

Hellfire from the Sky: Targeting of Innocent Civilians by Unmanned Drones

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HASBUNALLAH KHAN/AP



OUTSIDE A HOUSE, with bloodstained walls, after a U.S. drone attack in Mohammadhel village in north Waziristan along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border, in October 2008. The strike killed about 20 people in two villages.

United States President Barack Obama, who is due to visit India in early November, has virtually adhered to almost all the security policies of his predecessor. In fact, he has enhanced some of the most reprehensible policies of the George W. Bush administration, including the targeting of civilians by unmanned drones. Rendition (kidnapping) and indefinite detention of terror suspects have increased under his watch.

President Obama has substantially increased defence spending and has expanded the war in Afghanistan. A Federal Court in the U.S. overturned a decision by a lower court granting former prisoners tortured by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) the right to sue for damages. The Federal judge said he overturned the ruling because he supported the Obama administration's position on the issue. He stated in his judgment that "there is a painful conflict between human rights and national security". The judge concluded that fundamental human rights had to be sacrificed at the altar of national security.

Before assuming the presidency, Obama had promised to give up the unlawful practices of the Bush administration such as the rendition of suspects to secret CIA bases in countries such as Romania and Poland, where they were routinely subjected to torture.

Such practices may have diminished somewhat, but the Obama administration has wholeheartedly endorsed the Bush administration's policy of eliminating terror suspects using pilotless high-tech drone aircraft. Instead of using the laborious technique of capturing alleged terrorists from their hideouts in crowded cities and remote villages, the drones just bomb the house or village where the suspects are holed up. In the process, there has been huge collateral damage. Innocent civilians killed far outnumber those killed in the fight against the occupation.

Ever since he took office two years ago, Obama has made the deadly drones a key instrument in his fight against the militants in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The drones are also being used liberally to target militants in Yemen and Somalia. The German magazine Der Spiegel reported that Obama had, since assuming power, authorised more than 120 drone attacks in Pakistan. During the eight years of the Bush presidency, there were only an

estimated 60 such drone attacks. The drone attacks have contributed significantly to the alienation of the Pakistani public from the U.S. and the rise in suicide attacks on American and North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) targets.

The CIA had targeted the Pakistani Taliban leader Baitullah Mesud 16 times with drones. It was only in the last attempt that it succeeded in getting him. In the last attack alone, around nine of his relatives and friends were killed. Most of those killed in the continuing drone attacks have been poor civilians living in the tribal areas bordering Afghanistan. More than 700 civilians were killed in 2009. This year the numbers are bound to rise substantially.

The drones, many of which are launched by CIA operatives from Pakistani military bases, allow the U.S. military to function from Pakistani territory without attracting much domestic attention. Washington and Islamabad have never publicly acknowledged the presence of U.S. troops on Pakistani soil.

Drone history

Drone technology was first used during the U.S. war against the democratically elected government of Nicaragua in the early 1980s. The “Predator” drone, which the U.S. military and security agencies are using now, was developed after the Balkan war of the 1990s. It was initially devised as an intelligence-gathering tool and later armed with Hellfire missiles. Priced at around \$10 million, it is cheaper to operate than conventional jet fighters, which cost 10-15 times more a piece.

A mechanism was installed in the drones to ensure that shrapnel from the missiles killed people within a 20-metre radius of the impact site.

In early 2000, the Pentagon developed a more advanced version of the drone, called the “Reaper”. The plane could remain airborne for 36 hours, 12 hours more than the Predator. It could also be armed with lethal 240-kg bombs. The Reaper was guided by global positioning system (GPS) and laser technology.

In the next decade, the spending on drones is set to increase sevenfold. Many governments, including India and Iran, are investing heavily in this technology. Israel, true to style, was the first country to use drones to target civilians on a large scale. Since the early 1990s, drones have been used relentlessly against the hapless population trapped in Gaza. In another alarming development, the U.S. has started to use Predator drones to patrol its border with Mexico.

Marshall Peterson, the man who played a pioneering role in the development of drone technology, told Der Spiegel that he was not told that his work was being used for “targeted killings”. He said that the software was improperly installed, which, he felt, was the reason for the high number of civilian casualties.

The dramatic rise in civilian casualties is also directly related to the random targeting of houses on the basis of sketchy information gathered by the CIA. A new report compiled by the U.S.-based Campaign of Innocent Victims in Conflict (CIVIC) found that houses in the tribal areas of Pakistan were routinely targeted because Taliban fighters had once frequented them. A civilian victim of a drone strike told a researcher from CIVIC, Christopher Rogers, that his house in Waziristan was targeted a day after a group of Taliban fighters

barged into it demanding food.

The researcher, who investigated nine of the drone strikes carried out in Pakistan since 2009, reported that 30 civilians, including 10 women, had been killed in these strikes. Out of the estimated 2,000 people killed so far, as a result of drone attacks in Pakistan, only 66 were Al Qaeda or Taliban militants.

It is the civilian population that has borne the brunt of the attacks. A study by the prestigious Brookings Institute revealed that for every militant killed in a drone attack, 10 civilians perished as part of the collateral damage.

Evidently, under Obama, the CIA has been given a freer hand. The rise in civilian casualties has had no impact on the White House. David Kilcullen, the counter-insurgency expert who had worked closely with Gen. David Petraeus and is currently in charge of the U.S./NATO military operations in Afghanistan, said that only 2 per cent of those killed in drone attacks had been “jihadists”.

It is not surprising that a large majority (76 per cent) of the residents of Pakistan’s Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) oppose the use of drones. More than half of those questioned believed that the Predator and Reaper drones were mainly used for targeting the civilian population.

Robert Baer, a senior ex-CIA operative, has said that the U.S. administration now prefers to kill a suspect rather than capture him. “Targeted killings are easier for the CIA or for the military to deal with than taking someone prisoner. No one really questions a killing but when you take someone a prisoner, then you are responsible for the person and then headaches come. We have a logic that leads to more and more targeted killings,” he said. Kilcullen noted that the use of drones is “not moral” and only serves to provide “more recruits for militant movements that have grown exponentially as drone attacks have increased”.

BONNY SCHOONAKKER/AFP



A PREDATOR DRONE of the U.S., armed with a missile, in its hangar at the Bagram airbase in Afghanistan in November 2009.

Philip Alston, the U.N. Human Rights Council’s special representative on extrajudicial executions, has submitted a report highlighting the grave threat posed to international law by the indiscriminate use of drones by countries such as the U.S. and Israel. Alston has said that many countries will be encouraged to follow the lead taken by the U.S. and carry out “competing drone attacks” on those they label as terrorists operating outside their borders. In fact, Israel has been killing Palestinians using drones. The state of Israel brands people it does not like as terrorists and liquidates them, and no questions are asked.

In November 2002, the U.S. sent its first drone to Yemen to target an Al Qaeda suspect allegedly responsible for the attack on USS Cole. There has been no looking back since then. The CIA has been given a carte blanche on the use of drones to target whomever it suspects in any part of the world. The agency is not deemed legally accountable for its actions as the U.S. administration argues that the former is engaged in an asymmetrical war against global

terrorism. The U.S. government has justified targeted killings as a legitimate weapon of “self-defence” in the war against terror.

Anwar al-Awlaki, a U.S. citizen currently residing in Yemen, is on the most wanted list of the CIA. Al-Awlaki has filed a lawsuit in an American court demanding that the U.S. government desist from murdering him. He was the “radio Imam” who allegedly influenced Nidal Malik Hassan, a U.S. army officer, to shoot 13 people dead in Fort Hood, Kansas, in 2009. The U.S. put the preacher on the “kill list” immediately, without bothering to provide any clinching evidence against him. Al-Awlaki has so far avoided being killed. He escaped from Sana’a, the capital of Yemen, after he first heard the tell-tale sound of a drone circling over his apartment building and has since taken refuge in the rugged mountains in the Yemeni desert.

MOHAMMAD MALIK/AFP



A protest in Lahore, Pakistan, on October 21 against the drone attacks in the Waziristan region.

John Radsan, who was a legal adviser to the CIA, told Der Spiegel that President Bush had delegated the presidential power to order killings to the head of the CIA, who in turn delegated it to its Counterterrorism Centre. A *New York Times* correspondent, Scott Shane, highlighted the constitutional dichotomy involved.

“To eavesdrop on a terrorism suspect, intelligence agencies would have to get a court warrant. But designating him for death needed no judicial review,” he wrote.

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