

Trump administration secretly resumes CIA drone assassination program

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The Trump White House has secretly authorized the Central Intelligence Agency to resume drone assassination strikes that in the latter years of the Obama administration had been largely reserved for the US military, the *Wall Street Journal* reported Tuesday.

The *Journal* cited unnamed US officials revealing that the authorization was granted shortly after Trump visited CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia on January 21, the day after his inauguration. No announcement has been made as to the change in policy, and the White House as well as the CIA and the Pentagon have declined to comment on the matter.

According to the report, the authorization initially provided to the CIA was in relation to drone strikes in Syria, where the agency killed Egyptian Al Qaeda leader Abu al Khayr al Masri in an airstrike late last month.

It appears, however, that the policy has already been expanded globally, with an apparent CIA drone strike in Pakistan that killed two men, and a wave of strikes in Yemen—more in a single week this month than in any single year under the Obama administration—for which the Pentagon failed to take responsibility.

The return to drone assassinations by the US intelligence agency is part of a broader turn by the Trump administration toward jettisoning cosmetic restrictions imposed by Obama during his second term. These measures were aimed at providing a veneer of legality for the drone murder program, which had been greatly expanded by the CIA and the Pentagon under Obama, while firmly institutionalizing it as an instrument of the US state.

During the final years of the Obama administration, the CIA and the Pentagon worked in tandem in the drone killing program, with the intelligence agency providing surveillance and location of targets and the

military sending in killer drones to fire the missiles.

The Obama White House presented this arrangement as a bid to lend the drone program a pretense of “transparency,” as the Pentagon would issue reports on its strikes, while the CIA routinely refuses to confirm or deny actions by its own operatives.

In reality, the Pentagon routinely ignores or grossly underestimates its own slaughter of civilians in countries like Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria. And the Obama administration issued a secret order allowing the CIA to continue its covert drone war in northwestern Pakistan’s Federally Administered Tribal Areas near the Afghan border, as part of the attempt to quell the Taliban and other insurgents challenging the US puppet regime in Kabul.

In July 2016, when the Obama administration issued its executive order purporting to sanitize the drone assassination program, the Director of National Intelligence provided an accompanying estimate of the number of civilians killed in drone strikes since Obama’s inauguration in January 2009. The figure given—between 64 and 116—was less than a tenth of the deaths conservatively estimated by independent monitoring groups.

The other consideration in shifting the responsibility from the CIA to the Pentagon was the blatant illegality of intelligence agents—who are not considered legitimate combatants under international law—carrying out lethal operations abroad. By 2013, court cases had been initiated in Pakistan charging CIA personnel with murder and terrorism, while a class action lawsuit by relatives of drone strike victims was also brought against the US government and the CIA. The change in policy was also initiated with an eye toward the threat of possible war crimes prosecutions.

In May of 2013, Obama delivered a speech at the

National Defense University vowing that drone strikes would be launched only against “terrorists” who posed “a continuing and imminent threat to the American people,” and only under conditions of “near-certainty that no civilians will be killed or injured.” The pretense of concern for civilians being blown to pieces as “collateral damage” inflicted by drone strikes was meant merely to provide a “humanitarian” cover for cold-blooded assassinations and massacres.

The executive order issued by Obama in July 2016 repeated this language, while institutionalizing the drone assassination program and reaffirming the supposedly inalienable right of the US president to order state murder by means of Hellfire missiles of anyone in any part of the world, including US citizens.

This is the criminal political legacy that Obama has handed off to the Trump administration. Trump is now dispensing with the pretense of humanitarian concern, while also satisfying the demands of the Pentagon and the CIA to streamline the killing process to allow commanders and operatives on the ground to order drone strikes without having them vetted through Washington.

This shift may signal a departure from the Obama administration’s signature “terror Tuesdays,” in which the Oval Office was turned into a headquarters for approving “kill lists” and organizing “targeted killings,” with the responsibility instead being delegated to US military commanders and CIA agents.

Citing senior US officials, the *Washington Post* reported on Tuesday, “The Trump administration is close to finishing a review that would make it easier for the Pentagon to launch counterterrorism strikes anywhere in the world by lowering the threshold on acceptable civilian casualties and scaling back other constraints imposed by the Obama administration.”

The changes, the *Post* reported, “would empower the Pentagon to make decisions on targets without approval from the White House and potentially scrap the ‘near-certainty’ standard of no civilian deaths for strikes outside war zones.”

As part of the move to waive such restrictions, Trump has signed off on a request to designate three provinces of Yemen as “areas of active hostilities,” i.e., free-fire zones, where the rules on civilian deaths do not apply. His administration is reportedly about to grant similar approval in relation to Somalia.

Again, this is not an innovation on the part of the Trump administration, but follows similar dispensation granted by Obama in Libya during the bombardment of the coastal city of Sirt last summer.

Whatever the tactical differences between the Democrats and the Republicans over US foreign policy, both defend Washington’s right to murder people indiscriminately in every corner of the planet.



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