

The Washington Post

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U.S. assembling secret drone bases in Africa, Arabian Peninsula, officials say

By [Craig Whitlock](#) and [Greg Miller](#), Published: September 20, 2011

The Obama administration is assembling a constellation of secret drone bases for counterterrorism operations in the Horn of Africa and the Arabian Peninsula as part of a newly aggressive campaign to attack al-Qaeda affiliates in Somalia and Yemen, U.S. officials said.

One of the installations is being established in Ethiopia, a U.S. ally in the fight against al-Shabab, the Somali militant group that controls much of that country. Another base is in the Seychelles, an archipelago in the Indian Ocean, where a small fleet of “hunter-killer” drones resumed operations this month after an experimental mission demonstrated that the unmanned aircraft could effectively patrol Somalia from there.

The U.S. military also has flown [drones over Somalia](#) and Yemen from bases in Djibouti, a tiny African nation at the junction of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. In addition, the CIA is building a [secret airstrip in the Arabian Peninsula](#) so it can deploy armed drones over Yemen.

The rapid expansion of the undeclared drone wars is a reflection of the growing alarm with which U.S. officials view the activities of al-Qaeda affiliates in Yemen and Somalia, even as al-Qaeda’s core leadership in Pakistan [has been weakened](#) by U.S. counterterrorism operations.

The U.S. government is known to have used drones to carry out lethal attacks in at least six countries: Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Pakistan, Somalia and Yemen. The negotiations that preceded the establishment of the base in the Republic of Seychelles illustrate the efforts the United States is making to broaden the range of its drone weapons.

The island nation of 85,000 people has hosted a small fleet of MQ-9 Reaper drones operated by the U.S. Navy and Air Force since September 2009. U.S. and Seychellois officials have previously acknowledged the drones’ presence but have said that their primary mission was to track pirates in regional waters. But classified U.S. diplomatic cables show that the unmanned aircraft have also conducted counterterrorism missions over Somalia, about 800 miles to the northwest.

The cables, obtained by the anti-secrecy group WikiLeaks, reveal that U.S. officials asked leaders in the Seychelles to keep the counterterrorism missions secret. The Reapers are described by the military as “hunter-killer” drones because they can be equipped with Hellfire missiles and satellite-guided bombs.

To allay concerns among islanders, U.S. officials said they had no plans to arm the Reapers when the

mission was announced two years ago. The cables show, however, that U.S. officials were thinking about weaponizing the drones.

During a meeting with Seychelles President James Michel on Sept. 18, 2009, American diplomats said the U.S. government “would seek discrete [sic], specific discussions . . . to gain approval” to arm the Reapers “should the desire to do so ever arise,” according to [a cable summarizing the meeting](#). Michel concurred, but asked U.S. officials to approach him exclusively for permission “and not anyone else” in his government, the cable reported.

Michel’s chief deputy told a U.S. diplomat on a separate occasion that the Seychelles president “was not philosophically against” arming the drones, [according to another cable](#). But the deputy urged the Americans “to be extremely careful in raising the issue with anyone in the Government outside of the President. Such a request would be ‘politically extremely sensitive’ and would have to be handled with ‘the utmost discreet care.’ ”

A U.S. military spokesman declined to say whether the Reapers in the Seychelles have ever been armed.

“Because of operational security concerns, I can’t get into specifics,” said Lt. Cmdr. James D. Stockman, a public affairs officer for the U.S. Africa Command, which oversees the base in the Seychelles. He noted, however, that the MQ-9 Reapers “can be configured for both surveillance and strike.”

A spokeswoman for Michel said the president was unavailable for comment.

Jean-Paul Adam, who was Michel’s chief deputy in 2009 and now serves as minister of foreign affairs, said U.S. officials had not asked for permission to equip the drones with missiles or bombs.

“The operation of the drones in Seychelles for the purposes of counter-piracy surveillance and other related activities has always been unarmed, and the U.S. government has never asked us for them to be armed,” Adam said in an e-mail. “This was agreed between the two governments at the first deployment and the situation has not changed.”

The State Department cables show that U.S. officials were sensitive to perceptions that the drones might be armed, noting that they “do have equipment that could appear to the public as being weapons.”

To dispel potential concerns, they held a “media day” for about 30 journalists and Seychellois officials at the small, one-runway airport in Victoria, the capital, in November 2009. One of the Reapers was parked on the tarmac.

“The government of Seychelles invited us here to fight against piracy, and that is its mission,” Craig White, a U.S. diplomat, said during the event. “However, these aircraft have a great deal of capabilities and could be used for other missions.”

In fact, U.S. officials had already outlined other purposes for the drones in a classified mission review with Michel and Adam. Saying that the U.S. government “desires to be completely transparent,” the American diplomats informed the Seychellois leaders that the Reapers would also fly over Somalia “to support ongoing counter-terrorism efforts,” though not “direct attacks,” according to [a cable summarizing the meeting](#).

U.S. officials “stressed the sensitive nature of this counter-terrorism mission and that this not be released

outside of the highest . . . channels,” the cable stated. “The President wholeheartedly concurred with that request, noting that such issues could be politically sensitive for him as well.”

The Seychelles drone operation has a relatively small footprint. Based in a hangar located about a quarter-mile from the main passenger terminal at the airport, it includes between three and four Reapers and about 100 U.S. military personnel and contractors, according to the cables.

The military operated the flights on a continuous basis until April, when it paused the operations. They resumed this month, said Stockman, the Africa Command spokesman.

The aim in assembling a constellation of bases in the Horn of Africa and the Arabian Peninsula is to create overlapping circles of surveillance in a region where al-Qaeda offshoots could emerge for years to come, U.S. officials said.

The locations “are based on potential target sets,” said a senior U.S. military official. “If you look at it geographically, it makes sense — you get out a ruler and draw the distances [drones] can fly and where they take off from.”

One U.S. official said that there had been discussions about putting a drone base in Ethiopia for as long as four years, but that plan was delayed because “the Ethiopians were not all that jazzed.” Other officials said Ethiopia has become a valued counterterrorism partner because of threats posed by al-Shabab.

“We have a lot of interesting cooperation and arrangements with the Ethiopians when it comes to intelligence collection and linguistic capabilities,” said a former senior U.S. military official familiar with special operations missions in the region.

An Ethiopian Embassy spokesman in Washington could not be reached for comment Tuesday night.

The former official said the United States relies on Ethiopian linguists to translate signals intercepts gathered by U.S. agencies monitoring calls and e-mails of al-Shabab members. The CIA and other agencies also employ Ethiopian informants who gather information from across the border.

Overall, officials said, the cluster of bases reflects an effort to have wider geographic coverage, greater leverage with countries in the region and backup facilities if individual airstrips are forced to close.

“It’s a conscious recognition that those are the hot spots developing right now,” said the former senior U.S. military official.

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