

Cameron government justifies targeted assassinations of UK citizens

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UK Prime Minister David Cameron's announcement in parliament Monday that he had authorised the extrajudicial killings of British citizens in Syria raises issues of fundamental importance.

In a statement, supposedly on the refugee crisis in Europe, Cameron revealed that he had sanctioned the drone attack that killed Reyaad Khan and Ruhul Amin on August 21, in Raqqah, Syria. A third person, yet unnamed, was also killed in the strike. Three days later, another British national, Junaid Hussain, was killed in a US drone strike.

The Hellfire missile fired from the Reaper drone that killed Khan and Amin was operated by a pilot 3,000 miles away at the Royal Air Force's base in Lincolnshire, England.

Cameron asserted that the killings were "entirely lawful, necessary and proportionate" and that the government had exercised Britain's "inherent right to self-protection" on grounds of "national security".

Khan had gone to Syria to fight with ISIS (Islamic State) and was involved in plotting terror attacks on the UK, he alleged.

"In this area, there is no Government we can work with; we have no military on the ground to detain those preparing plots; and there was nothing to suggest that Reyaad Khan would ever leave Syria or desist from his desire to murder us at home, so we had no way of preventing his planned attacks on our country without taking direct action."

Even setting aside the fact that Britain, along with the US, France and the Gulf states, has worked to systematically destabilise the regime of Bashar Al-Assad—considered an obstacle to western interests in the region—Cameron's statement is specious from beginning to end.

The attack has clear parallels with the Obama administration's policy of extrajudicial executions and

constitutes a violation of every democratic safeguard and the rule of law.

The prime minister refused to say what plots Khan was allegedly involved in, stating only that they included preparations "to attack high-profile public commemorations, including those taking place this summer."

To the extent that any "commemorations" have been specified, those suggested by the media—the celebration of Victory in Japan day or, alternatively, Armed Forces Day—passed off peacefully *before* Khan and his alleged associates were killed.

A further question mark is thrown over the prime minister's statement by the claims of Rupert Murdoch's *Sun* newspaper.

On Tuesday, the newspaper's editorial boasted that, "It was one of our undercover reporters Hussain groomed online, aiming to bring slaughter to our streets."

On June 28, the *Sun* reported that a "terror group's plot to explode a pressure cooker bomb—killing soldiers and bystanders on the route—*failed after one of its leaders in Syria unwittingly recruited an undercover Sun investigator to carry it out.*" [emphasis added] According to the *Sun*, the newspaper then alerted the authorities about the plot.

Moreover, while Cameron said that Khan and Amin were killed on August 21, Khan's death had been reported weeks before, on July 21, by a host of national newspapers, including the *Daily Telegraph*, *Daily Mail*, the *Times* and the *Guardian*. Then it was claimed that he was the victim of unspecified "coalition" air strikes.

No account has been given for this discrepancy. At any rate, nothing the prime minister said can be taken at face value. If Khan was really directing a major terror attack on British soil, how would killing him in Syria prevent it being carried through? Who in the UK—besides an undercover journalist at Murdoch's tabloid—was

approached to carry out the attack?

The fact remains that no evidence of a “clear and present danger to the United Kingdom” has been presented. On the contrary.

In his remarks to parliament Cameron said, “our intelligence agencies identified the direct threat to the UK from this individual [Khan]. They informed me and other senior ministers of this threat. At a meeting of the most senior members of the National Security Council, we agreed that *should the right opportunity arise*, then the military should take action.”

The drone attack came “after meticulous planning”, Cameron asserted, during which the military assessed the “target location and chose the *optimum time* to minimise the risk of civilian casualties.” [emphasis added]

In other words, the resort to extra-judicial murder came not in the heat of the moment, at the height of a national emergency but was planned and authorised in advance, awaiting only the “right opportunity” and “optimum time.”

More fundamentally, even if the allegations against Khan were true, that would not alter the fact that the murder of a citizen by executive fiat is illegal and is an act more properly associated with police-military dictatorships.

All the more striking therefore is the near absence of any protest from within official political circles and the media.

While acting Labour Party leader Harriet Harman thanked Cameron for his briefing, asking only for a summary of his legal advice to be made available, neither the representative of the Scottish National Party, Angus Robertson, nor the Green Party’s Caroline Lucas, made any complaint as to this sinister development in their remarks following the prime minister’s statement.

As for Jeremy Corbyn, who is expected to be announced as Labour’s new party leader at the weekend, the so-called “left” MP made no reference at all to Cameron’s admission that the RAF is now murdering British citizens.

To the extent that the media has raised concerns, these do not go beyond words of friendly advice to the government.

The *Financial Times*, for example, called for a “fuller explanation for targeted killing of jihadis.”

“It is not yet clear why the two men who were killed posed such a danger that they needed to be assassinated”, it wrote, suggesting that while the prime minister “may be understandably reluctant to reveal the secret intelligence underpinning any operation, he should release as much of

the advice as he can in order to reassure the public.”

“If he is to continue applying pre-emptive force in a country or theatre where the UK is not at war, he needs to be backed by the strongest legal and political arguments”, it concluded.

The *FT* article appeared just as Rights Watch (UK) announced it had initiated legal proceedings over the government’s refusal to publish the legal advice of Attorney General Jeremy Wright QC to the National Security Council meeting that sanctioned the attack.

According to reports, Khan was just one amongst several names identified as a target at the National Security Council meeting, confirming that the UK now has its own “kill” list of Britons accused of fighting with ISIS.

Rights Watch (UK) Director Yasmine Ahmed, said “These strikes set a dangerous precedent for UK government activity. The UK government can now kill at will with no oversight.”

Meanwhile, Defence Secretary Michael Fallon confirmed Tuesday that the government is prepared to authorise the killings of other British citizens. “There are other terrorists involved in other plots that may come to fruition over the next few weeks and months and we wouldn’t hesitate to take similar action again”, he told reporters.

“We don’t have general permission to carry out military operations in Syria”, Fallon acknowledged, before arguing that the prime minister had previously made it “extremely clear that, where there was a vital national interest at stake, *we wouldn’t hesitate to take action rather than seek prior permission, to take action and then come and explain to parliament afterwards and that’s exactly what happened yesterday.*” [emphasis added]



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