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The Year in Drones: 2015

By Charles Pierson
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2015 was another glorious, blood-soaked year for US killer drones.

One story began in 2014, but it was not until 2015 that we knew how it ended. In February 2014, the Associated Press reported that the Obama Administration was contemplating a drone strike on a US citizen, an al-Qaeda member living in Pakistan and known by the *nom de guerre* Abdullah al-Shami (Abdullah the Syrian). Al-Shami had been born in Texas, but had not been in the United States since he was a toddler.

We did not hear of Al-Shami again until the following April. Al-Shami still lived but had been captured by Pakistani security forces and turned over to the United States. In April, al-Shami

(now identified by his real name, Mohanad Mahmoud Al Farekh) was arraigned on terrorism charges in federal court in Brooklyn.

Other US citizens have been less fortunate than Al Farekh. On January 14, a 73 year old aid worker, Warren Weinstein, was killed in a US drone strike on an Al-Qaeda compound in Pakistan. His family had been trying to negotiate ransom for Weinstein who had been abducted from his home in Lahore in 2011. Also killed in the strike were an Italian aid worker, Giovanni Lo Porto, and an American member of al-Qaeda, Ahmed Farouq.

Eight US citizens have been killed in US drone strikes. The best known is Anwar al-Awlaki, a US-born high-profile al-Qaeda spokesman. Al-Awlaki was killed by a US drone in Yemen on September 30, 2011. Al-Awlaki's 16-year old son, Abdulrahman, was killed in a separate drone attack a month later. All other US citizens killed by drones have been members of Al-Qaeda. Al-Shami's tale proves that the Obama Administration continues to be willing to execute Americans without due process of law.

Proliferation

Israel is the world's number one exporter of drones, followed by the US, then China. (US companies sell more drones than does Israel, but Israel exports more.) Israeli and Chinese success is due to US restrictions on selling drones abroad. Export restrictions mean that US drone manufacturers have to sell most of their armed drones to just one customer: the Pentagon.

On February 17, the Obama Administration announced that it was easing restrictions on the sale of US-manufactured drones abroad. Prior to this, only the United Kingdom had in 2007 been allowed to purchase armed drones from the United States.

Purchasers must promise to use the drones only in accordance with international law, just like the US does. Purchasers must also promise not to use killer drones against their own people. Ignore these unenforceable restrictions. More encouraging is the fact that it was not until November that the US State Department approved the first sales of killer drones to Italy.[1] Included in the deal are 156 Hellfire missiles. All this for a low, low price of \$126 million.

In the past, Turkey, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates had all asked the US for armed drones. All were rebuffed. Since then, Saudi Arabia has reportedly purchased armed drones from South Africa and China. Turkey announced on December 21 that it had successfully tested an armed drone developed by Turkish defense companies.

Pakistan has developed its own armed drone, the Burraq, which it unveiled in March. By September, the Burraq had tasted blood. Pakistan's military announced on September 7 that the Burraq had taken out three Islamist militants in Pakistan's tribal areas.

Pakistan joins a short but growing list of nations which not only possess armed drones but have killed with them. The US is in the forefront. Britain has made drone kills in Iraq and Afghanistan. Iraq has killed ISIS fighters with the Chinese-manufactured CH-4B "Rainbow" armed drone. Israel has used armed drones against Gaza. Hamas claims that it possesses armed

drones, although what Hamas has displayed in videos may not be a drone, but rather a small single-use missile which can only be controlled while within the operator's line of sight. Iran's so-called "suicide" or "kamikaze" drones are similar. Iran, however, also has developed an armed drone similar to the Predator or Reaper which it calls the "Ambassador of Death." You have to hand it to the mullahs: we may not like them, but they do have a flair for the dramatic.

The race for killer drones is on!

"The entire program was diseased"

In 2015, *The Intercept* broke two important stories on drones. In February, Jeremy Scahill reported on the US base in Ramstein, Germany. Leaked US slides and their confidential source confirmed what had long been suspected: that Ramstein Air Base is the global hub for relaying signals which allow pilots in the United States to control US drones in South and Central Asia, the Arabian Peninsula and Africa. The slides put the lie to US and German attempts to minimize Ramstein's crucial importance to the drone war. The slides raise the possibility of US personnel at Ramstein facing prosecution under German law for assisting drone assassinations in violation of international law.[2]

Then in October, *The Intercept* published *The Drone Papers*: a series of classified documents on the US government's drone assassination program. *The Drone Papers* were leaked to *The Intercept* by an unidentified source inside the intelligence community who is being called the new Edward Snowden. The new source can look forward to getting his face on the cover of *Time* and his ass in a prison cell—that is, unless he gets out of the US before the Obama Administration finds out who he is.

The Drone Papers confirm every horrifying thing we have learned about drones' indiscriminate killing. For every intended target, about six unintended targets are killed. Civilians killed by American drones are counted as enemies killed in action (EKIA), unless they are subsequently proven *not* to be militants. Internal criticism of the drone program is rife. Insiders say that drones are successful only at boosting terrorist recruitment.

Four other whistleblowers—former drone operators in the US Air Force—went public in an open letter to President Obama in November. The four lashed out at the drone program's callous disregard for human life. Drone operators call children "fun-size terrorists" and refer to killing children as cutting the lawn before the grass gets high. One of the whistleblowers, former Staff Sergeant Brandon Bryant has said: "We killed people who we really didn't know who they were, and there was no oversight."

True that. After Warren Weinstein was killed the New York *Times* ran this headline: "Drone Strikes Reveal Uncomfortable Truth: *U.S. Is Often Unsure about Who Will Die.*" "The entire program was diseased," Bryant says. For speaking out, Sgt. Bryant and his colleagues have had their bank accounts and their credit cards frozen.

Perhaps the most appalling revelation in *The Drone Papers* was that during one five-month period in Afghanistan 90% of drone victims were not the intended target. The civilian death toll

is not always that high, but it is high enough. An op-ed in the July 14 *New York Times* gives these figures:

In 646 probable drone strikes in Pakistan, Somalia and Yemen recorded by the [British NGO] Bureau of Investigative Journalism, as many as 1,128 civilians, including 225 children, were killed—22 percent of deaths. The New America Foundation’s estimates are lower, but suggest a civilian death rate of about 10 percent.[3]

US killer drones have taken lives in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Yemen, Iraq, Libya, and Somalia, Syria, and the Philippines. US drone strikes on Yemen have continued even during the country’s civil war, providing de facto assistance to Saudi Arabia’s criminal aggression in bombing Yemen.

Drone missions take their toll on those drone operators who still have a conscience. Substance abuse is common. So are burnout and PTSD. “Guilt-ridden American drone pilots continue to quit in unprecedented numbers,” according to RT, the Russian news service. Yet the Obama Administration wants to increase daily drone flights by 50% over the next four years. Good luck finding enough pilots.

Other veterans are also speaking out. In June, forty-four veterans representing each of the four service branches with ranks from private to colonel signed a letter urging armed forces members to refuse to fly drone missions. The “Refuse to Fly” campaign is also running a series of fifteen-second anti-drone TV ads. The ads show graphic scenes of death and destruction taken from Madiha Tahir’s documentary *Wounds of Waziristan* about Pakistanis killed by US drones. Each ad ends with a voice urging drone operators to “refuse to fly.”

According to a poll conducted in May by the Pew Research Center, 58% of Americans support US drone strikes. The same poll shows that one-third (35%) of Americans disapprove of drone strikes, up from 26% two years ago. Americans need to learn the truth about drones. Yet coverage of *The Drone Papers* and the four whistleblowers in the mainstream media has been spotty to nil. The word needs to go out if there is to be the sort of public pressure that it will take to ground the drones.

Notes.

[1] Italy already owns the unarmed version of the MQ-1 Reaper. Under the November deal, Italy will receive kits to convert its unarmed MQ-1 Reapers to armed drones. The Italians will assemble the drones themselves, not unlike buying killer drones from IKEA.

[2] In October 2014, human rights groups brought a civil lawsuit in Germany to force the German government to end drone strikes directed from its territory. The suit was brought on behalf of Yemeni victims of US drone strikes. The suit was dismissed on May 27, 2015. The claimants have appealed.

[3] Pratap Chatterjee, *Our Drone War Burnout*, N.Y. TIMES (July 14, 2015). Regularly updated spread sheets showing US drone kills by country for Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia, Yemen, and Afghanistan can be found on the Bureau of Investigative Journalism's website.