

Australian, New Zealand citizens killed by US drone strike in Yemen

Tom Peters
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The *Australian* reported yesterday that five people, including Australian citizen Christopher Harvard and dual Australian-New Zealand citizen Muslim bin John, were the victims of an extra-judicial killing by a US Predator drone in Yemen on November 19 last year. This is the first reported instance of Australians and New Zealanders being murdered by a drone.

According to the London-based Bureau of Investigative Journalism, 504 people have been killed since 2002 by American drone strikes in Yemen. This includes at least three US citizens: Anwar al-Awlaki, Samir Khan and 16-year-old Abdulrahman al-Awlaki. The Obama administration has greatly expanded the “targeted killing” program and asserted the right to kill anyone, in any part of the world, including US citizens.

Following yesterday’s revelations, Washington’s close allies in Canberra and Wellington both indicated their full support for the assassination of their own citizens. This sets a dangerous new precedent in the assault on democratic rights by Australian and New Zealand governments, both outside and within their own countries.

The *Australian*’s report stated that the primary targets were three “militants,” including Abu Habib, allegedly a leading figure in Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and former associate of Osama bin Laden.

A “senior counter-terrorism source” told the paper that US authorities notified Australian officials after the drone strike, saying the Australian and NZ citizens were “collateral damage.” The same source described the men as “foot soldiers” for AQAP and said there was “a suggestion they were involved in kidnapping Westerners for ransom.” No evidence has been produced to substantiate these claims.

Harvard’s stepfather Neil Dowrick told the paper that

his son went to Yemen in 2011 “to teach English.” The family was only informed of his assassination in December. His grandmother, Jeanette Harvard, said she had “heard three different stories” from government agencies about how her grandson was killed. She said the government told the family they would have to pay \$40,000 to repatriate her grandson’s remains.

A spokesperson for Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop told the paper that she was “briefed on the situation last year” but so far no government minister has commented in public. The opposition Labor and Green parties—which fully support the Obama administration’s imperialist wars—have remained silent.

Bishop’s Department of Foreign Affairs today defended the drone strike. A spokesperson told Fairfax Media that being an Australian citizen was “not a protection” for people “engaging in potentially criminal activity overseas.”

New Zealand Prime Minister John Key described the assassination as “legitimate ... given that three of the people killed were well known al-Qaeda operatives.” In other words, both governments accept and are complicit in Washington’s lawless operations—killing anyone it likes, without any semblance of due legal process, on mere suspicion of criminality.

In a chilling editorial today, the *Australian* fully endorsed the drone strike program, brushing aside the deaths of bin John and Harvard as “regrettable.” It admitted that “many” of the 3,300 people killed by drones in Pakistan and Yemen were “non-combatant civilians” but justified the murders on the basis that they prevented “the terrorists from committing even more atrocities.”

The Australian and New Zealand governments have not explained why the drone strike was kept secret from the public until now. Both claim that they had no prior

knowledge of, or involvement in the strike, but this is highly unlikely. Australian and New Zealand intelligence agencies were undoubtedly informed, if not directly involved.

Last July, Fairfax Media revealed that Washington was “critically dependent” on the joint US-Australian spy base Pine Gap to pinpoint targets for drone assassinations in the Middle East. According to the reports, based on leaked information, there were “personnel sitting in airconditioned offices in central Australia directly linked, on a minute-by-minute basis, to US and allied military operations in Afghanistan and, indeed, anywhere else across the eastern hemisphere.”

Key yesterday told the media he was aware of bin John’s presence in Yemen last year and had personally signed a warrant for NZ’s spy agency, the Government Communications Security Bureau (GCSB), to monitor him. Key claimed—without providing any evidence—that bin John had attended “some sort of terrorist training camp.”

The revelation that the GCSB was monitoring bin John before he was killed raises the question of whether they provided intelligence to their US counterparts, thus making the Key government an accomplice in the murder of its own citizen. Australia and New Zealand are part of the Five Eyes intelligence sharing alliance, which includes the US, Britain and Canada.

Until last August it was illegal for the GCSB to spy on NZ citizens and residents, but the law was changed—in the face of overwhelming public opposition—after a government-ordered review found that the agency had illegally spied on more than 85 people. The government can now lawfully spy on anyone it likes. It is not clear whether bin John was monitored before or after the law change.

Key used the revelations of the drone assassination to justify broadening the intelligence agency’s powers, telling reporters that it “shows ... the things that I have been saying for quite some time—that we need our intelligence agencies to track our people, that there are New Zealanders who go and put themselves in harm’s way—have all been proven to be correct.”

New Zealand Green Party co-leader Russel Norman criticised Key for “saying it’s OK for foreign governments to execute New Zealanders offshore if they have beliefs about those New Zealand citizens holding views the US government doesn’t like.” This

is completely hypocritical. The Greens supported the last Labour government that sent troops to Iraq and Afghanistan in wars in which drones—along with the full range of assault helicopters and warplanes—were routinely used to kill anti-occupation insurgents and civilians and terrorise the population.



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