

# Obama Speaks: Drone Warfare and Counterterrorism

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Region: [USA](#)

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[Drone Wars UK](#)

On Thursday (23 Oct) President Obama gave a much-trailed [speech](#) on counterterrorism, large parts of which focused on the US use of drones.

At the same time [a 'fact sheet' on US policy on the use of force outside declared wars](#) was published, as was a [transcript of a background briefing given by senior US officials](#) to journalists. All of these documents give some insight into the US use of drones.

In the speech President Obama accepted many of the criticisms that we and others have made over the past four years including (as he put it)

- The power that arise from “the technology to strike half a world” can lead to abuses
- To say “a military tactic is legal, or even effective, is not to say it is wise or moral”
- The use of “force alone cannot make us safe” and that “a perpetual war – through drones or Special Forces or troop deployments – will prove self-defeating”
- That we must address “the underlying grievances and conflicts that feed extremism”
- That “US [drone] strikes have resulted in civilian casualties” although President Obama also stated “there’s a wide gap between US assessments of such casualties and nongovernmental reports.”
- The secrecy surrounding drone strikes “can end up shielding our government from public scrutiny”



Obama also use the classic tactic of assigning false arguments to his critics only to knock them down, saying (twice) that “doing nothing is not an option” and “it is false to assert that putting boots on the ground is less likely to result in civilian deaths or less likely to create enemies in the Muslim world. I for one, have

never heard any drone critics suggesting to do nothing in the face of terrorism or that mass invasion of US troops would cause less civilian casualties than drones. Those are simply not our arguments.

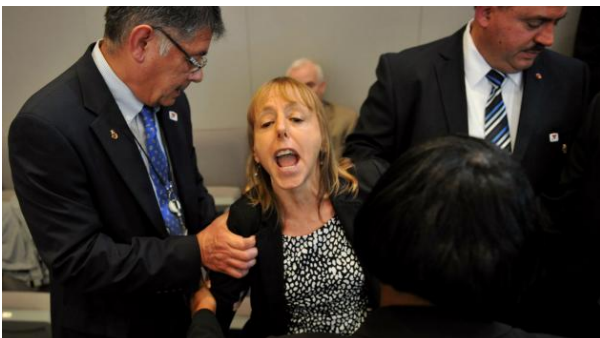
Of course President Obama like many who support the use of drones also insisted that “America’s actions are legal”, that the “war with al Qaeda, the Taliban, and their associated forces... is a just war – a war waged proportionally, in last resort, and in self-defense” and that drone strikes “have saved lives.”

President Obama went on to say that he had signed “Presidential Policy Guidance” that had “codified” his administration’s “use of force against terrorists.” However this document is to remain secret and it is far from clear if this is new policy or has been in operation for some time.

In the ‘fact sheet’ published to accompany the speech the Administration says that “ the United States will use lethal force only against a target that poses a continuing, imminent threat to U.S. persons” and that “the following criteria must be met before lethal action may be taken:

- 1) Near certainty that the terrorist target is present;
- 2) Near certainty that non-combatants will not be injured or killed;
- 3) An assessment that capture is not feasible at the time of the operation;
- 4) An assessment that the relevant governmental authorities in the country where action is contemplated cannot or will not effectively address the threat to U.S. persons; and
- 5) An assessment that no other reasonable alternatives exist to effectively address the threat to U.S. persons.

The speech and new documents [were reported by many initially at least as limiting the way drones will be used in the future](#). However once the speech was delivered and the dust had settled many raised [serious questions about whether the ‘new policy’ will in fact make any difference](#), with others, including [Jonathan Landay](#) and [Mary Ellen O’Connell](#) arguing that the ‘new rules’ may have made the situation worse.



As we reported last week a demand of the mainstream debate on drones is for the elimination of so-called signature strikes and for the CIA’s drones to be shifted back under military control. After this key speech by Obama it remains to be seen if this will in fact happen.

The wonderful [Medea Benjamin from CodePink disrupted the speech asking Obama many questions about the use of drones](#) and his failure to close GTMO. As she was being dragged out by security, Obama acknowledged the validity of the questions she was asking when he stated that Medea was “worth paying attention to.” Medea explains why she interrupted Obama [here](#).

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