

Institutionalized Killing: Obama to Approve Drone Assassination Manual

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President Obama is about to sign off on a manual that will institutionalize the process by which the White House orders and approves killings by remote-controlled drones, according to a report Sunday.

The so-called counterterrorism “playbook” will define the circumstances under which the CIA and the military’s Special Forces Command, the two agencies that operate drones in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia and other parts of the Middle East and Africa, may use lethal force.

The front-page article in the *Washington Post* amounts to a semi-official announcement by the White House and is based on statements by unnamed government officials. Its publication, on the same day that Obama officially took the oath of office for his second term as president, demonstrates the role of his administration as an instrument of the military-intelligence apparatus.

The US government is so deeply engaged in assassinations all over the world that top officials believe a manual is required to regularize the process. According to the *Post* account, the drafting of the drone warfare manual has been delayed by infighting between the CIA and other agencies, with the CIA seeking greater latitude to conduct missile strikes. These include “signature” strikes, in which the target is not an identified member of Al Qaeda or some other alleged terrorist group, but individuals who appear to be engaged in activity that bears the “signature” of terrorism, such as congregating with weapons, or loading vehicles with what appear to be explosives.

This means, in practice, targeting for murder people who appear to be engaged in resistance against US occupations or military actions in the Middle East, Central Asia and Africa. Moreover, since most drone strikes target rural areas of Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen and other countries where tribal gatherings are common and weapons are omnipresent, the demand for “signature” strikes amounts to a license for the CIA to murder anyone in the population of these territories.

The newspaper reported that the dispute was settled by the CIA gaining an exemption for wider attacks in Pakistan for a period of at least one year, more likely two years, and with a possible extension of even greater duration. The mountainous areas of northwest Pakistan, along the border with Afghanistan, have been the most frequent target of drone missile strikes, killing thousands, including hundreds of women and children.

The *Post* reports that the drone missile “playbook” will be submitted to Obama within

weeks. The newspaper observes that it “marks the culmination of a year-long effort by the White House to codify its counterterrorism policies and create a guide for lethal operations through Obama’s second term.”

In other words, throughout Obama’s reelection campaign, top White House officials have been negotiating and concretizing the details of a secret document that takes as its point of departure the principle that the president is above the law and can order the death of any individual on the planet, including American citizens, without any legal recourse or constraint.

According to the report, “Among the subjects covered in the playbook are the process for adding names to kill lists, the legal principles that govern when US citizens can be targeted overseas and the sequence of approvals required when the CIA or US military conducts drone strikes outside war zones.”

The Obama administration has refused to disclose what “legal principles” supposedly give the president the power of life and death over all humanity. Legal memoranda drafted by the Department of Justice have been kept secret from the American people, with the administration prevailing in a series of court hearings where judges have bowed to its assertion of an absolute right to maintain “state secrets,” regardless of the provisions of the Bill of Rights.

Even the legal requirements drawn up by the Obama administration, however, will not actually impose any limits on the CIA and military. One former official told the *Post* that the CIA exemption for Pakistan would be in effect for “less than two years but more than one,” but added that any final decision “will undoubtedly be predicated on facts on the ground.”

One purpose of the planted account in the *Post* is to bolster the image of White House counterterrorism coordinator John Brennan, nominated by Obama to head the CIA. Brennan was Obama’s first choice as CIA director in 2009, but the newly elected president dared not nominate him because of his role as an advocate of rendition and torture while a top CIA official during the Bush administration.

The article published Sunday conforms to recent efforts by the White House to present Brennan as the advocate of moderation and restraint in the waging of drone warfare. He is described as the driving force of the “playbook,” his aim being “to impose more consistent and rigorous controls on counterterrorism programs that were largely ad-hoc in the aftermath of the Sept. 11 attacks.”

Insofar as this is anything more than puffery before Brennan’s nomination hearing next month, the account suggests that Brennan’s role is like that of the Nazi bureaucrats who wanted order and system in the operation of the Final Solution, rather than uncontrolled, spasmodic and therefore inefficient violence.

Meanwhile, the US killing machine continues its grisly operations. Over the weekend, US drone strikes killed at least six, and perhaps as many as sixteen, in several attacks in southern Yemen. Drone-fired missiles killed three people Saturday in Maarab province and three more in a car in the same province Sunday. Another ten were killed in an explosion at a house in al-Bayda province, said to be an accidental detonation during bomb-making, but possibly the result of another US strike, since the US government never comments publicly on drone operations.

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