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Obama's drone order: Institutionalizing a state murder operation

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Over three-and-a-half months after promising “in the coming weeks” an “assessment” of the number of civilians slaughtered in illegal drone missile strikes carried out in countries “outside of areas of active hostilities,” the Obama administration on Friday released numbers that represent a fraction of those documented by various independent investigations.

The report, drafted by the office of the Director of National Intelligence (DNI), was accompanied by an executive order reaffirming that the US president has the unquestionable right to order the state murder of anyone in any part of the world, while claiming a commitment to “promote best practices that reduce the likelihood of civilian casualties.”

The words “best practices,” drawn from the dry lexicon of corporate management, recur three times in the US president’s executive order, underscoring the way in which the methods of Murder Inc. have become routinized and institutionalized within the American capitalist state.

It is to further this process that the White House released its phony numbers, along with the hypocritical order feigning commitment to reducing the number of civilians killed by the Hellfire missiles fired from thousands of miles away by CIA and Pentagon operatives viewing their victims over video screens.

The new policy, according to a White House release, is designed to “develop a sustainable legal and policy architecture to guide our counterterrorism activities going forward,” and to “institutionalize and enhance best practices regarding US counterterrorism operations and other US operations involving the use of force...”

In other words, with barely six months left in office, Barack Obama is determined to secure a core element of his loathsome political legacy—turning the White House Oval Office into headquarters for drawing up “kill lists” and organizing “targeted killings,” i.e., political assassinations of foreign nationals and US citizens alike.

The Obama White House has set into motion a drone expansion program that will increase the military’s capacity to launch assassination strikes by 50 percent, while keeping the covert CIA drone program in place. All of those who appear in a position to succeed him have endorsed drone killings. In the case of the presumptive Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton, she signed off on them as Obama’s secretary of state.

As for the pretense of concern for the “collateral damage” inflicted by this campaign—men, women and children who are not deliberately targeted but nonetheless blown to pieces—it is intended merely to provide a pseudo-humanitarian cover for cold-blooded murder.

Even the *New York Times*, which has in the past defended Obama’s drone assassinations, was compelled to note that the executive order and the casualty estimate from the DNI were released on the Friday afternoon of a long holiday weekend. This is a traditional time period for releases that the government hopes will escape close public scrutiny.

In this case, it is for good reason. According to the estimate provided by the DNI, the number of civilians killed “outside areas of active hostilities,” i.e., excluding the wholesale slaughter in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria, between Obama’s inauguration in January 2009 and the end of 2015, amounted to a grand total of between 64 and 116. This compared in the US intelligence estimate to between 2,372 and 2,581 “combatant” deaths.

This admission represents an incremental change from when the architect of the drone murder program, now CIA director, John Brennan, claimed in 2011 that over the previous year there had not been “a single collateral death because of the exceptional proficiency, precision of the capabilities” of the remote-control killing machine. At the time, Pakistan was counting its civilian victims in the hundreds, if not thousands, including 41 tribal leaders gathered in an open air, government-approved meeting in March of that year, who were ripped to pieces by four Hellfire missiles fired from multiple US drones.

Nonetheless, the numbers now provided by the DNI are absurdly low. Among the most cited sources on the subject, the Bureau of Investigative Journalism has provided a conservative estimate that as many as 1,138 civilians have been killed by American drones—that is, tens times as many as are admitted by Washington.

Even this figure is a serious underestimation of the real human toll of Obama’s “targeted killing” program. A study done in 2014 by the human rights group Reprieve documented that in

attempting to assassinate 41 individuals deemed by the White House to be “terrorists”—a category that includes anyone resisting American occupation or opposing US policy—drone strikes killed an estimated 1,147 people.

Among those reacting to Thursday’s press release was Letta Tayler, a Human Rights Watch researcher who documented through interviews with witnesses, relatives and officials the deaths of at least 57 civilians in US drone strikes in Yemen between 2009 and 2013. “I find it difficult to believe that in examining just seven attacks I happened upon well over half of the civilian deaths that the US acknowledges,” Tayler told the *Washington Post*.

One explanation for the immense discrepancy between the US government’s figures and those of virtually all other sources is that the Pentagon and the CIA have a policy of presumption of guilt for anyone killed by a drone missile. Males between the ages of 18 and 80 are automatically deemed “combatants,” and in many cases women and children are treated the same way.

Director of National Intelligence James Clapper provided a simpler—and chilling—explanation Friday for the disparity in casualty estimates: the higher totals were the result of the “deliberate spread of misinformation by some actors, including terrorist organizations.” The meaning is clear. Those questioning a global assassination program carried out in the name of a “war on terror” are themselves suspect of acting in league with terrorists and, logically, potential targets.

The drone murder program—the signature policy of the presidency of Barack Obama—sums up the criminality not only of the president himself, but also of those he serves, the parasitical financial oligarchy and the vast military-intelligence apparatus. In the defense of their interests, war abroad is inevitably joined with repression at home.

The Obama administration’s move to sanctify this assassination program as a permanent institution of the American state must serve as a serious warning to the working class.