

Drone Strikes Turn Allies Into Enemies, Yemeni Says
By Charlie Savage, New York Times
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WASHINGTON — A Yemeni man who studied at an American high school told Congress on Tuesday that a drone strike on his village in Yemen last week terrified his neighbors, turning them against the United States in a way that terrorist propaganda had failed to do.

The man, Farea al-Muslimi, said his friends and neighbors used to know of the United States primarily through “my stories of the wonderful experiences I had” here. “Now, however, when they think of America, they think of the fear they feel at the drones over their heads. What the violent militants had failed to achieve, one drone strike accomplished in an instant.”

A man killed in the strike was well known locally, Mr. Muslimi also asserted, and could easily have been arrested by Yemeni forces.

His testimony, before the Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights and Human Rights, was part of a rare public hearing on the use of drones. The Obama administration did not send anyone to testify at the hearing, convened by Senator Richard J. Durbin, Democrat of Illinois. But witnesses included legal specialists, a retired Air Force colonel who formerly worked with drones, and retired Gen. James E. Cartwright, the former vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

The topics discussed included the number of civilians inadvertently killed in the strikes, whether there should be a secret court to approve who becomes a target, and legal issues raised by the killing of American citizens who are deemed to be terrorists.

Several witnesses said the government should be more open and clear about the standards and procedures it uses in selecting who should be targeted. But some also stressed that legally, a drone strike is no different from other means of lethal force, like artillery, a commando raid or a cruise missile.

Retired Col. Martha McSally of the Air Force said that drones offered more “oversight and precision” because they could hover over a target, with the ability to abort a strike until the last second, and with the “chain of command” and lawyers watching.

She also said that even when it appeared possible to arrest someone rather than killing him, there were risks of civilian casualties in “capture missions,” too. Such operations also take longer to plan, and create the risk that an American commando might be killed or captured, she said.

The use of drone strikes has grown enormously over the past decade with relatively scant public policy discussion, but it has recently received greater attention, including a push by Congress to obtain access to secret Obama administration legal memos on targeted killings.