

Trump signs executive order cementing secrecy over US airstrikes and shadow wars

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President Donald Trump signed an executive order on Wednesday, March 7 rescinding a previously toothless measure introduced by the Obama administration in July 2016 for the reporting of civilian casualties inflicted by US drone strikes.

Unaccountable drone strikes, including targeted assassinations, were a defining feature of the Obama presidency, expanding far beyond what his predecessor George W. Bush had initiated.

Under the original order, signed under the pretext of providing “transparency” to the global assassination program, the US government was to make publicly available an annual report on civilians killed by airstrikes outside of US recognized “conventional” war zones. The annual report, which was not released in 2017, was deemed “superfluous” by the National Security Council in statement released with Trump’s newly signed executive order.

The Security Council statement continued, stating that the previous, “requirements ... do not improve government transparency, but rather distract our intelligence professionals from their primary mission.”

The first report issued by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (DNI) following the signing of Barack Obama’s executive order in 2016, drastically underreported civilian and combat casualties from airstrikes outside of war zones from 2009 to 2015. In that report the DNI only acknowledged 473 strikes outside of “areas of active hostilities.” The report stated that between 2,372 and 2,581 “combatants” were killed and an additional 64-116 “non-combatants” were murdered.

These figures have not been creditably substantiated by any other media, academic or reporting agency. The *Bureau of Investigative Journalism*, which has been tracking drone strikes for over a decade, estimated

between 258 and 633 civilians had been killed between January 2009 and December 2015 in Pakistan alone.

Meanwhile a June 2017 report provided by the Columbia Law School Human Rights Clinic, in conjunction with the Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies, titled “Out of the Shadows,” stated that the US only acknowledged approximately 20 percent of reported drone strikes. The report also alleged that over 400 civilian casualties had occurred in Pakistan, Somalia and Yemen, approximately four times more than the 116 alleged casualties claimed by the US government.

The definition of what constitutes a war zone is also not clear, and is open to interpretation and revision. Recognized war zones include Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, while parts of Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia and Libya have also at times been included in what are deemed “areas of active hostilities.” These “areas” were also excluded from the policy, meaning that casualty figures were neither tracked nor fully accounted for.

The previous policy also did not require the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to report the drone strikes it conducted in remote locations such as on the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan.

In addition to relaxing requirements on reporting, the Trump administration has also adjusted limits on acceptable targets. Previous self-imposed constraints, including a May 2013 Obama instruction that individuals targeted for assassination by the military or CIA should be high-level militants with a “near certainty” of being present, have now been changed to target regular or low-level “jihadists” with a “reasonable certainty” of being present.

While Obama began his presidency by setting a deadly precedent, launching 186 drone strikes on

Yemen, Somalia and Pakistan in his first two years in office, Trump has eclipsed his predecessor. According to US Central Command (CENTCOM), Trump launched 238 strikes in those same countries during his first two years in office.

It is unlikely that a true accounting of the number of fatalities inflicted by illegal US airstrikes will ever be forthcoming. The US military, as seen in the 2017 “Mosul Massacre,” regularly presumes that those it kills are terrorists or jihadists, regardless of the facts. Investigations into civilian casualties are only initiated by the US government after claims by non-government organizations, allied governments, journalists or academics raise concerns. These investigations are slow to release findings and, if fault is found—a rare occurrence—a hush payment of a few thousand dollars is the most victims of US imperialism can hope to receive.

Despite the shrouded, yet deadly, record of civilian casualties inflicted by drone strikes, the Democrats have mounted little opposition to the Trump’s administration escalating use of this so-called “tool.”

Democratic presidential candidates, including the “anti-war” candidates, Tulsi Gabbard and Bernie Sanders, have stated their support for drones and surgical strikes. In an interview with *The Intercept* in January 2018, Gabbard stated that she still believes that “the right approach [is] to take in these quick-strike forces, surgical strikes in and out ... and the very limited use of drones.”

Meanwhile, Bernie Sanders publicly stated in 2015, when asked about the use of drone strikes and special forces troops under a Sanders administration, “All of that and more.” “Surgical strikes” in Yemen have targeted weddings, funerals, school buses, hospitals and street markets.

The use of drones and unmanned aerial vehicles in conjunction with artificial intelligence will continue to increase as US imperialism prepares for “great-power conflicts” with Russia and China. Two weeks ago, Boeing unveiled its “loyal wingman combat drone concept,” which it has been developing locally in Brisbane, Australia, as part of a classified program for the Royal Australian Air Force.

A similar concept vehicle for the US Air Force dubbed the XQ-58A was revealed this week and completed its inaugural flight on March 5. The

XQ-58A is a stealthy drone that will be augmented with artificial intelligence targeting capabilities, and is capable of carrying small diameter bombs. With an estimated \$3 million dollar cost for each drone, the Air Force expects to purchase a “high volume” of the drone, which can be operated independently or as a cooperative “swarm” under the command of a nearby manned aircraft.



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