

Leaked documents: vast majority of those killed in US drone strikes not intended target

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Secret US government documents published this week by *The Intercept* have shed new light on the bureaucratization and institutionalization of the American government's international drone murder operation.

The documents, a series of secret Pentagon briefing slides and internal reports outlining details of their drone killing programs in Africa and the Middle East, were leaked to *The Intercept* by an anonymous source within the intelligence community who has worked on drone killing operations.

Under the guise of the “war on terror” that began in 2001, two separate but parallel drone assassination operations, one overseen by the Pentagon and the other by the CIA, have been developed to carry out regular drone strikes in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Yemen, Somalia and Iraq. These operations have now been extended to Syria.

One selection of documents given to *The Intercept* provides a summary of a military campaign in Afghanistan, codenamed Operation Haymaker, carried out in Kunar and Nuristan provinces between January 2012 and February 2013 that highlights the chaos and death produced by drone assassination attempts.

The internal documents reveal that during a five-month period, ninety percent of those people killed by drone strikes in the operation were not direct targets. Out of the 235 people killed in Operation Haymaker only 35 were direct targets; the other 200 were bystanders. The operation had targeted not only alleged members of Al Qaeda and the Taliban for death, but also members of local Salafist militia groups that were actively resisting the US occupation.

The number of civilians and other unintended targets killed in drone strikes over the last decade has not impacted the rapid growth of the bureaucratic

mechanisms used to target and kill. Over the next four years, the military is planning to expand its drone capability by 50 percent.

The latest leaks about the American drone program also reveal the disturbingly sanitized jargon that government officials use when engaged in plotting assassinations.

The documents refer to a person who has been marked for assassination as an “objective”; in many of the documents this is abbreviated to simply “obj.” The process of hunting down an individual who has been targeted for death is denoted as “find, fix, finish.” The act of murder by drone is referred to as a “kinetic action” or “targeted killing.”

One of the slides provides an overview of the “kill chain” process that is used for approving targeted individuals for death. The process involves two distinct steps, moving from “developing a target” to the “authorization of a target.”

After President Obama gives his assent, an authorized target is moved into a “targeting cycle,” a two-month period in which the military has the authority kill them. Once the military feels they have a fix on their target, they move to the final step, “actioning,” i.e. murder.

When a drone missile is fired and kills its intended target, this is declared to be a “jackpot.” A drone strike that successfully destroys a cell phone sim card that was used to locate and target suspects is referred to as “touchdown.”

If a missile is fired and it does not kill its intended target but instead kills other people, these are reported as “EKIA,” enemies killed in action. Military-aged men killed in drone strikes are routinely declared by the US military to have been an “enemy.”

Detailed dossiers known as “baseball cards” are drawn up by the US military on targeted individuals

with information on their location, day-to-day activity, and any connections to other people that have been targeted for death.

While the first drone missile assassination took place in 2002 under the administration of President George W. Bush, it was only after President Barack Obama took office that the use of drones for killing those designated as terrorists and enemies of the United States was dramatically expanded.

According to a conservative estimate by the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, nearly 2,500 people, including at least 314 civilians, have been killed in drone strikes outside the declared war zones in Iraq and Afghanistan since Obama took office in 2009.

Due to the secretive nature of the drone program, along with its use in Iraq and Afghanistan, the actual total number of people killed is certainly much higher. By September 2010, the list of people in Afghanistan targeted to be killed or captured had grown to 744.

Glenn Carle, a former senior CIA officer in the clandestine services, defended the drone program in an interview with *The Intercept*, stating, “The Obama administration has been quite ruthless in its pursuit of terrorists. If there are people who we, in our best efforts, assess to be trying to kill us, we can make their life as short as possible. And we do it.”

Speaking to *The Intercept*, the former head of the Defense Intelligence Agency, Lieutenant General Michael Flynn, made clear that the entire focus under Obama has been and will continue to be on assassination. “The drone campaign right now really is only about killing. When you hear the phrase ‘capture/kill,’ capture is actually a misnomer. In the drone strategy that we have, ‘capture’ is a lower case ‘c.’ We don’t capture people anymore,” Flynn said.



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