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Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

ASSESSMENT REPORT

US Drone Attacks: A New War on the Muslim World?

Policy Analysis Unit - ACRPS | May 2014

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Introduction

On April 19 and 20, American drones launched a series of strikes against the central and southern Yemeni provinces of Abyan, Shabwah, and al-Bayda, targeting elements from al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). According to Yemen's foreign ministry, these attacks, which left 55 people dead including at least three civilians, came a few days after CNN posted a video online showing the leader of AQAP, Nasir al-Wuhayshi, along with hundreds of his fighters, celebrating the escape of a group of their comrades from the central prison in Sanaa. These strikes have once again put the spotlight on this form of military hardware, and further demonstrated the US's reliance on the drone in Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia, to such an extent that US commentators have taken to describing it as the weapon of choice for President Barack Obama in the "war on terror."

"Weapon of Choice"

In his first speech on becoming president at the beginning of 2009, Obama stated his rejection of President Bush's policy, which was based on the "false choice" between "our safety and our ideals". Obama pledged to make the US's war on terror conform to American values. It is true that Obama's administration dropped the looseness of the term "the global war on terror," but apparently only in order to better pursue war against al-Qaeda and its affiliates. During his election campaign in 2007, Obama declared that he would focus his war on al-Qaeda and its bases in Pakistan, with or without the agreement of the Pakistanis.

The logic behind intensifying the use of drones is that the drone is a less costly means, both in human and financial terms, than deploying US military forces. The drone is also safer for US forces, more effective and focused when it comes to targeting al-Qaeda and its allies in the Muslim world, and less objectionable to US public opinion. Using drones also enables Obama to signal to his Republican opponents that he is no less hawkish in his war on terror than the previous administration, and that he is smarter and more focused in pinpointing the enemy by using more effective and less costly means. For example, the cost of deploying a single American soldier in the battlefield approaches USD 1 million per year. Drone attacks are vastly less expensive. Furthermore, Obama's administration has benefited from technological advances to this military hardware that have made it more lethal.

Obama's strategic use of drone attacks is one that "takes no prisoners," with death as the only available option, something the Obama administration denies, claiming that such targeted operations only take place in rugged regions or places where sending troops would be too risky. The administration also points out that on more than one occasion it has provided foreign governments with intelligence that has led to the apprehension of wanted persons. In reality, however, these attacks spare Washington the legal and political headaches that accompany taking prisoners, particularly over how prisoners are detained and held, notably at Guantanamo Bay, which Obama promised to close down.

Drone Attacks: Bush versus Obama

While drone attacks began during Bush's first term in office in 2002, they have increased at least seven fold during Obama's time in office. Throughout Bush's administration, the US launched 46 drone strikes inside Pakistan against sites and individuals attributed to al-Qaeda and Pakistan's Taliban, and a single strike in Yemen. In comparison, under Obama's administration, from 2009 to the present, the US has launched at least 337 drone attacks within Pakistan and at least 93 in Yemen, as well as at least 15 more using other weapons such as cruise missiles.¹ There have also been a number of additional strikes against Somalia.

In parallel with the escalation in drone strikes, there has also been an escalation in casualties. Under the Bush administration, some 468 people died as a result of drone strikes in Pakistan, at least 128 of whom were civilians. Currently, under Obama, around 3,250 people have died in Pakistan, at least 829 of whom were civilians, according to statistics from the Bureau of Investigative Journalism.² In Yemen, between 753 and 965 people have been killed since 2009, at least 81 of whom were civilians according to a study by the New America Foundation,³ though these numbers are not universally agreed

¹ Bill Roggio and Bob Barry, "Charting the data for US air strikes in Yemen, 2002 – 2014," *The Long War Journal*, April 21, 2014, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/multimedia/Yemen/code/Yemen-strike.php>; Peter Bergen, "Obama's high-stakes drone war in Yemen," *CNN*, April 21, 2014, <http://www.cnn.com/2014/04/21/opinion/bergen-yemen-obama-drone-war/>; "Drone Wars Pakistan: Analysis," New America Foundation, <http://natsec.newamerica.net/drones/pakistan/analysis>.

² "Drone strikes in Pakistan," The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, <http://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/category/projects/drones/drones-pakistan/>.

³ "Drone Wars Yemen: Analysis," New America Foundation, <http://natsec.newamerica.net/drones/yemen/analysis>.

upon. There are other higher and lower estimates for the numbers of civilian casualties primarily because the CIA counts any male of fighting age killed by an airstrike at the targeted site an "enemy combatant," simply for being in the vicinity, unless the opposite can be subsequently demonstrated. This is surely an unwarranted assumption, and it is odd that Obama would incorporate it in reckoning the numbers.

At the beginning of his presidency, after he was informed that civilians had been killed in an attack in Pakistan, Obama laid down criteria for targeting any person or site, but he has been quick to violate the conditions. In the early days of his term, he requested that only those who posed an "imminent threat" to American security should be targets, and that there should be "near certainty" that civilians would not be hurt in missile attacks. However, in August 2009, he disregarded this, when head of the CIA at the time, Leon Panetta, informed him that the agency had tracked the leader of the Pakistani Taliban, Baitullah Mehsud, to a relative's house, where he was with his wife and other family members.

At that moment, Mehsud did not meet the condition of being a direct and imminent threat to US national security. Also, targeting him at a relative's house would mean civilian deaths. Mehsud was not on the list of US targets, but the Pakistanis were pressing for him to be killed, which is precisely what happened. Obama gave orders for the house Mehsud was in to be bombed. He, his wife, and a number of other civilians were killed. The same occurred in Yemen in December 2009. A targeted person was blown up along with two nearby families. Unexploded ordnance remained in the area, which detonated after the bombing, causing yet more civilian casualties.

Obama continued to prosecute the drone war, and the "kill lists" with targeted individuals grew longer, as did the list of suspect sites. He went so far as to adopt Bush's policy of "signature strikes," in which he agreed to strike general targets with no certainty that they represent a threat or a legitimate target. Such strikes are aimed at any group of people who give the impression of being suspect fighters. This policy was adopted in Yemen starting in April 2012, having permitted it in the tribal regions of Pakistan a year before. As a result of these lax criteria, the number of casualties has escalated in both countries since then.

The Turn toward Yemen

The Obama administration began to focus attacks on Yemen with the first strike on December 17, 2009, accompanying the rising strength of AQAP. Since then, drone strikes

in Yemen have surpassed the level of attacks in the tribal areas of Pakistan. Hence, Obama, who came to power insisting that he did not want a new war in the Muslim world, has found himself engaged in a new war using means other than invasion and occupation.

The Obama administration explains that the drone war in Yemen is the result of al-Qaeda's shift to Yemen, a country beset by poverty and tribal and sectarian conflict and where the state's grip is weak in many remote areas. According to the US administration, the person who carried out al-Qaeda's operation at Fort Hood in Texas in November 2009, Major Nidal Hassan, was in contact with the former AQAP leader, an American of Yemeni origin, Sheikh Anwar al-Awlaki. Thirteen American soldiers were killed in that shooting. According to the US administration, AQAP, which is based in the Yemeni tribal regions, was also behind the failed attempt to explode an American airline over Detroit on Christmas Day 2009 in what is known as the underpants bomb, carried out by Nigerian Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab.

In October 2010, the American security services announced that they had discovered parcel-bombs sent from Yemen to two synagogues in Chicago. This operation was uncovered by a Saudi agent planted inside al-Qaeda, and was foiled at Dubai and London airport. In 2011 and 2012, American anxieties grew during the Arab Spring, while the grip of the Yemeni state was further weakened, which allowed al-Qaeda to take control of large areas. Since then, the US has focused on the al-Qaeda franchise in Yemen as the major threat to the US. Unlike Pakistan, where officials condemn American drone strikes publically, and welcome them implicitly, there is official backing and cover from the government in Yemen.

Issues the Attacks Raise for the US

With ever growing numbers of civilian deaths caused by these attacks and in the absence of any oversight, the Obama administration has started to come under pressure from human rights organizations and from Congress itself, which has tried, without any notable success, to force the administration to disclose the proportion of civilians who die in these operations.

Under pressure, in May 2013, Obama announced a new strategy for targeting al-Qaeda leaders and facilities outside Afghanistan, which limits strikes rather than abandoning them. According to Obama, these strikes target fighters who "represent a direct and imminent threat to the American people," and any strike that cannot provide "near certainty" that no civilians will be killed or injured would not be authorized. He considered

this “the highest standard that we can set.” The recent attacks in Yemen, however, have made it clear that this standard lacks any practical credibility.

These attacks are also problematic because they target American citizens without trial or even an attempt to capture them alive. Perhaps the best known example on this is the assassination of al-Awlaki in Yemen at the end of September 2011. In that strike, two other Americans not on the list of targets, including his son, were killed alongside him. Although Obama deemed this a legitimate decision, and made use of his legal skills as a former professor of constitutional law to justify it, this dilemma continues to pose problems for his administration on Capitol Hill.

The more significant matter is the Obama administration’s claim that such tightly-targeted operations reduce both reliance on direct military force and tensions with the Muslim world. In fact, according to present and former US officials and other observers, the situation is quite the opposite. Such operations have provided the impetus for a recruitment campaign for al-Qaeda, given the many innocent civilian casualties they cause. For example, at his trial in June 2010, the Pakistani-American Faisal Shahzad, who a month before had tried to blow up a car bomb in Times Square in New York, stated: “When the drones hit, they don’t see children.”⁴

Despite the US’s withdrawal from Iraq and its preparations to withdraw from Afghanistan at the end of the year, US relations with the Muslim world have not yet improved. This is, at least in part, because of what could be described as the injustice of American power. Some in the US warn that using drones sets a dangerous precedent that might drive Russia and China to do the same. They also warn that even if these strikes are low cost relative to direct military intervention, as well as giving an impression of US might, they nevertheless comprise a real threat to the US in the long term.⁵

⁴ Doug Bandow, “Terrorism: Why They Want to Kill Us,” *Huffington Post*, July 1, 2010,

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/doug-bandow/terrorism-why-they-want-t_b_631942.html.

⁵ Jo Becker and Scott Shane, “Secret ‘Kill List’ Proves a Test of Obama’s Principles and Will,” *The New York Times*, May 29, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/29/world/obamas-leadership-in-war-on-al-qaeda.html?ref=unmannedaerialvehicles&r=0>.

Summary

Obama, who came to the White House promising to reduce tensions with the Muslim world and declared a break with the Bush era policy of open-ended wars, has continued the same wars, in practice, using advanced US military hardware instead of deploying troops to invade or occupy locations around the world. Rather than restricting the number of hotspots in the Islamic world, he has expanded the count to include regions such as Yemen and Somalia.

Despite promising to curtail US drone attacks because they may disrupt the scope for diplomacy, Obama has expanded their use and adopted the calculus of the CIA in determining civilian losses in an attempt to find a moral justification for these strikes. This has led officials in the US State Department to describe the CIA's methodology as "lax".⁶ Cameron Munter, the former US ambassador to Pakistan who served under Obama from October 2010 to July 2012, put an end to any further debate over Obama's claim that he rose to office to improve relations with the Muslim world, stating that "he didn't realize his main job was to kill people".⁷

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.