THE NEW FACES OF TERROR

One year after the killing of Osama bin Laden, al-Qaeda is alive and well.

Dylan Welch reports.

O

N SUNDAY afternoon, the US government celebrated what it would no doubt regard as its latest victory in the war against al-Qaeda. With the press of a button, a hellfire missile was ejected from the undercarriage of a US military drone aircraft in southern Yemen and when it hit the ground it killed a mid-ranking al-Qaeda member, Fahd al-Quso.

While the reports of such drone strikes are rare—until last month they were not even acknowledged by the US government—the al-Quso killing is one death in an American war that many believed was coming to a close.

But in the past fortnight two important events have occurred that point to a clash between what the White House is saying—al-Qaeda is close to extinction—and what they are doing, which is fighting a growing war against new al-Qaeda offshoots.

The first event was the one-year anniversary of the killing of Osama bin Laden, on May 2. In Kabul on a carefully managed press tour, President Barack Obama told thousands of US troops: “The goal that I set, to defeat al-Qaeda, and deny it a chance to rebuild, is within reach.”

The other event, unannounced but discovered by diligent US reporters, was that the CIA and its military companion, the Joint Special Operations Command or JSOC, have been given permission to launch drone strikes against suspected al-Qaeda fighters in Yemen even when they don’t know who exactly those fighters are.

Known as signature strikes, the drones identify the targets by relying on so-called intelligence signatures such as communications intercepts, patterns of behaviour and movement and human sources, before killing them all.

These strikes mark a significant escalation of the US secret war against al-Qaeda in Yemen, or AQAP, and suggest that the terrorist network that sparked a decade of bloody conflict on September 11, 2001, may not be the spent force some would have you believe.

“Terrorism as a strategic issue for around the world is still a first-order security issue,” says Professor Alan Dupont, director of the Institute for International Security and Development at the University of NSW.

“Terrorism today has morphed into numerous more-difficult-to-deal-with organisations, and collectively they are contributing to instability in quite a major way.”

While the much-vaunted killing of bin Laden in his Abottabad home allowed the US to draw a firm line under the so-called “9/11 decade”, it increasingly appears that it was not the killer blow to the al-Qaeda brand that some had hoped for.

While al-Qaeda central, now led by new emir Ayman al-Zawahiri, appears to have lost its ability to undertake its own attacks, bin Laden’s death has not removed the spectral threat posed by small groups of violent Islamic fundamentalists intent on bloody global change.

In the Arabian Peninsula and, increasingly, Africa, the disciples of bin Laden’s warped ideology are growing in number and taking over where their mentor left off.

In Yemen, AQAP has grown from about 300–400 fighters to as many as 1000 in the last 12 months. In northern Africa, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, or AQIM, is forming alliances with dangerous African insurgencies such as Nigeria’s Boko Haram. In Iraq,
the local al-Qaeda franchise is believed to be responsible for as many as 1000 deaths since Bin Laden was killed.

“Far from being dead and buried, the terrorist organisation is now riding a resurgence tide as its affiliates engage in an increasingly violent campaign of attacks across the Middle East and North Africa,” says Seth Jones, a former adviser to the US Special Operations Command and author of In the Graveyard of Empires: America’s War in Afghanistan.

Writing in this month’s edition of Foreign Policy, he argues that the combination of Middle Eastern instability brought on by the Arab Spring and the proliferation of al-Qaeda franchises has left the brand as strong as ever.

He says several facts support that contention: one, that four of the al-Qaeda franchises have sworn bayaat (an oath of allegiance) to Zawahiri since Bin Laden’s death; two, those organisations are proving themselves capable of holding large swathes of territory in their areas of operation; three, there has been an upward trend in attacks by those groups since Bin Laden’s death.

“Despite the group’s violent legacy, popular support for al-Qaeda remains fairly high in countries such as Nigeria and Egypt, though it has steadily declined in others,” Jones writes. “If this is what the brink of defeat looks like, I’d hate to see success.”

Nor does the ongoing threat posed by the Islamists leave Australia’s region of the world untouched. Though Australia has only experienced one significant Islamist attack, the 2002 Bali bombings, there are three south-east Asian countries still battling domestic insurgencies.

Violent jihadi activity continues in Indonesia, despite a notable decline in significant government counterterrorism operations leading to major improvements in security.

In the Philippines the government continues to struggle with its indigenous insurgency, the Islamic separatist group Abu Sayyaf. Meanwhile, in Thailand, the fight against Muslim separatists in the south of the country has left some 4400 people dead.

“What we’re seeing is the post-al-Qaeda world,” says Dupont. “It is what we will see over the next decade: a lot of low-level terrorism with spikes. Every now and then in one failed or failing state there will be a spike in activity by terrorist groups which may become full-blown insurgencies. And the seriousness of those spikes will depend on the international response. And that holds true for our region as well.”

The arrest of the bomb maker in the 2002 Bali attacks, Umar Patek, in the Pakistani town where bin Laden was to be found and killed soon after, was an indication of how the various groups in south-east Asia continue to seek succour from al-Qaeda.

Patek is now facing trial in Jakarta over bombings in Bali and elsewhere, and the prosecution has alleged he travelled to Abbottabad in Pakistan’s west in order to meet Bin Laden. Patek, one of south-east Asia’s most wanted terrorists until his arrest, had been believed to be working with Abu Sayyaf in the Philippines after being a bomb maker for the Indonesian terrorist network Jemaah Islamiah, or JI.

Last month a US Federal Bureau of Investigations agent, Frank Pellegrino, told the Jakarta court that Patek had told an associate in the Philippines that he wanted to go back to Pakistan to “work with Osama bin Laden”.

“He wanted to reconnect the al-Qaeda-JI connection made so strong by Khalid Sheik Mohammed and Hamzah,” Pellegrino told the court. Mohammed was the architect of the September 11 attacks. Hamzah was JI’s military commander.

According to some within Australia’s national security community, this year there will be as many US drones flying in the skies over Yemen and the Horn of Africa as there will be above Pakistan. This reflects the growing presence of al-Qaeda in that region, particularly in Yemen where the new president, Abdo Rabuh Mansur al-Hadi, is struggling to halt the country’s slow slide into anarchy.

Worryingly, some of the world’s best Yemen analysts say it is the drone strikes themselves that have helped sustain and promote the al-Qaeda brand among local people.

“AQ is now prioritising actions within smaller cells, and the US is now quite aggressively targeting these smaller fronts of activity using drone strikers, and I think this runs the risk of turning the groups into something that’s more powerful and has more local interaction than they otherwise would have,” says Dr Sarah Phillips, a Yemen expert from Sydney University’s Centre for International Security Studies.

Phillips is one of a handful of scholars with on-the-ground experience in Yemen and has advised the Australian government about the threat posed by the al-Qaeda branch there. She has seen videos released by AQAP that show captured Yemeni troops being paraded in front of the cameras, with al-Qaeda fighters berating them for working with outsiders, asking them why they let Americans invade their skies.

“It’s all building into this narrative that Yemen is under attack from outsiders, and with everything else that’s going on there that’s a narrative that some [Yemenis] are picking up on,” she says.

“I think the West needs to be more aware of the problems they might be creating for themselves down the track.”

Phillips’ view is supported by another Yemen expert, Gregory Johnsen of Princeton University. In a post on his Waq al-Waq blog last month, Johnsen said the US should not measure success in Yemen by “body bags”.

Age, Melbourne
11 May 2012, by Dylan Welch

General News, page 11 - 1.388.00 cm²
Capital City Daily - circulation 184,156 (MTWTF--)

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"I would argue that US missile strike[s] are actually one of the major — not the only, but a major — factors in AQAP’s growing strength," he wrote.

He also challenged the intelligence the US often says is the reason they can so effectively target al-Qaeda fighters without killing civilians.

“What the US ‘knows’ about Yemen often turns out to be untrue. For instance, the December 17, 2009, strike that targeted an AQAP training camp turned out be a Bedouin encampment that killed more than 40 civilians.”

He wrote that “the pictures of mangled corpses of women and children next to missiles with ‘Made in the USA stencilled on them has been a recruiting coup for AQAP”.

While it is impossible to know exactly how many civilians have been killed by drones, the London-based Bureau of Investigative Journalism estimates that between 545 and 973 civilians have been killed in Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia since 2001.

THE vexed issue of drones was highlighted following the targeted killing last year of Anwar al-Awlaki, a Yemeni-born US citizen with strong ties to AQAP. After being released from prison in the Yemeni capital of Sana’a in late 2007, he spent his time in the country’s south issuing a series of online videos exhorting Muslims to undertake violent jihad in the West.

He created even closer ties with the AQAP leadership. He also delivered many of his speeches in English and consequently became something of a lightning rod for disaffected Western Muslim youths looking to undertake jihad.

Then, last September, two Predator drones fired hellfire missiles which struck the car in which al-Awlaki was travelling.

President Obama described his death as a “major blow to al-Qaeda’s most active operational affiliate”.

While few appeared concerned by the targeted killing of a US citizen, given his role in one of the world’s most murderous outfits, the US may have been reaping a far more ethically contentious path when a fortnight later, al-Awlaki’s 16-year-old son was killed by a drone strike on a group of alleged AQAP members.

As 2012 dawned the debate over the legality, ethics and efficacy of drones was louder than ever. Which is perhaps why Obama’s principal counterterrorism adviser, John Brennan, felt the need to defend their use publicly for the first time.

“These targeted strikes against al-Qaeda terrorists are indeed ethical and just,” he told an audience at the Woodrow Wilson Centre in Washington last month.

He argued that the drones not only removed the threat to American lives on the battlefield, they allowed a never-before-seen ability to discriminate between civilians and targets and they were an essential counterterrorism tool.

“Al-Qaeda’s a cancer throughout the world, it has metastasised in so many different places, and when that metastasised tumour becomes lethal and malignant, that’s when we’re going to take the action that we need to.”

But what if it is those very actions that are causing the malignancy to grow? In the final paragraph of his his Waq al-Waq post, Princeton’s Gregory Johnsen asks his readers a simple question — one he says that few in the Obama administration are asking themselves.

“Why, if the US has been carrying out strikes in Yemen since December 2009, does AQAP keep getting stronger?”

Dylan Welch is national security correspondent.
THE AL-QAEDA THREAT

AL-QAEDA IN THE ARABIAN PENINSULA (AQAP), YEMEN
Originally known as al-Qaeda in Yemen, the group was originally aimed at Islamic revolution in Yemen and Saudi Arabia, but in recent years has taken over primary responsibility for high-visibility attack in the West. AQAP’s ideologue-in-chief, Anwar al-Awlaki, was seen as the most important rallying point for would-be jihadists after Osama bin Laden, until his targeted killing in September.

AL-QAEDA IN THE ISLAMIC MAGHREB (AQIM), ALGERIA
Also known as the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat, AQIM was formed by disaffected members of another local Islamic insurgency, the Armed Islamic Group. While its original aim was to overthrow the Algerian government, it has since stated its intent to attack a variety of international targets and is believed to be operational in numerous north African countries.

AL-SHABAB, SOMALIA
Full name Harakat al-Shabab al-Mujahideen, the group is currently occupying the minds of some of the US’s most senior intelligence officials due to the large number of Western Muslims that have become devotees. Given the steadily growing Somali populations in many Western countries, including Australia, al-Shabab is now high on the list of potential domestic attacks in the West. Such concerns were heightened in early February, when the group publicly pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda central.

ABOVE: Al-Shabab soldiers on patrol in southern Mogadishu. BELOW: After a bomb blast in the Nigerian city of Kano in January. PICTURES: REUTERS

BOKO HARAM, NIGERIA
For a long time Boko Haram, which means ‘Western education is a sin’ in Hausa, was seen as a violent yet ill-disciplined local insurgency. But a series of attacks and events beginning last year have suggested the group is far more operational capable than was previously thought. Concerns have also been expressed about its growing links with the al-Qaeda network through AQIM.

TEHRIK-I-TALIBAN PAKISTAN
Officially formed in late 2007 under the leadership of the now dead Baitullah Mehsud, the Pakistani Taliban is a different entity to Afghanistan’s Taliban and is more of a loose grouping of tribal leaders in Pakistan’s Federally Administered Tribal Areas. Most of their fighters are veterans of fighting in Afghanistan and the movement receives much of its ideological guidance from al-Qaeda.