

Report finds Border Patrol flew drones away from US borders

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The US Customs and Border Protection flew drones, similar to the ones used to carry out extrajudicial assassinations in Yemen and Pakistan, away from US border areas for more than 1700 hours since 2011, according to an internal investigation by the Department of Homeland Security released last week.

The report comes after the revelation earlier this year that US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) frequently “loans” its drone fleet out to other agencies for surveillance away from US border areas, and has done so more than 700 times.

The report, which was based on an internal audit carried out by the Department of Homeland Security Privacy Office, reveals that CBP, which has been operating the Unmanned Aerial Systems (UAVs) since 2006, flew drones throughout the US northern and southern borders and across the Florida coastline for a total of over 14,000 hours during the same three-year period. An additional 1,594 hours were spent on training and maintenance, with the remaining 9 percent of flight time allotted for monitoring “other airspace,” meaning the US interior.

The operation of unmanned drones above the US mainland clearly contradicts the CBP’s stated aim of securing US borders and coastline. Despite this, the report claims that CBP’s tasks “do not limit use exclusively to border and coastal areas.” The additional certifications of authorization (COAs) for the UAV include monitoring disaster areas and assisting in law enforcement with “multiple agencies.” The document asserts that even these guidelines can be rewritten or altogether ignored in “emergency situations.”

Under the UAV program, CBP is allowed to hold all information gathered for up to five years for use in “analysis and intelligence products.” Although the agency asserts that all information obtained is subject

to protections from abuse and boasts of an assortment of guidelines aimed at insuring constitutionality, the GAO notes that the “review did not address the extent to which CBP had institutionalized the procedures reported as helping to protect privacy and civil liberties through written policies.”

The rubber stamp character of such protections is documented in the report itself, which notes that the DHS Privacy Office, among other groups, “is responsible for embedding and enforcing privacy protections and transparency in DHS activities.” As the report shows, the only “transparency” on offer is the DHS’s bald assertion of the mandate to pilot drones throughout the US.

Under the Obama administration drone usage has expanded drastically. Under the Federal Aviation Authority Modernization and Reform Act of 2012, the FAA would be required to completely open up US skies to drone flight by 2015. In 2013, the Electronic Frontier Foundation reported that drone flights across the US had increased eightfold in the period from 2010 to 2012.

Overseas, armed drones piloted from the US have contributed to the deaths of thousands of people in the past decade. Due to the vast expansion of drone technology, it is estimated that by the end of the decade tens of thousands of UAVs will be in use across the United States.

The expanded use of unmanned drones throughout the country is in line with the basic premise of the “War on Terror,” which maintains that the entire world has become a battlefield subject to not only covert monitoring, but also extra-judicial homicides and bombardment, all carried out remotely through drone strikes.



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