

Obama administration pushes ahead with drone killings

Patrick Martin

26 November 2012

According to a report published Sunday on the front page of the *New York Times*, the Obama administration is pushing ahead with plans to establish a more systematic and regular program of using unmanned drones to kill people selected by the White House for death.

The newspaper estimated that US drone strikes have killed more than 2,500 people—a death toll approximating the number killed in the attacks of September 11, 2001.

The article was written by Scott Shane, the same reporter who was the conduit for administration propaganda last May, glorifying drone missiles as a great advance in the “war on terror” and detailing Obama’s personal role in the approval of targets.

Like the earlier report, Sunday’s article describes the assassination program in entirely uncritical terms, raising questions only over the political motivation of the decision to “develop explicit rules for the targeted killing of terrorists by unmanned drones.” This effort was supposedly spurred by concern that Republican Mitt Romney might win the presidential election and inherit an open-ended drone missile program that he would then be able to define as he pleased.

The *Times* article claims that Obama and his top aides “are still debating whether remote-control killing should be a measure of last resort against imminent threats to the United States, or a more flexible tool, available to help allied governments attack their enemies or to prevent militants from controlling territory.”

The language is remarkable, since what is being discussed is nothing less than acts of political murder, and the two sides in the official “debate” are wrangling, like a Mafia council of war, over who should be targeted for “hits” and how to do it.

The language used to describe various “options” in relation to the drone killings marks a further debasement in American political discourse.

According to Shane, “The Defense Department and the C.I.A. continue to press for greater latitude to carry out strikes; Justice Department and State Department officials, and the president’s counterterrorism adviser, John O. Brennan, have argued for restraint, officials involved in the discussions say.”

Early in his term, Obama originally planned to name Brennan CIA

director, but had to scrap that plan because of questions over his role in authorizing torture of CIA prisoners under the Bush administration. Given that history, the fact that Brennan supposedly represents “restraint” in the internal debate should give readers of the *Times* article a chill.

The *Times* notes that most other countries, with the exception of Israel, regard the US drone missile strikes as illegal under international law. The article draws no conclusion from this consensus, which suggests that Obama and other top administration officials could face war crimes charges for the escalation of the drone war.

Shane reports without comment that the United Nations will open an investigation into the US drone strikes early next year.

The article also drew attention to remarks made by Obama during an October 18 appearance on “The Daily Show” with Jon Stewart, where the president said, in relation to the drone strikes, “One of the things we’ve got to do is put a legal architecture in place, and we need Congressional help in order to do that, to make sure that not only am I reined in but any president’s reined in terms of some of the decisions that we’re making.”

Subsequently, in an interview with Mark Bowden, author of *The Finish*, a new book on the bin Laden killing, Obama said of the drone killings, “There’s a remoteness to it that makes it tempting to think that somehow we can, without any mess on our hands, solve vexing security problems.”

The *Times* article acknowledges that the nature of the drone missile strikes has changed during the years since Obama entered the White House. It no longer is focused on top leaders of Al Qaeda in Pakistan, the majority of whom are now dead. Instead, the targets include “militants whose main battle is with the Pakistani authorities or who fight with the Taliban against American troops in Afghanistan” or, in Yemen, “militants who were preparing to attack Yemeni military forces.”

In other words, the targets are no longer individuals who have some alleged connection, however tenuous, to the 9/11 attacks in New York and Washington, but include virtually anyone who takes up arms against a regime allied with the US government anywhere in the world.

Moreover, the article admits, “there is the matter of strikes against people whose identities are unknown.” These are the victims of what the CIA calls “signature strikes,” where the targets are supposedly acting in a fashion typical of terrorist groups, even if no actual terrorists have been identified.

According to the *Times*, “the word evolved to mean the ‘signature’ of militants in general—for instance, young men toting arms in an area controlled by extremist groups.” Given that virtually every adult man in the tribal areas of Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia carries a weapon, that makes the entire population of these regions subject to summary execution by the American president.

Remarkably, but characteristically, the *Times* article cites criticism of the drone missile assassination program only from the standpoint of its expediency, noting US foreign policy experts who believe the widespread killings of innocent people are counterproductive and have produced a political backlash against the United States and its foreign policy throughout the Middle East, Central Asia and East Africa.

Organizations like the American Civil Liberties Union and Amnesty International have publicly denounced the assassination program as illegal under international law, but these declarations have been censored by the *Times* and by the American media as a whole.

A survey of press reporting on the drone program Sunday shows that the British newspaper *Guardian* quoted extensively from the ACLU’s spokesman Jameel Jaffer and other critics, but there was nothing in the American press. Jaffer described the *Times* article as a “self-serving leak” and expressed skepticism over the extent of the divisions said to exist among White House, Pentagon and intelligence officials.

“The suggestion is that there is a significant debate going on within the administration about the scope of the government’s authority to carry out targeted killings,” he told the *Guardian*. “I would question the significance of the debate ... the gap between the sides is narrow.”

In the American media and political establishment, there is not a hint of opposition to the drone assassination program on any principled grounds.

The *Washington Post*, in an article also published Sunday, noted that Obama’s selection of a new CIA director to replace David Petraeus, who resigned November 9, could affect the drone program. All three of those prominently mentioned for the position are former or current CIA officers and diehard supports of the assassination program, however.

These include the acting director of the CIA, Michael Morell, who served as deputy director under Petraeus and has spent his entire career at the agency. Michael Vickers, 59, now a top Pentagon military intelligence official, is described as “the most ardent supporter of the agency’s expanded paramilitary role.”

The third potential nominee is White House counterterrorism adviser John Brennan. Like the *Times*, the *Post* presents Brennan as the advocate of restraint, claiming, “In recent months, he has expressed concern within the administration that the agency has become too focused on targeted killings, even though he has presided

over the sharp expansion of the drone campaign under Obama.”

In addition to not challenging the basic premise of the drone program—that the US president has the right to kill anyone in the world he designates as a “terrorist,” without any judicial, constitutional or international oversight—the *Times* article fails to note the dire implications of the policy of drone warfare, both internationally and within the United States.

So far as we know now, no drone missile attacks have targeted individuals living in the United States. But there is no reason to believe that will be the case indefinitely.

On the contrary, the domestic use of drones has already begun, under the terms of the FAA Modernization and Reform Act, which Obama signed into law February 14. This requires the FAA to permit nationwide use of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) by September 2015. Dozens of police departments and even private corporations have applied for permits to use drones.

The military use of drones has begun along the US-Mexico border, and it is only a matter of time before these are armed and used to fire missiles at targets who will be identified as “terrorists,” “people smugglers,” “drug cartels” and the like.

From there, it is a short step to the use of drone-fired missiles in domestic law enforcement operations, and then more widely against the growth of social and political opposition to the policies of the American ruling elite.

Internationally, as well, the Obama administration’s promotion of drone warfare has inevitable consequences. Other countries possess drone technology, or will develop it. An arms race is well under way. According to one press report on the weekend, the UN is considering seeking drones for use in monitoring armed groups in the eastern Congo.

There is no doubt that every country which is potentially a target of American military action—a category that includes most of the world—is working on techniques for defeating or replicating drone missile attacks.

Moreover, by the same logic that Washington justifies its “right” to fire remote-control missiles at tribesmen in Pakistan, Yemen or Somalia, other governments will assert their “right” to use the same methods against political opponents, whether armed guerrillas or mass social movements.



To contact the WSW and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact