

**Univerzita Karlova v Praze
Právnická fakulta**

Lethal drone strikes from the perspective of international law

Studentská vědecká a odborná činnost

Kategorie: Magisterské studium

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2014

7. ročník SVO

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Foreword

Lethal drone strikes as a method of combating terrorism are described as very efficient. But by targeting terrorists in inhabited areas, vast numbers of civilian non-combatants are either left dead or injured as a result of the strike. Also arguable is the extent of guilt of the targeted individuals. Sometimes it can be clearly determined by evidence that one is clearly conspiring to inflict harm on the USA and due to the nature of the environment where he is hiding it is impossible to restrain him and bring him to justice (in front of a court). However, sometimes very little evidence is necessary for someone to be put on the terrorist (kill) list. Also this list is created only by the executive power of the government; there is no review or authorization from the judiciary power. The legislative power simply gave the executive a *blanco cheque* on combatting terrorism. The individual is granted no right to prove his innocent and is automatically labeled guilty. I personally believe this approach is wrong and has no place in the 21 century, since as for example we all are humans and as humans sometimes make mistakes and mistakes concerning people placed on that list can have fatal consequences. Khalid El-Masri¹ a German citizen abducted by the CIA may serve as an example. While on vacation in Macedonia, due to having a very similar name as an individual placed of the terrorist list. Afterwards he was subjected to a yearlong intense questioning that allegedly also involved the use of various methods of torture. This clearly demonstrates, that the executive branch of the -Federal government is not infallible. Therefore I firmly believe, that solely the executive branch of the US government is not sufficiently competent to beyond any doubt determine whether an individual is a terrorist or not. From this deducing it is also arguable, if it is legal for them solely to judge to what extent are they committing acts of self-defense and to what extent are they breaching human rights. Since the protection of human right does not end even in the event of war.

¹ <http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2012/05/16/241585/german-sues-cia-abduction-torture/>

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to assess from an international law perspective the legality of one of the most deadly forms of targeted killing, “lethal drone strikes”. The reason for such specification is that this method of targeted killing is becoming clearly the most preferable and according to some the most “effective” means of combating terrorism. The analyses will primary focus on the action and interpretations provided by the US government. Since the US is the most notable and active propagator of this “method of war” against terrorism.

Moreover as many things, even this legal problem has many interpretations and the understanding of this topic is subjected to various perceptions. The aim of this paper is however not to assess the efficiency of this method of combating terrorism. But from a legal perspective analyze its legality since many countries, individuals and organizations doubt the official US interpretation as the most efficient and legal means of self-defense. Therefore this paper will analyze both sides of this dispute and try to determine which of the sides is closer to being right from the perspective of international law.

USA is not the only country operating drones for the means of targeted killing, the other publicly known operator being Israel². There are many other countries³ operating their drone programs potentially capable of using these machines as a tool for targeted killing⁴ (but currently mostly used only as a surveillance⁵ tool). USA is currently the only country, whose actions regarding this matter are debated on the floor of UNHRC. Evaluating targeted killing as a whole, from the point of human rights abuse, is also a great deal of difference to only focusing on lethal drone strikes. When comparing: lethal drone strikes that often cost life of innocent bystanders, and highly organized undercover “hit” operations on suspects who have beyond doubt committed crimes, that would either in front of USA⁶ or Israel⁸ (Operation Wrath of God) courts result in a death sentence (⁹Eichmann) (¹⁰McVeigh). The aim of this paper is to analyze the situation from this perspective with the focus on the currently largest operator, since I personally consider being this the most serious issue.

² <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/Digital-Library/Articles/Special-Feature/Detail/?lng=en&id=163091&contextid774=163091&contextid775=163086&tabid=1454265792>

³ <http://www.flightglobal.com/news/articles/italian-predator-bs-start-afghan-duty-395035/>

⁴ http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/30/world/europe/us-proposes-arming-6-of-italys-reaper-drones.html?_r=0

⁵ http://rt.com/news/korea-north-south-drone-821/?utm_source=browser&utm_medium=application_chrome&utm_campaign=chrome

⁶ <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=28686>

⁷ <http://www.findingdulcinea.com/news/on-this-day/July-August-08/On-this-Day--Saddam-Husseini-Survives-Assassination-Attempt.html>

⁸ <http://www.militaryphotos.net/forums/archive/index.php/t-20663.html>

⁹ <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/eichcap.html>

¹⁰ <http://edition.cnn.com/US/9706/13/mcveigh.sentencing/>

General description of US position (author is the current (3/2014) director of CIA)

“¹¹The United States is in an armed conflict with Al-Qaeda, the Taliban, and associated forces, in response to the 9/11 attacks, and we may also use force consistent with our inherent right of national self-defense. (However self-defense from the perspective of international law is allowed only against armed attacks of other nations. But we may assume that this type of self-defense is on the bases of the below described 9/11 Security council resolution) There is nothing in international law that bans the use of remotely piloted aircraft for the purpose or that prohibits us from using lethal force against our enemies outside of an active battlefield, at least when the country involved consents or is unable or unwilling to take action against the threat.” This comment was made by John O. Brennan current Director of the CIA, former Barrack Obamas Homeland Security Advisor. This statement is highly disputable from the perspective of international law. However it is true that there is nothing that explicitly bans the use of lethal drone strikes as a method of combating terrorism. But there are rules that have been set and discussed further in this paper that may not be violated under any circumstances. Moreover let’s firstly analyze this situation based upon provided examples. From them we are able to determine that definitely not every single drone strike is conducted in accordance with international law.

Examples of lethal drones strikes

It is almost impossible to state the exact number of lethal drone strikes that have occurred, because the US government has so far not disclosed its official records. When the strikes reach media the government sometimes confirms reports, sometime it does not release any comments at all, sometimes something is “classified information” therefore official and unofficial records vary¹². Some stats exist, but they are not 100% accurate due to the nature of the vast and remote areas subjected to lethal drones strikes it is simply impossible to independently beyond all doubt record, all the operations. Due to the rather vast number of lethal drone strikes that have occurred in the not so distant past, only statistics and some specific examples will be provided.

Before presenting the statistics note-worthy is a 2012 comment made by President Obama regarding this issue: “*drones had not caused a huge number of civilian casualties*”¹³.

¹¹ <http://www.wilsoncenter.org/event/the-efficacy-and-ethics-us-counterterrorism-strategy>

¹² <http://web.law.columbia.edu/sites/default/files/microsites/human-rights-institute/CountingDroneDeathsPresserFINAL.pdf>

¹³ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-16804247>

The statistics only include casualties resulting from actions caused by drones.

Country:	Number of strikes:	Total killed:	Civilians killed:	Children killed:	Injured:
Somalia ¹⁴	5-8	10-24	0-1	0	2-3
Pakistan ¹⁵	383	2296-3718	416-957	168-202	1089-639
Yemen ¹⁶	61-71	293-430	30-74	6	76-187
Somalia	5-8	10-24	0-1	0	2-3

Examples

Example 1

¹⁷Anwar al-Awlaki – known as the “Bin Ladin of internet¹⁸”: Otherwise a US citizen by birth, but at the time of death a Yemeni Iman (but still holding US citizenship). He was characterized by the US government officials as a senior talent recruiter and motivator working for the Al-Qaeda. Due to his presence on YouTube, he had inspired many Muslims to radicalize and even established email contact with many. Before relocating to Yemen he was an Iman at the Falls Church Virginia mosque (2001-02) where he both met three – 9/11 hijackers¹⁹ and for the first time also Mayor Nidal Malik Hasan²⁰ (responsible for the first Fort Hood shooting). He was accused of being allegedly involved in those and other attacks threatening the freedoms and liberty of American citizens all over the world. The “special” thing about this case is the fact that al-Awlaki a US citizen was added on to the “drone kill” list of his own government for the first time in US history. When localized, travelling in a convoy on a public road in Yemen, al-Awlaki was hit by a lethal drone strike on the 30/9/2011. Al-Awlaki was officially wanted by both the Yemeni and US government. From the perspective of international law, it is evident, that the countries cooperated regarding this matter and the US drone was officially permitted to enter the Yemeni airspace for this purpose. Based upon the available evidence al-Awlaki was an imminent threat to the security of the United States of America. Thought an extrajudicial assassination of a citizen by its home-state is absolutely unacceptable in my opinion in the 21 century, however very recently a US court ruled that it is not unconstitutional²¹.

¹⁴ <http://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/category/projects/drones/drones-somalia/>

¹⁵ <http://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/2014/04/01/march-2014-update-us-covert-actions-in-pakistan-yemen-and-somalia/>

¹⁶ <http://natsec.newamerica.net/drones/pakistan/analysis>

¹⁷ <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=123894237>

¹⁸ http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/nation/2010-08-25-1A_Awlaki25_CV_N.htm

¹⁹ <http://abcnews.go.com/Blotter/FtHoodInvestigation/anwar-awlaki/story?id=9200720&page=1>

²⁰ <http://abcnews.go.com/Blotter/major-hasans-mail-wait-join-afterlife/story?id=9130339>

²¹ <http://rt.com/usa/drone-lawsuit-americans-yemen-565/>

Example 2

Another interesting case is Abdurrahman al-Awlaki a 16 year old son of the previously mentioned victim. He had no “work” connection other than that his father was an alleged member (similar to the 15 year old Canadian citizen Omar Khadr²² who was detained without charged for almost 8 years at the US Guantanamo facility and allegedly though a minor also subjected to torture) of al-Qaeda. Like his father he was by birth a US-citizen. Approximately 3 weeks after his father’s assassination he was also hit by a lethal drone strike. With him were also killed his 17 years old cousin and other 9 innocent bystanders. The US drones were “hunting” a different targeted that was supposed to be located in the same building. The target was not there so “by accident” 11 innocent people died. This is an undisputable violation of basic human rights and international law²³.

Example 3

²⁴Last but not least as an example shall serve a very recent drone strike, that took place in December 2013 in Yemen. A U.S military Joint Special Operations Command operated Drone ²⁵fired missiles at a line of vehicles that were part of a wedding procession and evidence suggests that some if not all those killed and wounded were civilians. Human Rights Watch found that the operation did not comply with the targeted killing policies newly set up by President Obama a in detail will be reviewed further.

United States of America – internal policy

This is the cited newly established US policy regarding it use of lethal drones strikes:

“First, there must be a legal basis for using lethal force, whether it is against a senior operational leader of a terrorist organization or the forces that organization is using or intends to use to conduct terrorist attacks.

Second, the United States will use lethal force only against a target that poses a continuing, imminent threat to U.S. persons. It is simply not the case that all terrorists pose a continuing, imminent threat to U.S. persons; if a terrorist does not pose such a threat, the United States will not use lethal force.

Third, the following criteria must be met before lethal action may be taken:

²²http://web.archive.org/web/20071203140702/http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/story/11128331/follow_omar_khadr_from_an_al_qaeda_childhood_to_a_gitmo_cell/print

²³ <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/10/world/middleeast/anwar-al-awlaki-a-us-citizen-in-americas-cross-hairs.html>

²⁴ http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/report-deadly-drone-strike-in-yemen-failed-to-comply-with-obamas-rules-to-protect-civilians/2014/02/19/46bc68f2-997d-11e3-b931-0204122c514b_story.html

²⁵ http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/officials-us-drone-strike-kills-13-in-yemen/2013/12/12/3b070f0a-6375-11e3-91b3-f2bb96304e34_story.html

- 1) *Near certainty that the terrorist target is present;*
- 2) *Near certainty that non-combatants will not be injured or killed;*
- 3) *An assessment that capture is not feasible at the time of the operation;*
- 4) *An assessment that the relevant governmental authorities in the country where action is contemplated cannot or will not effectively address the threat to U.S. persons; and*
- 5) *An assessment that no other reasonable alternatives exist to effectively address the threat to U.S. persons.*

Finally, whenever the United States uses force in foreign territories, international legal principles, including respect for sovereignty and the law of armed conflict, impose important constraints on the ability of the United States to act unilaterally – and on the way in which the United States can use force. The United States respects national sovereignty and international law.²⁶”

It is obvious from the previously mentioned examples that these pre-defined points are not always met and what’s worse, once they are breached no consequences result from such an error that claims the lives of many innocent civilians. Especially when viewing example 3, there were no terrorists present. It is an outrageous and obvious violation of both international law and own internal policy.

“It is also important to note, that from the second half of 2012 President Obama authorized the CIA and the JSOC (Joint special operations command) to fire on targets based solely on their intelligence “signatures”- patterns of behavior that are detected through signals intercepts, human sources and aerial surveillance, and that indicate the presence of an important operative or a plot against U.S interests. Under the previous rules, lethal drone strikes could have been only authorized against known terrorist leaders – with confirmed locations.”²⁷

In my understanding this basically means, that under the previous rules, the executive branch of the US government was authorized to perform extrajudicial killings. On the bases of assuming ones guilt only in cases were absolutely unchallengeable evidence was present, thought omitting the very basic principles of law and without a legal obligation for its action to comply with international law. Currently the executive branch of the US government has formally declared that all of their actions will strictly comply with international law. However from the previously mentioned examples (especially 2 and 3) it is slightly obvious, that it was a mere declaration, from the “targeting” perspective. Guild is automatically assumed based upon from my perspective uncertain evidence (signature patterns), which is a far greater violation of human rights than under the previous rules. Since under my understanding legitimate targets under the previous rules were only individuals, that either directly confessed publicly (video confessions) that they either already had or are willing to commit acts that

²⁶ http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/uploads/2013.05.23_fact_sheet_on_ppg.pdf

²⁷ http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/white-house-approves-broader-yemen-drone-campaign/2012/04/25/gIQA82U6hT_story.html?wpisrc=nl_headlines

might endanger the freedom and liberty of American people. There was sufficient evidence against those individuals that if apprehended they would have almost certainly be sentenced to death by a US court, shortly said it was clear that they were enemy combatants. (But based upon the presented examples their understanding was slightly different) Nowadays it is uncertain who can be targeted since the text can have an even far larger variety of interpretations. It may be even enough for someone to be often meeting a friend that is listed as a known AL 'Qaida suspect (with him not knowing) and suddenly becoming a target for a lethal drone strike. I understand that my interpretation might seem vague and absolutely unbelievable, but from the previously mentioned examples, it is evident that targeted were also people that had no direct plausible work link to Al-Qaeda, like friends or relatives. This is an even far greater violation of human rights, because a lot of those people cannot by label even under the wildest interpretations as "enemy combatants". Therefore it is impossible to state that they were fighting in a war and that the laws of Ius bellum should apply. (Described further below) From this deducing the new policy should have addressed all the criticism from the international community, but the only thing it really did, was that it made it officially even easier, from the US national interpretation to violate human rights.

United States of America legal interpretation

From the national perspective, solely the executive branch²⁸ of the US government is currently authorizing lethal drone strikes²⁹ absolutely without any review from any other branch of the government. Therefore, from the US national perspective it is entirely legal, to for the sake of National Security to perform extrajudicial killing wherever it is necessary. Also worth mentioning are the legality of infinity detention³⁰ of suspects without trial or an official accusation and even their torture^{31,32} for the sake of intelligence gathering. Concluding there, is no legal wrong done from the national perspective, the situation is entirely different from an international law perspective.

Firstly we have to analyze this issue also from a historical perspective. Originally under the Bush administration the US was engaged in a global war on terror. So the war was not limited to any geographical location. Therefore the official policy was that wherever terrorists were located, there in that area was a temporally battlefield. Thus the USA reserved to apply the rules of Ius bellum and strike in the manner of self-defense. The policy of being in war with Al-Qaida and Taliban was also official approved by the Supreme Court ruling in Hamad vs

²⁸ <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PLAW-107publ40/pdf/PLAW-107publ40.pdf>

²⁹ <http://edition.cnn.com/2012/09/05/opinion/bergen-obama-drone/>

³⁰ <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2012-09-13/u-s-appeals-order-blocking-u-s-military-detention-law.html>

³¹ <http://rt.com/op-edge/gitmo-strike-torture-inmate-724/>

³² <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2486998/CIA-ordered-US-military-doctors-design-new-torture-methods-use-Guantanamo-Bay.html>

Rumsfeld³³. But that was from a national perspective, from the perspective of international law a country can be at war only with another country and not with an organization.

Under the Obama administration³⁴ the “global battlefield thesis” was omitted, however the administration continued to combat terrorism on a variety of places all over the globe, but still continued in formally being in war with the two above mentioned entities. But the most important addition was that the administration considered a legitimated battlefield only an area of country harboring terrorist that was unwilling, unable or simply incapable of fighting them. Thus countries like Slovakia or Poland capable of executing their sovereignty all over their entire territory could not be potentially selected as a location for a drone strike. But the most important question we are in need to ask is that if laws of war can apply against something that is not a country. Since according to the customs of international law and as previously mentioned war can be declared upon only on another country. Logically if we don't accept the declaration of war against an organization it is impossible to apply the laws of war on something that we are not in war with. But this issue is in a great deal a matter of perception. In the times of the creation of customs of international law it was unthinkable that an organization could be capable of fighting a war against a sovereign nation. If we choose to accept that the customs of international law are a forever evolving field. We could agree with the US interpretation. But what the US interpretation is lacking is the fact, that the peremptory norms of international law are already firmly set and no evolution leading to their cancellation could ever be considered legal. Even if the laws of war would apply, they still would not be superior to the peremptory norms and the basic principles of humanity.

Regarding the US policy, its most prominent proponent besides the already mentioned current CIA director is the former dean of Yale law school and also former legal adviser of the Department of State Harald Koh; in his 2010 speech³⁵ he clarified 4 reasons supporting the legality of targeted drone strikes. Firstly, he considers enemy leaders legitimate targets, because they are belligerent members of an enemy group in a war with the United States. Secondly drones are considered appropriate instruments for such missions, so long as their use conforms to the laws of war. Thirdly, enemy targets are selected through “robust” procedures (this can be easily disputed according to the previously presented recent findings) and as such they require no legal process and are not “unlawful extrajudicial” killings. Finally Kohl argued that using drones to target high level belligerent leader does not violate domestic law banning assassinations.

Basically these 4 reasons can be summed as one lie and three excuses, claiming that the US is officially in war with something/body that they cannot be official at war with. Also it is unthinkable to respond to criminal acts of terrorism by a more sophisticated, but in nature not so different method of terror and call it legal. But furthermore to their argumentation.

The most essential principle of collective preemptive self-defense by the means of force is granted by the UN Charter and authorized by multiple UN security council resolutions

³³ <http://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/05pdf/05-184.pdf>

³⁴ <http://digitalcommons.law.wustl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1041&context=globalstudies>

³⁵ <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/179305.pdf>

(1368(2001)³⁶). On the other hand the article 2(4) of the UN Charter³⁷ prohibits the threat or use of force by one state against other (which for example President George Bush ignored in his 17.03.2003 address to the nation³⁸), but there are two important exemptions to this prohibition. One of them is when the use of force is carried out with the consent of the host state – which for example Yemen granted always, Pakistan granted sometimes³⁹(this remains controversial and is further explained below, since certain Pakistanis leaders claim that they newer authorized drone strikes, but leaked information’s claims that at least some strikes were authorized. Also it is not certain if the strikes were authorized in writing by a person authorized to grant such authorizations). But sometimes these countries weren’t even informed, because the US, though that there are leaks in the Pakistani intelligence community and notifying them might compromise their operation. Most recently on the 9th May 2013 a Pakistani High court⁴⁰ prohibited the government from authorizing drone strikes on its territory. Therefore we can deduce that from that date, all US lethal drones strikes on Pakistani territory should have stopped. But this did not happen⁴¹. (Noteworthy is the fact that no drone strikes occurred in Pakistan in the year 2014 (so far as of April). But they did not stop globally. ⁴²)

The court also states that the drone strikes are illegal from an international law perspective also in the case that the executive branch of the Pakistani government approves them. But the court lacks jurisdictions to decide such a matter therefore this judgment is not binding for the USA.

The second exemption from the prohibition stated by 2(4) article of the United Nations Charter, is the use of force in self-defense in response to an armed attack or an imminent threat, and where the host state is unwilling or unable to take appropriate action. Also the legality of every single lethal drone strikes has to be case by case evaluated from the perspective of international humanitarian law, most importantly the principles of distinction, proportionality, humanity and military necessity⁴³.

From this we can deduce that USA is entitled to act as a response to an armed attack or an imminent threat, therefore logically an armed response can only follow once either the US is attacked or there is sufficient evidence that it is not far from happening. Or that by killing the targeted individual an active operation aimed at inflicting harm to the US, would be hampered.

³⁶ <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2001/SC7143.doc.htm>

³⁷ <https://treaties.un.org/doc/publication/ctc/uncharter.pdf>

³⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WS5AYQX1m6c>

³⁹ Entous Adam, “U.S. Unease Over Drone Strikes”, Wall Street Journal, 26 September 2012, p.1

⁴⁰ <http://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/2013/05/09/pakistani-court-rules-cia-drone-strikes-are-illegal-and-war-crimes/>

⁴¹ <http://www.dawn.com/news/1059365/three-suspected-militants-killed-in-north-waziristan-drone-attack>

⁴² <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/03/11/us-yemen-drone-idUSBREA2A08Q20140311>

⁴³ “Living Under Drones: Death, Injury, and Trauma to Civilians from US Drone Practices In Pakistan”.

International Human Rights and conflict Resolution Clinic at Stanford Law School and Global Justice Clinic at NYU School of Law: 1-165, 105. September 2012. Retrieved 29 March 2014.

Legal opposition from the UK against the US interpretation

⁴⁴*“The Director of Public Prosecutions and head of the Crown Prosecution Service in the UK, Ken McDonald, Britain’s most senior criminal prosecutor, has stated that those responsible for acts of terrorism such as the 7 July 2005 London bombings are not “soldiers” in a war, but “inadequate” who should be dealt with by the criminal justice system. He added that a “culture of legislative restraint” was needed in passing anti-terrorism laws, and that a “primary purpose” of the violent attacks was to tempt countries such as Britain to “abandon our values.” He stated that in the eyes of the UK criminal justice system, the response to terrorism had to be “proportionate, and grounded in due process and the rule of law”:*

London is not a battlefield. Those innocents who were murdered...were not victims of war. And the men who killed them were not, as in their vanity they claimed on their ludicrous videos, ‘soldiers’. They were deluded, narcissistic inadequate. They were criminals. They were fantasists. We need to be very clear about this. On the streets of London there is no such thing as a war on terror. The fight against terrorism on the streets of Britain is not a war. It is the prevention of crime, the enforcement of our laws, and the winning of justice for those damaged by their infringement.”

Human rights breached by the strikes

Any extrajudicial killing conducted by sovereign nations has to be both justified under international and human right law. In order to be legally justified by the standards of human rights, it must be beyond doubt certain that any target-killing, has domestic legal bases and would be proportionate to the legitimate aim of saving life and absolutely necessary, after less harmful means were exhausted. ⁴⁵

Let’s apply these standards on example 1. It was clear beyond doubt that the actions of the victim were directly connected to terrorism aimed at the USA. It was also clear that he was willing to motivate others for his cause. However he never personally physically committed acts of terror. But when summarizing this all together he would have certainly been under US legislation executed either for high treason, conspiracy to commit acts of terror or membership in an organization actively engaged in inflicting harm on the USA. So we can definitely agree that there was a justified domestic legal bases and it would have been proportionate since the US executes individuals fairly regularly. The aim of “saving life” might be arguable; however it is a fact that since his radicalization a rising number of individuals somehow connected to him began either directly engaging in acts or terror or willing to do so. From this perspective one might argue that his death was a “preemptive

⁴⁴ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1540399/There-is-no-war-on-terror-says-DPP.html>

⁴⁵ <http://jcsf.oxfordjournals.org/content/16/2/385.abstract>

measure” to prevent future attacks. Therefore it saved lives. We don’t know to how many people was he connected, nor don’t we exactly know what degree of control he had over his network of followers. So it would not be true to say that killing him stopped an attack that was to happen tomorrow, but we may be nearly certain that it stopped some future attacks from happening. Less harmful means were exhausted to that extent that he was officially wanted and there were attempts to bring him to justice. However the US has at least 6 military installations⁴⁶ and at that time had 3⁴⁷ carrier battle groups in close proximity to the site of the strike. So it might be questionable whether they were really unable to arrest him or they were simply not willing. It is a decision between putting at risk the life of people serving to protect their nation for the sake of appeasing legal standards and executing an individual that would be, if arrested probably executed anyway. From a non-legal perspective it would be a simple choice. However from a legal perspective and especially when applying the same logic on example 2 it is a very disputable issue.

The victim in example 1 was traveling in a convoy and all killed were clearly linked by a common cause and would have likely died when resisting arrest. However there was no reason, desire or justifiable excuse for the deaths of individuals in example 2. It is probable that since none of them was a terrorist, none of them would be resisting arrest – especially when many of them were children. From this assuming, if regular troops would have been deployed in this case they wouldn’t have faced danger and the lives of innocent civilians could have been saved. Also for example from this WikiLeaks video⁴⁸ showing a US airstrike (drone operators have a similar view – but from a far more distant location) in central Baghdad that resulted in the death of numerous civilians and children (and 0 enemy combatants). It is evident, that drone operators simply aren’t capable of distinguishing children from terrorist nor are they capable of distinguishing cameras from assault rifles. Moreover it is evident that it is simply impossible to be absolutely sure whether the fired upon target is really the target that the operator was willing to fire upon. It is highly questionable, whether at the current state of technology are lethal drone strikes capable of operating within the boundaries set by international law and with respect to human rights. But it remains true that at present day era there is no legal ban to their use nor a complex international legal understanding regarding their regulation. But that does not mean that their usage can simply not comply with already existing legal norms.

But as describe before that’s not always the case since, at least in example 1 the head of a sovereign nation approved the deployment of US drones⁴⁹ over his countries territory (unlike in Pakistan) and the target was apparently fulfilling the overwhelming majority (if not all) of legal criteria’s.

⁴⁶ <http://www.npr.org/blogs/thetwo-way/2013/02/06/171309345/air-base-in-saudi-arabia-is-latest-drone-secret-to-be-revealed>

⁴⁷ <http://navaltoday.com/2012/01/30/us-navy-to-deploy-third-carrier-group-to-persian-gulf/>

⁴⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5rXPrfnU3G0>

⁴⁹ http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/yemeni-president-acknowledges-approving-us-drone-strikes/2012/09/29/09bec2ae-0a56-11e2-affd-d6c7f20a83bf_story.html

When further analyzing the status of human rights violation in the context of international law. The most fundamental right breach by extrajudicial killing is the right to a fair trial. Granted explicitly by article 10 of the Universal Declaration of Human⁵⁰ rights and acknowledge in the ⁵¹6th amendment of the US constitution (however according to previously mentioned sources an US court recently ruled that lethal drone strikes on US citizens aren't unconstitutional – al' Awlaki case) and article 6 of the ⁵²European Convention of Human rights. In some cases even the process of accusing somebody of a crime is ignored. Moreover in many cases individuals are executed on the bases of very little evidence that only suggests some sort of connection to the terrorist movements.

Last but not least as previously mentioned, the fundamentally most basic legal principles that are the basis of the western legal theory are breached in some cases by the lethal drone strikes, but not only those. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights⁵³ that codifies the most basic rights granted to humans is violated on a nearly regular base. Since every single human being has the right to live and this right is deprived from numerous civilians living in their homes outside of active combat areas. From this perspective most terrifying is the fact that according to the previously described newly enact regulations, this is not an issue to consider for the US. No one is punished for action described in example 3, or no one is punished for misjudging terrorist for children and etcetera.

⁵⁰ <http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/>

⁵¹ http://www.law.cornell.edu/constitution/sixth_amendment

⁵² http://www.echr.coe.int/Documents/Convention_ENG.pdf

⁵³ <http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/>

Human Rights Council – March 2014 – Resolution

During the war on terror and the systematic execution of people who reportedly poses a threat to US national security on the territories of numerous other countries, when lethal drones operated by individuals located far away strike it is common, that numerous civilian casualties arise (951). Within which are included at least 200⁵⁴ children as it was previously described. The USA boycotted ⁵⁵the session of the Human rights council and their ambassador departed.

The fundamental aim of this resolution is to achieve, that the lethal drone strikes comply with ⁵⁶international law and abide the human rights of individuals. Most importantly for example article 2 paragraphs 4 of the UN charter⁵⁷. Which clearly states that: “all member states shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state, or in any other manner inconsistent with the Purposes of the UN”. This is clearly violated by the USA, when they enter without the approval of sovereign nations their airspace, and perform lethal combat operations.

The main problem is, that since the ability to assassinate suspected terrorists and de facto anybody is by no means overseen by the local government, they are unable to protect their citizen that are by no – way connected to any form of terrorist movement. This is especially terrible from a psychological perspective since all the inhabitants living in small villages and communities and basically everybody is fully aware of the possibility of a drone strike, striking virtually from no-where due to the possibly of long range travel of the Hellfire missiles (used by drones). Therefore they are absolutely unable to see an upcoming strike and thus live in a constant fear that a strike might happen virtually anywhere and at any time. Even though President Obama publicly unveiled a decree that clearly states that a strike can take place only when there is near certainty of no civilian deaths, this was obviously ignored when striking a wedding⁵⁸⁵⁹ (happened on 2 separate occasions both before and after the degree was enacted) and there are absolutely no guarantees that it won't be ignored again.

It is almost impossible to imagine what a mother feels when she sends her children alone to school, knowing that there is a chance that by accident they might get close to a terrorist suspect and end up dead as collateral damage following a lethal drone strike.

⁵⁴ <http://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/2014/02/03/january-2014-update-us-covert-actions-in-pakistan-yemen-and-somalia/>

⁵⁵ <http://rt.com/usa/us-boycotts-unhrc-drone-resolution-961/>

⁵⁶ <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/LTD/G14/123/87/PDF/G1412387.pdf?OpenElement>

⁵⁷ <https://treaties.un.org/doc/publication/ctc/uncharter.pdf>

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http://www.salon.com/2014/02/20/u_s_drone_strike_on_yemeni_wedding_may_have_violated_laws_of_war/

⁵⁹ <http://www.reuters.com/article/2008/11/05/us-afghan-violence-idUSTRE4A44EW20081105>

Double standards

Another controversial part of the US war on terrorism are in my perception double standards. Though definitely not the worst nor the most terrible aspect of this “war”, but however interesting from a legal perspective.

Timothy McVeigh a domestic terrorist responsible for the Oklahoma City bombing which claimed more than ⁶⁰168 killed and 600 injured was a US citizen. McVeigh was arrested accused and tried, his “habeas corpus” and “audi alteram partem” rights were granted. He was allowed a proper trial for the most awful and brutal crime he has committed.

But nothing like this was granted to a different US citizen, more precisely described in example 1. He also was a member of an organization willing to harm the US. He was also spreading his ideas using the internet and etcetera.

Domestic opposition to the use of lethal drone strikes:

As presented before not only prosecutors in the UK oppose the official US legal interpretation, but also members of the US legislative body that granted the power to the executive branch.

“On February 27, 2013, the Senate Intelligence Committee postponed a vote, expected to be taken the next day on the confirmation of Brennan until the following week. On March 5, the Intelligence Committee approved the nomination 12-3. The Senate was set to vote on Brennan’s nomination on March 6, 2013. Kentucky Senator Rand Paul began a talking Senate filibuster of the vote, citing President Barack Obama and his administration’s use of combat drones, stating “No one politician should be allowed to judge the guilt, to charge an individual, to judge the guilt of an individual and to execute an individual. It goes against everything that we fundamentally believe in our country.” Paul’s filibuster continued for 13 hours, after which Brennan was confirmed by a vote of 63-34.”⁶¹

Conclusion

From all the presented arguments and evidence it is evident that every single case has to be assessed individually. The gap between what is a violation of law and what is not is in some cases very slim. When only taking into consideration cases from Pakistan, it is evident that

⁶⁰<http://web.archive.org/web/20080110063748/http://www.health.state.ok.us/PROGRAM/injury/Summary/bomb/OKCbomb.htm>

⁶¹<http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2013/03/07/sen-paul-holds-floor-for-hours-in-filibuster-cia-nominee-over-drone-concerns/#ixzz2Mn1R5v2W>

every single drone strike at least from 2013 on (because the local high court banned US drone strikes on Pakistani territory) clearly constituted a violation of international law. Since not a single one as of 2013 could have been approved. For previous cases there is a slight collision between sources, because some state that a couple of strikes were approved⁶² by Pakistani military high command. Other suggests that not a single one was ever approved⁶³. But as previously described, approval is not the only condition needed to be fulfilled and again every single case has to be judged individually. Moreover we can be absolutely sure that a wedding or a school definitely isn't fulfilling the strict requirements previously described. Actually when reviewing the current wanted terrorist list, only the targeting of maybe a dozen or two dozens of individuals would be absolutely justified. Since being an imminent threat to the homeland security of the worlds' most powerful nation is a difficult task. I am beyond doubt certain that under the currently set up domestic rules, the US is authorized to violate both human rights and international law. Also in case of accidents or misjudgments no one else except the dead civilians face consequences. This is rather disturbing. Noteworthy is also the fact that for example Nelson Mandela was also placed on the "terrorist list" and for example Saddam Husein was taken off it when he attempted to invade Iran in the aftermath of the Irani revolution and the US hostage crisis. This again illustrates a questionable bias regarding this matter.

This issue is also rather interesting from a philosophical perspective, since the aim of the US is by the means of lethal drone strikes, the eradication of terrorism. However collateral damage and especially the deaths of children have different consequences. Instead of eradication it prompts the terrorist cause. The local population feels hater especially towards the US and its own government for failing to protect their human rights and the only other local group willing to give them their revenge are terrorists. Every single unnecessary death of an innocent bystander prolongs the still ongoing war on terror⁶⁴ and maybe fighting this war only within the limits of international law and without systematically breaching human rights might help to end it sooner rather than the current policy of extrajudicial murder.

Also for example Afghanistan is a party to the Rome statue of the International Criminal Court and can extradite suspects and grant them a fair trial where they would have the right to possibly bring new insights into the functioning of their networks. Since logically if a suspect is executed even before it is clear what exact position in the hierarchy is he holding and cannot be inter-negotiate by an independent body, no new progress can be made. The currently occurring in depth senate investigation has also challenged the efficiency of CIA torture⁶⁵ investigation methods, which besides being a clear violation of human rights might end up being proven pointless. But also the lethal drones strikes instead of reducing the amount of terrorist contributes to the rise of membership (especially due to the previously described violations of both international law and human rights) and torture instead of its eradication.

⁶² <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2013/10/24/new-documents-showpakistanascomplicityinusdroneprogram.html>

⁶³ <http://www.dawn.com/news/1052001/never-approved-drone-strikes-pakistan-tells-un>

⁶⁴ <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/01/al-qaeda-new-generation-arab-spring.html>

⁶⁵ <http://rt.com/op-edge/cia-torture-information-kiriakou-766/>

”As seen from a drone”

- A Pakistani artists placed this picture of a recent victim of a lethal drone strike right next to its site – in order to remind the operators what have they targeted.



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