

From [Democracy Now](#) | Original Article

President Obama's counterterrorism chief John Brennan is heading up a new team to determine who should be targeted by armed U.S. drones overseas. The newly revealed procedure for drone attacks means Brennan's staff consults the Pentagon, the State Department and other agencies before ultimately deciding who will be targeted. One official said there is growing concern over "how easy it has become to kill someone" under the administration's drone strike policy. We speak with investigative blogger Marcy Wheeler of the website, "Empty Wheel." "I think we're now calling Brennan the 'assassination czar,'" she says. Wheeler disputes the government's assertion the drone attacks are finely targeted, noting that it is unclear who the targets really are and that civilians have been killed.

**Guest:** Marcy Wheeler, an investigative blogger who runs EmptyWheel.Net.

**JUAN GONZÁLEZ:** As President Obama expands the use of armed drones to assassinate suspects overseas, the White House is reportedly taking up a key role in determining who should be targeted. Since Obama has taken office, deadly drone strikes have been carried out in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Yemen and Somalia. According to the Associated Press, a small team at the White House led by counterterror chief John Brennan has taken the lead for drafting lists of individuals to target. One official said there is a growing concern over, quote, "how easy it has become to kill someone" under the administration's drone strike policy.

Late last month, Brennan publicly confirmed that the United States has used drones to conduct targeted killings overseas.

**JOHN BRENNAN:** President Obama believes that, done carefully, deliberately and responsibly, we can be more transparent and still ensure our nation's security. So let me say it as simply as I can. Yes, in full accordance with the law, and in order to prevent terrorist attacks on the United States and to save American lives, the United States government conducts

targeted strikes against specific al-Qaeda terrorists, sometimes using remotely piloted aircraft often referred to publicly as drones. And I'm here today because President Obama has instructed us to be more open with the American people about these efforts.

**AMY GOODMAN:** That was John Brennan, President Obama's top counterterrorism adviser.

The newly revealed procedure for drone attacks means Brennan's staff consults the Pentagon, the State Department and other agencies in deciding who will be targeted. According to the Associated Press, this makes a military-run review process in place since 2009 less relevant. Pentagon spokesperson George Little has defended the program, saying the department was, quote, "entirely comfortable with the process by which American counterterrorism operations are managed."

For more, we turn to Marcy Wheeler, an investigative blogger who runs the website [EmptyWheeler.net](http://EmptyWheeler.net).

Marcy, welcome to *Democracy Now!* Talk about the significance of John Brennan being at the hub, being in charge of—well, what would you call this? A White House assassination team?

**MARCY WHEELER:** Yeah, right. I think we're now calling Brennan the "assassination czar."

There are a couple of factors to this, Amy. I think one is, the suggestion that the recommendation of who to have on the assassination list is going to come from other entities. The AP describes it as coming from other agencies, possibly the State Department. But that means it's coming from people that aren't the special forces guys on the ground in Yemen. It may mean—and we'll get back to this, but it may mean that it's coming from Saudi Arabia. The other thing is, it's unclear whether these assassination strikes are going to be overseen by the Senate intelligence community or by the armed services committees. In other words, it doesn't—it's unclear whether—what kind of oversight there will be. And since the Congress has a very difficult time subpoenaing or getting testimony from the National Security Council, it may mean that there is much less oversight for what's going on.

And then, finally, the clip you had with John Brennan, he kept emphasizing that these are targeted strikes. But the decision, as the AP—as the AP reported it, the decision of this happened not yesterday but actually in April, around April 22nd. And that means it coincides with the decision that the White House made to embrace not just personality strikes, but signature strikes, which means we're shooting drones at people whose identity we don't actually know. We're shooting at them because they look like terrorists from the sky, because they seem to have certain levels of security. In other words, Brennan was not telling the full truth when he said that these are targeted killings. What they are, in fact, are not targeted. We don't know who we're shooting at. And the fact that that's all brought into the White House all at the same time, I think, really means we've lowered the level at which we're targeting people in Yemen, and probably means it's going to be a lot easier for us to target not al-Qaeda members in Yemen, but insurgents who really aren't trying to target the United States but are instead fighting the government of Yemen.

**JUAN GONZÁLEZ:** Marcy Wheeler, you mentioned Saudi Arabia as possibly being involved in helping to identify targets. Now, Brennan used to be a station chief for the CIA

in Saudi Arabia and is supposedly close to Saudi intelligence—the intelligence machinery of the Saudi state. Could you talk about Saudi Arabia's role in this, from what we know?

**MARCY WHEELER:** Right, yeah. Well, we don't know, I mean, for sure about the drone strikes, but if you recall after the undie bomb plot was revealed a couple weeks ago—and that actually was delivered up to us in the same week where the White House embraced signature strikes, when John Brennan started managing the targeting of these things, so that all happened around April 20th, April 22nd. Around that time—

**AMY GOODMAN:** And explain—remind us of what the undie bomb plot was.

**MARCY WHEELER:** Right. It was a Saudi infiltrator into al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, and he brought out a similar bomb to the one that Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab used in the Christmas Day bombing in Detroit. He was under Saudi—you know, he was being managed by the Saudis the entire time. He was able to bring the bomb out. The FBI has it. They're doing analysis. But that plot was revealed to John Brennan, at least, to the U.S., at least, back in April, probably around April 20th. So this is all happening around the same time. The Saudis, you know, deliver us this alleged terrorist plot, and then, around the same time, we decide we're going to change the way we're targeting people in Yemen.

And at the same time, in the discussions of this undie bomb plot, there were Saudi sources who were saying, "We're the ones who pinpoint. We're the ones who provide the HUMINT, the human intelligence on the ground, for what you're doing in Yemen." And that's particularly concerning, because the Saudis not only have very different interests in Yemen than we do, they're—you know, this is their backyard. They're worried about the instability in the Middle East generally. They have a big push against the Arab Spring. Their installment of the current president, Hadi, in Yemen is part of that. In addition, they've struck at Houthi rebels in the north of Yemen as recently as 2010. And when they were doing that, they actually asked us, "Well, you know, if we had drone strikes, our targeting against these Houthi rebels would be more accurate." So they've got far different interests in Yemen than we do, and they're running around saying, "We're the ones providing human intelligence for the targeting that you guys are doing in Yemen."

**JUAN GONZÁLEZ:** Marcy, I want to turn to a comment Attorney General Eric Holder made in March, when he outlined what the White House billed as the legal rationale for its claimed right to kill U.S. citizens who belong to al-Qaeda or associated forces.

**ATTORNEY GENERAL ERIC HOLDER:** It is and unfortunate but undeniable fact that some of the threats that we face come from a small number of United States citizens who have decided to commit violent attacks against their own country from abroad. Based on generations-old legal principles and Supreme Court decisions handed down during World War II, as well as during this current conflict, it's clear that United States citizenship alone does not make—does not make—such individuals immune from being targeted.

**JUAN GONZÁLEZ:** Marcy Wheeler, your response?

**MARCY WHEELER:** Well, what he was talking about, ostensibly, was the killing of Anwar al-Awlaki, Anwar al-Awlaki's 16-year-old American citizen son, Abdulrahman, and also Samir Khan, also an American citizen. So he was trying to say, "Well, we OK using drone strikes against American citizens if they reach a certain level of being involved with al-Qaeda." Now, Abdulrahman, the 16-year-old, there's no evidence that he had any active—I mean, he was a 16-year-old kid, playing soccer like everybody else.

But as the government moves drones to the U.S., and they're rolling out drones in civilian airspace, you've got to really wonder what the legal basis for using drones is and

whether—after he made those comments, a number of people in Congress asked him or asked Robert Mueller, the FBI director, whether the U.S. could use drone strikes in the United States, and they really didn't answer that. They kind of said, "Well, you've got to ask the—you've got to ask DOJ." And we still don't have any answer to that. Ron Wyden, the senator from Oregon, has said he doesn't know, and he's actually on the Intelligence Committee. So, we don't know even whether the government claims they could use drones against American citizens in the United States.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Marcy Wheeler, the people you're all talking about were killed by drone strikes in Yemen, the poorest country in the Arab world despite receiving over \$300 million in military and security aid from the United States over the last five years. Much of that money has gone into an aggressive and controversial counterterrorism campaign rather than programs of humanitarian relief. We recently spoke to *Democracy Now!* correspondent [Jeremy Scahill](#)

, who had just returned from Yemen. He said U.S. counterterrorism operations have ignited an Islamist uprising in the country.

**JEREMY SCAHILL:** The Obama administration began an air war in Yemen. Sometimes the strikes hit the people that were the intended targets, but oftentimes civilians were killed. And so, what happened is that the prophecy envisioned by the leaders of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, and envisioned by Anwar al-Awlaki, came true. And that was that the United States intended to turn Yemen into its next Afghanistan, its next Iraq, its next Pakistan. So you had the one-two punch—or actually, there were three punches. The first one is the air strikes. The second one is supporting Saleh family military units. And then the third is not funding any humanitarian programs and allowing the vast majority of the U.S. money to go toward units which were then used as agents of domestic repression.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Independent journalist Jeremy Scahill. Marcy Wheeler, can you continue to respond to that?

**MARCY WHEELER:** Yeah, I mean, two more things to add to that. One is, the State Department just released a kind of talk sheet of aid that goes to Yemen. And what it actually shows is for things like humanitarian aid, it's going down, whereas military aid is going up. And so, I really think we need to be asking how much we're sucking dry what little humanitarian aid we're giving to Yemen and instead putting it in drone strikes.

But the other thing is—and Jeremy, I think, mentioned this on the program when he was there—is that one of the reasons why al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula is having some success is because they're kind of taking the same approach that the Taliban or Hezbollah did, which is they're providing services. They're trying to turn the electricity on. And if we're bombing them, and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula is turning on the electricity, we're going to have a really hard time winning that battle for hearts and minds, because we're not providing the really basic things that people need. And instead, since this new drone targeting procedure rolled out on the 15th, I think, we've already killed a number of civilians. So, you know, we're still killing civilians at the same time as al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula is trying to turn the electricity on.

**JUAN GONZÁLEZ:** Marcy, John Brennan spoke late last month at the Woodrow Wilson Center for—International Center for Scholars, and he was disrupted by Medea Benjamin of CodePink. Let's go to a clip of that incident.

**MEDEA BENJAMIN:** How many people are you willing to sacrifice? Why are you lying to the American people and not saying how many innocents have been killed?

**MODERATOR:** Thank you, ma'am, for expressing your views. There will be time for questions and answers after the presentation.

**MEDEA BENJAMIN:** I speak out on behalf of Tariq Aziz, a 16-year-old in Pakistan, who was killed because he wanted to document the drone strikes. I speak out on behalf of Abdulrahman al-Awlaki, a 16-year-old born in Denver, killed in Yemen, just because his father was someone we don't like. I speak out on behalf of the Constitution, on behalf of the rule of law. I love the rule of law. I love my country. You are making us less safe by killing so many innocent people.

**JUAN GONZÁLEZ:** For our radio listeners, as Medea Benjamin was speaking for those last 30 seconds, she was being actually dragged and lifted up in the air by a security guard and removed from the offices of the Woodrow Wilson Center—from the auditorium. Marcy, your response? And also, could you talk a little bit about Brennan's role prior to becoming counterterrorism chief? Under the Bush administration, he had been in the CIA

, been a supporter of enhanced interrogation techniques?

**MARCY WHEELER:** Right. Medea Benjamin's interruption, right after she was pulled away, John Brennan picked up his speech again. And if I recall, it was something like, "Oh, and al-Qaeda keeps killing other people." And it was this wonderful contrast, because she had just listed all these people that we've killed, including citizens. And Brennan just kept going, suggesting that it was al-Qaeda who was killing citizens, after she had just made it clear that that's not all that was going on.

Brennan, yeah, right, and in—he was at the CIA until, I want to say, 2004, 2005, went—he was a contractor after that. In addition to being a supporter of enhanced interrogation, he also was involved in the targeting for Cheney's illegal wiretapping program. So he's got a lot of complicity with some of the things that were done in the Bush administration. And as you already pointed out, he was the Riyadh station chief going back into the '90s. So he's got ties to the CIA in the region going back some time and to a lot of the illegal things that were started under the Bush administration.

**AMY GOODMAN:** And as Glenn Greenwald pointed out, Brennan's support of enhanced interrogation techniques forced him to withdraw from consideration as President Obama's CIA director, because of the controversy that swirled around that.

**MARCY WHEELER:** And so, one of the things we've got now is that, had he been CIA director, he would have been running these targeted strikes, or these not-targeted strikes, with oversight from Congress. But now that he's running the Yemen war from inside the NSC, it's not entirely clear whether he'll have any oversight. Same guy running the war as we otherwise would have had, except that it's buried in the White House, so it's going to be less accessible to oversight.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Marcy Wheeler, we want to thank you for being with us, investigative blogger who runs [EmptyWheel.net](http://EmptyWheel.net), speaking to us from Chicago. This is *Democracy Now!*  
Back in a minute.

