

Report documents carnage of US drone war in Yemen

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A report released this week by the Open Society Justice Initiative (OSJI), titled “Death by Drone: Civilian Harm Caused by U.S. Targeted Killings in Yemen,” documents the deadly carnage inflicted by Hellfire missile strikes in US President Barack Obama’s criminal drone war in Yemen.

Drone and other airstrikes have been launched under the authority of either the CIA or the Pentagon’s Joint Special Operations Command against suspected members of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) throughout the country since 2002.

These strikes were permitted by former dictator Ali Abdullallah Saleh and the recently ousted Abd Rabbuh Mansour Hadi, who was installed as president by the US and Saudi Arabia. The Yemeni government often claimed responsibility for attacks as a cover for the American government’s actions.

While the US supports Saudi Arabia in its campaign of daily airstrikes against Houthi rebels, who oppose AQAP, it has continued its own air campaign in Yemen. The latest American drone strike hit the city of Mukalla on Sunday, killing as many as seven people.

The first known airstrikes carried out by the Obama administration came on December 17, 2009, when a cruise missile loaded with cluster bombs slammed into the village of Al Majala in Abyan province. While purportedly targeted at an AQAP training camp, it killed at least 44 civilians, including five pregnant women and 21 children. A separate strike the same day killed four people in Arhab.

Since then, there have been at least 121 drone and other airstrikes that have taken the lives of as many as 1,100 people, most of them officially classified as combatants. As a means of limiting the official civilian casualty count in any particular attack, President Obama approved the redefinition of a “combatant” as

any male of military service age killed or injured by a drone strike.

In addition to strikes targeted at specific individuals, in 2012 Obama authorized the CIA to use “signature” strikes against targets in Yemen. The decision to launch a signature strike is based purely on patterns of behaviors that the CIA has determined mark a terrorist, meaning many attacks have launched against unknown persons based purely on movements observed from afar by surveillance drones, including their carrying of firearms, which is common in Yemeni tribal society.

Anwar Al Awlaki became the first US citizen to be deliberately targeted and killed by a drone strike on September 30, 2011. Last year, the Obama administration released a legal memo authored by the Justice Department to justify the killing. It asserts that the US President has the power to kill a US citizen, without charges or trial.

President Obama gave a speech at the National Defense University in 2013 in which he outlined supposed guidelines and limits on drone killings. He stated that “before any strike is taken, there must be near-certainty that no civilians will be killed or injured.”

The OSJI review of nine separate drone strikes carried out between 2012 and 2014 reveals this statement to be a blatant lie. The report found that 26 civilians had been killed and 13 injured in this handful of attacks. Investigators traveled to the areas where the strikes occurred and interviewed survivors and the families of those killed.

A drone strike on April 19, 2014 in the Al Sawmaah district of Al Bayda province killed four workers and wounded five others. The men were traveling together in a car when a missile fired from a CIA drone hit a vehicle allegedly carrying AQAP militants

approximately thirty meters behind them, blowing up their car as well.

Hussein Nasser Abu Bakr al-Khushm, a father of one of the victims, told investigators that he was devastated by the death of his son, Sanad Hussein, who had just gotten a visa to work in Saudi Arabia.

“The news fell on our ears like thunderbolt,” he said. “I got motionless. Even when his body was brought to the village for burial I could not go to have a last look at him. Until this moment, I’m still unable to figure out what happened to my son. They were killed by an American drone.”

Investigators spoke to Musa Ahmed Ali Al Jarraah a 15-year-old boy who survived a strike by two Hellfire missiles on a home in the village of Silat Al Jaarrah on the night of January 23, 2013.

“It was a US drone,” Al Jaraah said. “I saw it while I was on my way home. It flew so low I could view it easily. It had long wings in the rear, its size was not large and it had a head that looked like a camel’s head.”

A crowd of approximately 30 people had gathered outside the home to watch the village’s only television when the missiles struck. The strike injured five civilians including Al Jaraah, who suffered shrapnel wound to his abdomen. A ten-year-old girl, Iftikar Abdoh Mohammed, sustained minor injuries when she was hit in the head with shrapnel.

On September 2, 2012, a Hellfire missile launched by an American drone blew up a truck carrying a group of qat merchants and several others who were returning home from a day at the market in the city of Radaa. The strike killed 12 out of the 14 passengers in the truck, including Rasilah Ali Al Faqih, who was pregnant, and her 10-year-old daughter Dawlah Nasser Salah.

The truck’s driver, Nasser Mabkhout, who survived despite being severely burned, described the attack and its aftermath to the investigators:

“Before we arrived at the junction that leads to the unpaved road of the village, two aircraft approached the front of the car, one white and the other black, as far as I can remember. They approached us more closely, and we started to exchange humor that they would attack us, and we laughed. Our laughter was cut off by two shells...I saw the dead bodies scattered in and around the car, some of them beheaded. I couldn’t differentiate between the bodies of the dead.”

The Yemeni government paid \$4,654 for burial expenses to each victim’s family, and eventually paid out a paltry restitution to the families: \$32,578 for each individual killed and \$13,962 for each person wounded.

As with other drone strikes, the attack on the merchants continues to terrorize civilians long after the victims’ bodies have been buried and restitution paid out to the families. “Since the incident, my family and I as well as the villagers live in constant fear,” one of the victims’ uncles told investigators. “The horror increases with the constant over-flights of the US aircrafts. We go to our farms in fear, our children are afraid to go to school, and at bedtime, women remain in constant fear.”



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