open up a path in this direction, by means of the creation of Ansar Al Sharia and the application of a strategy targeted at winning local support, adapting its remarks to fall into line with local grievances. It also offers material incentives and it is trying to present itself as an effective alternative to state weakness. This endeavour is assisted by factors from outside the organisation that indirectly contribute towards the genesis and establishing of insurgent movements, such as the political context, the incapacity of the State and errors in the established political authority.<sup>28</sup>

25 Raghavan, Sudarsan, "When U.S. drones kill civilians, Yemen's government tries to conceal it", *The Washington Post*, December 25, 2012.

26 BBC News, "Al-Qaeda attack' on Yemen army parade causes carnage", May 21, 2012; Al Jazeera, "US embassy security chief killed in Yemen", October 11, 2012.

27 Byman, Daniel, "Understanding Proto-Insurgencies, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Volume 31, Issue 2, 2008, pp. 165-200.

28 Jordán, Javier, "Delimitación teórica de la insurgencia: concepto, fines y medios [*Theoretical limits set to insurgency: concepts, aims and resources*]", in Jordán, Javier, Pozo, Pilar and Baqués, Josep (Ed.), *La seguridad más allá del Estado. Actores no estatales y seguridad internacional* [Security

This has therefore been another factor that has encouraged the United States air strikes against AQAP. In a context of state weakness such as that which Yemen is suffering from, and of the establishing of proto-insurgent commanding officers in areas beyond the Government's control, it is unrealistic to expect the police forces to be sufficient to dismantle the organisation. In the spring 2012 offensive, the Sana regime used five army brigades with abundant air support. In this respect, armed drones constitute one further means of fighting against a group that operates in regions that are hard to access. Its goal consists of depriving the organisation of its key leaders and preventing it from having a safe hiding place, by punishing it from the air.

### Main characteristics of the United States aerial campaign

The United States carried out its first air strikes against AQAP in December 2009, on the 17th and 24th; that is to say, very shortly before the young Nigerian activist failed to blow up the airplane that was about to land in Detroit. The start of the armed campaign against Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula was not therefore a reaction to said terrorist plot, but rather it was in line with a gradual increase in the threat. This materialised in the attack on the United States embassy in Sana, in September 2008, and the Fort Hood shooting, in November 2009. In fact, it is logical to think that the Fort Hood attack served as a precipitating factor in the response. The general public heard talk about Anwar Al Awlaki for the first time, and about his association with Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, from the time of that attack.

Unlike the specific strike by a CIA drone in November 2002, the start of the American campaign was carried out by the US Navy, in this way demonstrating the speed and flexibility of its naval units when it comes to using force on land. The first attacks were done with Tomahawk cruise missiles or with manned airplanes, specifically the Harrier AV-8B of the Marines.<sup>29</sup>

In principle, the responsibility for the armed actions in Yemen lay with the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC). This is still the case at present but, simultaneously, the CIA –acting in coordination with the JSOC– is developing its own armed drone strikes operations.<sup>30</sup> Three days after the attempted attack on the Detroit plane, over twenty CIA operatives went to Sana. The Ali Abdullah Saleh regime gave authorisation for Predator drones to carry out daily reconnaissance flights in the south

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beyond the State. Non-state players and international security], (Madrid: Plaza y Valdés, 2011), pp. 113-134.

29 Mazzett, Mark, "Drone Strike in Yemen Was Aimed at Awlaki", *The New York Times*, May 6, 2011.

30 Entous, Adam, Gorman, Siobhan & Barnes, Julian E. "U.S. Relaxes Drone Rules", *The Wall Street Journal*, April 26, 2012.

of the country, in those areas where the AQAP militants were hiding out. This was complemented by similar missions using US Navy combat airplanes.

Saleh made it a condition that all of the images captured by the drones had to be sent to an operations centre that was set up, with the help of the CIA, at the Yemeni ministry of defence. So as not to make American too obvious, Saleh proposed that, as the same way as happened in December, responsibility for the attacks should be attributed to the national air force.<sup>31</sup> Years before, in October 2002, the death of Al Harizi used by being fired on by a Predator had provoked a strong reaction in the streets of the capital. According to one of the American cables published by Wikileaks, in January 2010, President Saleh told General Petraeus –the chief of the Central Command at that time- “we will keep on saying that the bombs are ours, not yours”.<sup>32</sup> The position of the Yemeni government is now more explicit. On a trip he made to the United States, in September 2012, the current president, Abdu Rabu Mansour Hadi, acknowledged that the American attacks come with permission from his Government. He justified that stance by arguing that unmanned aircraft have more advanced technology and they are more accurate than Yemeni military aviation.<sup>33</sup>

The United States carried out a fresh air strike in mid-January 2010, followed by two more over the course of the same year. Ten new attacks took place in 2011, four of which were carried out by armed drones, including the one that ended Anwar Al Awalki’s life in the month of September. The first assault with a CIA drone happened at the start of May 2011.<sup>34</sup>

The trend towards the use of UCAVs was confirmed in 2012, when all of the aerial actions were known to be carried out by unmanned aircraft. The number of strikes increased considerably following the resignation of President Saleh in February. In total, in 2012, forty-two air strikes were counted, as compared to sixteen recorded during the preceding three years. Figure 1 sets out the timeline of the strikes.

One factor that explains the increase in the bombing is that, in April 2012, the Obama Administration authorised the use of the so-called signature strikes: attacks against places and individuals that, because of their patterns of behaviour (detected using SIGINT, HUMINT or IMINT), suspicions arose that there were activities of Al Qaeda militants, even though the identity of the person or persons in question was

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<sup>31</sup> Aid, Mathew M., *Intel Wars. The Secret History of the Fight Against Terror*, (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2012), pp. 149-150.

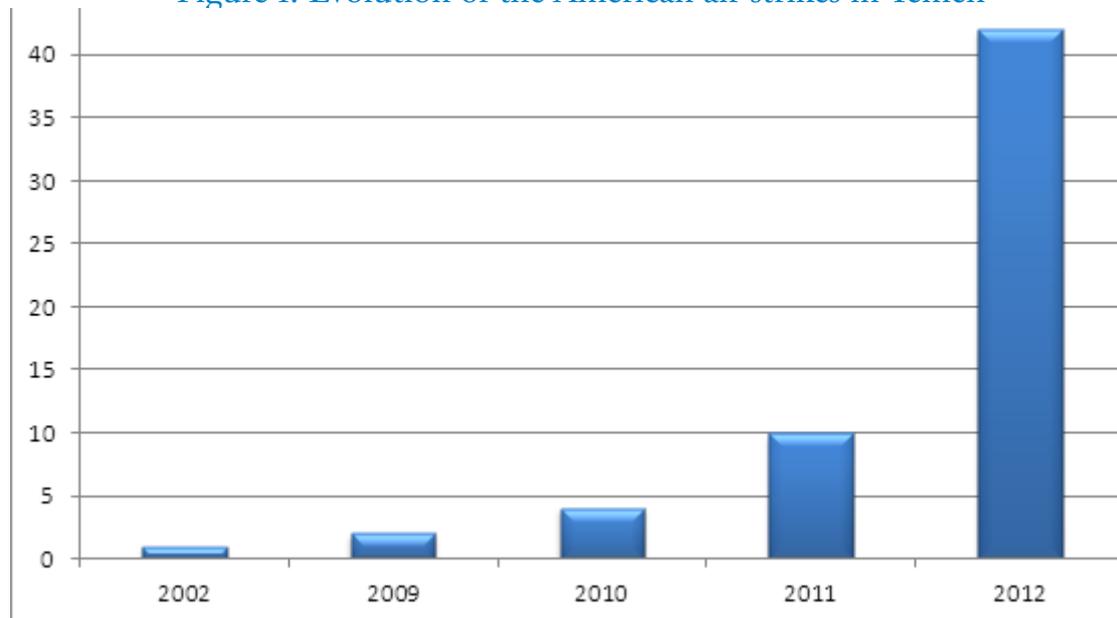
<sup>32</sup> Bergen, Peter & Rowland, Jennifer, “Obama ramps up covert war in Yemen”, CNN, June 12, 2012.

<sup>33</sup> Miller, Greg, “In interview, Yemeni president acknowledges approving U.S. drone strikes”, *The Washington Post*, September 29, 2012

<sup>34</sup> Ackerman, Spencer, “CIA’s Drones Join Shadow War Over Yemen”, *Danger Room*, June 14, 2011.

unknown.<sup>35</sup>

Figure 1. Evolution of the American air strikes in Yemen



Source: The Long War Journal

In total, between December 2009 and the end of 2012, the Obama Administration had carried out 58 air strikes against AQAP in Yemen, and probably 46 of those were with drones. We say probably because information in open sources does not always make it possible to distinguish when an attack has been carried out with cruise missiles, manned combat aircraft or drones.<sup>36</sup> The aerial actions have continued since the start of 2013.<sup>37</sup>

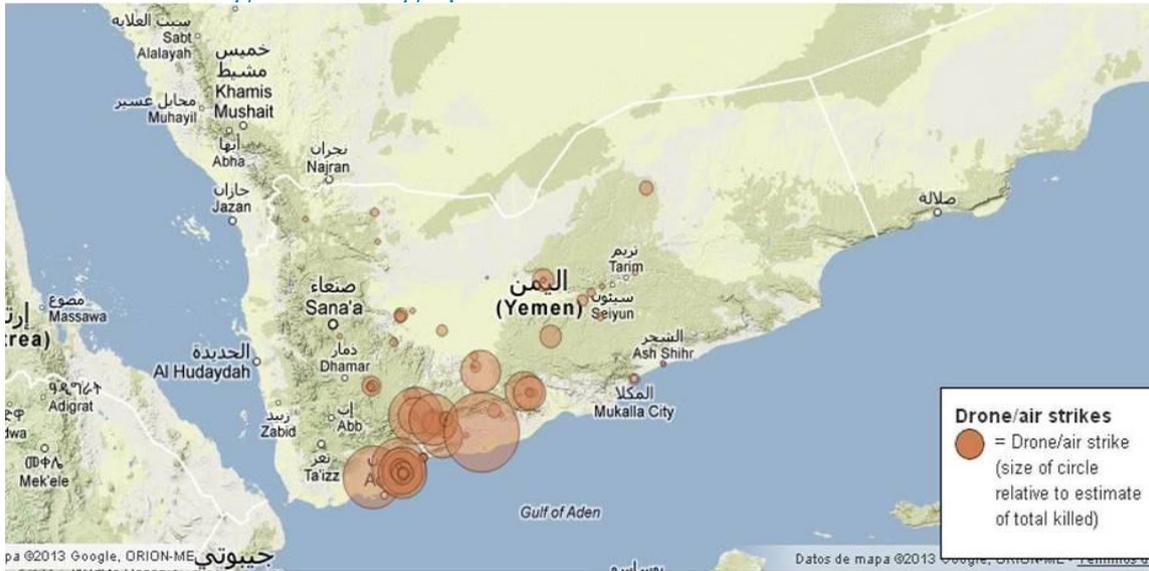
The attacks have been concentrated in the provinces of the southeast of the country which is where, as we have seen in the previous section, the bulk of AQAP/Ansar Al Sharia is operating. The map below, prepared by the National Security Studies Program of the New America Foundation, shows the geographical distribution of the bombings.

<sup>35</sup> Miller, Greg, "White House approves broader Yemen drone campaign", The Washington Post, April 25, 2012.

<sup>36</sup> National Security Studies Program, Obama's Covert War in Yemen, New America Foundation. Available at: <http://yemendrones.newamerica.net/>

<sup>37</sup> The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, US Covert Action in Yemen 2002–2013. Available at: <http://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/2013/01/03/yemen-reported-us-covert-actions-2013/>

Figure 2. Geographical distribution of the air strikes



Source: National Security Studies Program. New America Foundation.

There are no official figures about the number of deaths caused by the air strikes. The sources that compile information about the actions in Yemen offer diverse estimates, which vary notably. According to the Programme of the New America Foundation, the strikes have led to the deaths of between 623 and 896 people. According to that source, the proportion of non-combatants killed was between 4 and 8.5%. The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, a British think-tank that is also tracking the American actions, proposes a range of deaths that oscillates between 374 and 1,077, of which 72-171 were civilians. Finally, the count made by *The Long War Journal*, another of the sources that are most quoted in referring to this question, speaks of 301 deaths (including the 2002 attacks), of which 82 were civilian. The disparity in the figures is one further example of the difficulty existing when it comes to ascertaining the actual harm caused by the campaign.

According to the Programme of the New America Foundation, air strikes have killed 23 commanding officers of a senior or mid-ranking level of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. Table 1 sets out the names and the description of the ones, amongst these, who performed a more relevant function in the international planning of the terrorist organisation.

Table I. AQAP commanding officers in charge of international planning killed

Name	Description	Approximate date of death
Adnan Al Qadhi	Sought for the attack against the United States Embassy in 2008	7/11/2012
Said Al Shihri	AQAP number two	10/09/2012
Fahd Al Quso	AQAP head of external operations. Sought for the attack on the USS Cole destroyer in 2000	7/05/2012
Mohammed Al Umda	Took part in the attack against the <i>Limburg</i> oil tanker in 2002	22/04/2012
Abdul Mun'im Salim Al Fatahani	Took part in the attacks against the <i>Limburg</i> oil tanker in 2002 and against the <i>USS Cole</i> destroyer 2000	31/01/2012
Ibrahim Al Bana	AQAP head of propaganda	14/10/2011
Anwar Al Awlaki	AQAP international propaganda spokesman and possible head of external AQAP.	30/09/2011
Samir Khan	Managing editor of the <i>Inspire</i> magazine	30/09/2011
Ammar Al Waeli	Took part in the attack on Spanish tourists in 2007	15/01/2011

Source: Own preparation based upon information obtained from National Security Studies Program. New America Foundation and the Long War Journal

The armed drones used by the CIA and the JSOC in Yemen are the MQ-1 Predator and the MQ-9 Reaper, derived from the Predator, but these have greater militaristic capability and size. While the Predator usually carries two AGM-114 Hellfire missiles, the Reaper –in addition to the Hellfire– can also carry GBU-12 Pave way laser-guide bombs and GBU-38 JDAM GPS-guided bombs. The Reaper is capable of flying for fourteen hours with maximum load, being able to complete the attack cycle (find, fix, track, set, attack and assess the damage). Some of the drones that operate in Yemen take off from Camp Lemonnier, a former French Foreign Legion base in Djibouti. Diverse American intelligence units fitted with HUMINT and SIGINT in the region are also deployed from there.<sup>38</sup> Other are deployed from a base located in Saudi Arabian territory, whose existence was kept a secret until the start of this year.

<sup>38</sup> Aid, Mathew M., *Intel Wars. The Secret History of the Fight against Terror*, (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2012), pp. 136.

The drone that killed Al Awlaki let from that particular base.<sup>39</sup>

Collaboration with the Saudi intelligence services plays an essential role in implementing the campaign, using its network of ground-based informers. Between 2003 and 2005, AQAP took on a major role in an intense campaign of attacks in Saudi Arabia. At the outset, the high level of preparation of veterans from Afghanistan caught the Kingdom unawares, but the situation went back to normal in a very short time. In eighteen months, the Saudis forces capture or killed twenty-two of the twenty-six alleged senior-level AQAP command officers. The organisation was left in pieces.<sup>40</sup> Faced with the difficulty of operating inside the country, some of the survivors joined in with the insurgency in Iraq, or they left for Pakistan. Others joined forces with the Al Qaeda forces in Yemen, which enabled Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, to re-establish itself in January 2009. In September of that year, the new AQAP tried to assassinate the deputy minister of the Saudi Home Office, using a suicide bomber, after the de-radicalisation programme had supposedly been successfully completed. The action was ambitious, but it did not achieve its goal. Subsequent attempts to rebuild its infrastructure in Saudi Arabia have failed, but as is logical, the intelligence is continuing to closely follow the Al Qaeda activity in the neighbouring country. The intelligence from Saudi human sources complements the intelligence from their American counterparts.<sup>41</sup>

In order to intimidate possible informers, Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula has published videos on the Internet that show the execution of alleged spies, often in a brutal way. In one of these that was put on YouTube in summer 2012, it shows images of an alleged informer being crucified. In other cases, decapitated bodies have been left in the street as a warning.<sup>42</sup>

### Strategic consequences of the air strikes

When it comes to assessing the strategic consequences of the campaign carried on by the United States, we need to pay attention to two levels of analysis, which are related but different 1) consequences for the AQAP transnational terrorist capacity and 2) effects on AQAP/Ansar Al Sharia as a proto-insurgent organisation with national reach.

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39 BBC World, "CIA operating drone base in Saudi Arabia, US media reveal", February 6, 2013.

40 Hegghammer, Thomas, *The Failure of Jihad in Saudi Arabia*, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, February 25, 2010, pp. 15-17.

41 Worth, Robert F., & Eric Schmitt, , "Long-Running Antiterrorism Work with Saudis Led to Airline Plot's Failure", *The New York Times*, May 9, 2012.

42 Reuters, "Yemeni Qaeda beheads three men for spying on operations", October 9, 2012.

As far as the first aspect is concerned, the attacks against high value individuals (*High Value Targeting*, HVT) have deprived Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula of people such as Anwar Al Awlaki or Samir Khan, who were performing a very significant function in the international dimension of the organisation (as was stated in the first section) and who are not easy to replace. The two of them had been educated in the United States and both of them, especially Awlaki- had demonstrated notable communication skills in directing the most radical Islamises amongst those living in the West.

At present, there is a rich academic debate concerning the effectiveness of the HVT campaigns in the fight against terrorist organisations. On the one hand, some authors cast doubt on how effective these are and they even warn that they may be counter-productive in nature, making use of empirical studies on samples that are more or less representative.<sup>43</sup> Then again there are others, also based upon empirical research, which assert that the HVT campaign reduces the efficacy of terrorist organisations.<sup>44</sup> There are also those that exclusively analyse the Israeli HVT campaign during the second Intifada, and conclude that the effects of this are neither beneficial nor unfavourable, in terms of operability and longevity of the target terrorist organisation. They say that therefore this policy has to be interpreted rather as an instrument of vengeance and political marketing (the number of attacks gives the impression that the government is doing something)<sup>45</sup>. Lastly, some authors are of the view that, due to problems of a methodological nature, the existing work prevents generalisations being made about the efficacy of HVT as a counter-terrorist tactic.<sup>46</sup>

In this analysis, we rather favour the final premise. The dubious validity of generalisations leads to a recommendation that the research into HVT efficacy should be evaluated case-by-case, by means of specific studies. However, in the question that concerns us it is still too soon to be able to assess the effects of HVT on the AQAP transnational plan. Following the death of Al Awlaki, AQAP has only planned one new

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43 Jordan, Jenna, 'When Heads Roll: Assessing the Effectiveness of Leadership Decapitation', *Security Studies*, Vol. 18, No 4 (2009), pp. 719-755; Cronin, Audrey Kurth, *How Terrorism Ends: Understanding the Decline and Demise of Terrorist Campaigns*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009); Mannes, Aaron, 'Testing the Snake Head Strategy: Does Killing or Capturing its Leaders Reduce a Terrorist Group's Activity?', *The Journal of International Policy Solutions*, Vol. 9 (2008) 40-49.

44 Price, Bryan C., 'Targeting Top Terrorists. How Leadership Decapitation Contributes to Counterterrorism', *International Security*, Vol. 36, No 4 (2012), pp. 9-46; Johnston, Patrick B., 'Does Decapitation Work? Assessing the Effectiveness of Leadership Targeting in Counterinsurgency Campaigns', *International Security*, Vol 36, No 4 (2012), pp. 47-79; Byman, Daniel L., 'Do Targeted Killings Work?', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 85, No 2 (2006), pp. 95-112.

45 Hafez, Mohammed M. and Hatfield, Joseph M., 'Do Targeted Assassinations Work? A Multivariate Analysis of Israel's Controversial Tactic during the Al Aqsa Uprising', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol. 29, No. 4 (2006), pp. 359-82

46 Carvin, Stephanie, "The Trouble with Targeted Killing", *Security Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 3, (2012), pp. 529-555.

transnational action (which, we will recall, was thwarted because an alleged terrorist was working for the Saudi intelligence services) and this was moreover followed by the death of the head of external operations, Fahd Al Quso. These facts would point towards a weakening of the AQAP transnational capacity, but we do not yet have a sufficient time perspective in order to assess whether this is merely a passing phase or a permanent situation, or to establish a clear correlation between the death of the AQAP commanding officers who were associated with the overseas dimension of the organisation and the reduction of its transnational profile. The deaths of Al Awlaki and Samir Khan has not however had the influence of placing a stop on the continuity of the *Inspire* magazine. After these acts, AAP has published a further five editions, available on the Internet.

On the other hand, there are grounds for thinking that the American air strikes have limited the interest of AQAP in attracting volunteers from Europe and the United States to its training camps. Internet is not enough for the acquisition of terrorist know-how. While some knowledge can be learned in theoretical classes, or via a web site, putting this into practice in real situations –especially in hostile environments– is usually tough. The performance of the terrorist activity in complex operations requires a series of skills that are not acquired just by reading about them. For this reason, the terrorist organisations that aim to carry out sophisticated terrorist campaigns need physical spaces where they can train their members, over a prolonged time period and with real armies.<sup>47</sup> For example, the group that was broken up in Cardiff (the United Kingdom), in December 2010, delayed the preparation of the attacks it was thinking of carrying out in London until it could receive training abroad (that it was unable to get in the end). Amongst other factors, the Cardiff group had been radicalised by reading the scripts of Anwar Al Awlaki and the contents of the *Inspire* magazine, but that propaganda was not enough for them to acquire knowledge and operating skills.<sup>48</sup>

However, AQAP –in spite of having training camps in the areas under its control– it has not developed a system for training foreign volunteers similar to that maintained by Al Qaeda central, first in Afghanistan and later on in the tribal regions of Pakistan. As has been stated, the testimony from the terrain speak about some volunteers from Europe, but a very limited number of these. Just before dying in the drone strike, Samir Khan drew up a manual directed at potential foreign recruits. It warned them about the lack of trust they would have to deal with when they joined AQAP, and the type of questions that they should avoid so as to not be put on a blacklist of possible spies. In fact, Samir Khan advised against travelling to Yemen. On the other hand, he encouraged jihadist sympathisers to attack using their own (and usually

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47 Burton, Fred, “Beware of ‘Kramer’: Tradecraft and the New Jihadists”, Stratfor, January 18, 2006.

48 Gardham, Duncan, “‘Suicide bomb plotter’ told wife it was best they split up”, *The Telegraph*, November 16, 2011.

insufficient) resources in the places where they were located.<sup>49</sup> In the background is a message of weakness, because the importance of the training and of coordination as factors multiplying the force of the terrorism is relegated, in favour of a “decentralised jihad” that, in practice, is barely effective. Although Samir Khan did not tie his recommendations in with the American air strikes, it is highly likely that there is a relationship between one and the other.

At the same time, it ought to be presumed that the AQAP’s precaution about foreign volunteers has become even more notable since the Morten Storm case. This individual is a Danish convert to Islam who frequented the jihadist circles in the United Kingdom, he lived in Yemen and he kept up an ongoing relationship with Al Awlaki. However, Storm began working for the Danish intelligence services in 2006. Between the end of 2009 and the beginning of 2010, he acted as a go-between and he made arrangements for Al Awlaki to dispense with his third wife, a Croat convert to Islam. At that time, Storm’s activities were supervised by Danish intelligence, the British MI6 and the CIA. In October 2012, his story gained importance in the mass media.<sup>50</sup>

The eventual restriction of access to the training camps, due to the fear of infiltration and consequent drone strikes, deprived AQAP of one of its main transnational assets. In order to commit attacks in the United States or in Europe, it needs volunteers from those places. Although the organisation has indigenous militants, trained in putting together explosives, it needs people who can gain access and who know how to move around in western societies. At the same time, the refusal to let them go through the training camps also adversely affects the creation of informal links and the development of a common identity between militants from different countries. The camps are not just places for passing on technical skills. They furthermore constitute a source of identity and integration. Although it does not bring them completely to a halt, the presence of drones in the skies of Yemen endangers the activity of the camps, because they could easily become the subject of *signature strikes*.

However, and in the same way as happens with the impact of the deaths of Awlaki and of Al Quso, the evidence about the correlation between the air strikes and the problems of gaining access to the AQAP training camps that foreign volunteers who are established in the West have, means that they are still insufficient. This is an issue that we have to look at before making a sound assessment about the effectiveness of the campaign as an anti-terrorist instrument.

The second level of the analysis deals with the consequences arising from the campaign of American air strikes on AQAP/Ansar Al Sharia as a proto-insurgent organisation of a national nature.

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49 Cruickshank, Paul & Levine, Adam, “Wage jihad at home, not in Yemen, al Qaeda urges recruits”, Security Clearance, CNN Blog, May 16, 2012.

50 Gardham, Duncan, “Morten Storm: A radical life”, The Telegraph, December 3, 2012.

Air power has performed a relevant function as a counter-insurgent instrument (COIN) since the outset of military aviation. The British used this against the Kurdish rebels in Iraq, just after the First World War, and again in Somalia and Waziristan in the 1920's. During the rest of the last century, it was used in most of the COIN campaigns. Air resources provided great fire power in just a few minutes. This offers a competitive advantage to the conventional troops that are compelled, in order to effectively control the company, to disperse themselves into small outposts and patrols.

But having recourse to air strikes (in general, we are not yet referring to the particular case of Yemen) is not exempt from problems. In June 2009, General McChrystal, who was the head of the United States forces and ISAF in Afghanistan at that time, stated that "air power contains the seeds of our own destruction if we do not utilise it responsibly". McChrystal was alluding to the civilian victims that the air strikes were causing in supporting their ground troops in areas close to villages and towns.<sup>51</sup> The counter-productive nature of the bombings, from the COIN viewpoint, when they lead to the deaths of a large number of non-combatants, has been empirically recorded in other historical cases: for example, in the Vietnam war.<sup>52</sup> As is well-known, gaining the local population's support constitutes a fundamental goal in any counter-insurgent strategy.<sup>53</sup> But, obvious that this may seem, it is not an easy problem to resolve. On the ground, the troops very often need the degree of superiority that the air arsenal offers them, and at the same time, these forces usually operate in relatively populated settings.

The drones offer advantages in this respect. They can fly for prolonged time spells over their potential targets, carrying high-resolution intelligence equipment and using guided munitions, features that make them more suitable than manned fighter planes, when it comes to carrying out precision strikes. However, the difficulty in distinguishing combatants and non-combatants, when they are mingled in together and they have similar appearances, the fact that some militant leaders of Ansar Al Sharia live with the (extended) families and the intelligence errors that can be minimised, but not wholly eradicated in a war context (let's recall the concept of the "fog of war" of Clausewitz), have the consequence that the drone strikes in Yemen have also caused civilian deaths, in some cases, the elderly, women and children.

The target of one of the erroneous attacks that attracted greatest media attention was a lorry occupied by fourteen people, on September 2, 2012. Amongst the dead passengers there was a women and two children. The intention of the strike was to finish off Abdelrauf Al Dahab, an AQAP leader who was supposedly travelling

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51 Motlagh, Jason, "U.S. to limit air power in Afghanistan", *The Washington Times*, June 24, 2009.

52 Kocher, Matthew Adam, Pepinsky, Thomas B. & Kalyva, Stathis N., "Aerial Bombing and Counterinsurgency in the Vietnam War", *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 55, Issue 2, (2011), pp. 201–218,

53 Kilcullen, David, "Counterinsurgency Redux", *Survival*, Vol. 48, No. 4, (2006/2007), pp. 111–130.

along the same road. As a protest, the tribal leaders tried to take the corpses to the presidential palace. The Yemeni government admitted the error and an anonymous source from the US government acknowledged that the strike had been carried out by an aircraft (without going into details as to whether it was manned or not) of the Defence Department, not the Central Intelligence Agency. The death of these innocent people aroused sympathy for AQAP and repulsion towards the Yemeni regime and against the United States.<sup>54</sup>

As we have already seen in earlier pages, in the case of Yemen the open sources differ by wide margins as to the number of deaths caused by the drone strikes. Even more complex is knowing the proportion of non-combatants killed or injured. The Bureau of Investigative Journalism quotes a figure of between 72 and 178 (a considerable range) in the number of civilians killed by American air strikes between 2009 and the end of January 2013, with number of young people varying between 27 and 37.<sup>55</sup> Nonetheless, the degree of reliability of this information is hard to calibrate. This is why it is not possible to ascertain –with the information from open sources– to what extent the erroneous attack of September 2012 is an exception or, conversely, whether we have a common situation. In this second case, the air strikes campaign would be detracting from the counter-insurgent strategy. In order to gain the sympathies of the population, the Government has to improve the lives of its citizens, demonstrating that they have much more to offer them than the insurgency. The risk of the air strikes is that because of the errors and deaths of non-combatants, these send a message that is precisely contrary to what they want and they moreover convey the idea that the Yemeni government is a mere puppet of the ‘infidel’ Americans.

On the other hand, the number of American air strikes is too small so as to assume it makes a significant contribution to the ‘kinetic dimension’ of the counterinsurgency. We should recall that there have been 58 of these in the last four years, a long way away, for example, from the 2,000 air strikes carried out by fixed wing NATO aircraft in Afghanistan in 2011; or the more than three hundred drone strikes in the same country during the first nine months of 2012.<sup>56</sup>

## Conclusions

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54 Raghavan, Sudarsan, “When U.S. drones kill civilians, Yemen’s government tries to conceal it”, The Washington Post, December 25, 2012;

55 The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, US Covert Action in Yemen 2002–2013. <http://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/2013/01/03/yemen-reported-us-covert-actions-2013/>

56 Chivers, C. J. , “Afghan Conflict Losing Air Power as U.S. Pulls Out”, The New York Times, July 6, 2012; Sahchtman, Noah, “Military Stats Reveal Epicenter of U.S. Drone War”, Danger Room, September 11, 2012.

Following the negative experiences undergone in Iraq and Afghanistan, the – United States is implementing a focus in the fight against Al Qaeda in Yemen, which is characterised by avoiding the presence of troops on the ground and limiting military actions to precise air strikes. This is not an innovative strategy. We have already had the opportunity to consider this in the 1990's in scenarios such as Iraq (operation 'Desert Fox' in 1998), Bosnia (1995) and Kosovo (1999). In this case, the new development is based upon the argument that the enemy is a proto-insurgent organisation, with a transnational terrorist dimension; and that an increasingly large number of the air strikes are carried out using armed drones.

It is still too soon to draw up a balance sheet of the American campaign. From the anti-terrorist viewpoint, the deaths of several AQAP leaders associated with plots of a transnational nature – the most notable case is that of Anwar Al Awlaki- seems to have degraded the organisation's capacity to carry out new actions. Equally, the fear of informers could be making it hard for foreign volunteers to have access to the AQAP training camps. If both possibilities are true with time, it can be asserted that the air strikes have been effective as an anti-terrorist tool. The fact that AQAP has only launched one new transitional terrorist action (also cut short by the success of an intelligence operation) since the transport airplane bomb plot in November 2010, would seem to be clear evidence. It may well be that such a circumstance could be explained by greater attention by AQAP on the national points of its political agenda. This comes as a consequence of the window of opportunity opened by the greater degree of instability of the Yemeni regime since the start of the Arab uprisings.

Where it is harder to show a positive balance sheet is in the usefulness of the American air strikes from the point of view of the counter-insurgency strategy. There are too few of them in number to tip the military balance in favour of the Yemeni armed forces. In turn as well, the death of non-combatants, which inevitably ends up being caused by any aerial campaign, de-legitimises the regime when it is aiming to protect and indirectly benefit from the proto-insurgents. The unknown factor about the magnitude of such a circumstance is to what extent the erroneous attacks and the death of civilians are a common pattern, or on the contrary, whether they are exceptional. In the first case, the possible advantages that the campaign would provide, in terms of the degradation of AQAP as a transnational terrorist organisation, we would have to consider obtaining a disproportionate cost –one that is immoral and incompatible with legitimate defence- and at the expense of undermining the legitimacy of the Yemeni state. With everything that this entails.

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