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## Targeted Killings: A Short History

BY URI FRIEDMAN

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U.S. President Barack Obama has taken George W. Bush's war on terror to a new level, approving, as journalist David Rohde **recently put it in Foreign Policy**, "more targeted killings than any modern president" through drone strikes against suspected militants from Pakistan to Somalia to Yemen. The idea of decapitating the enemy's leadership stretches at least as far back as the fourth century B.C., when Emperor Chandragupta Maurya assassinated two Greek governors as part of his conquest of India, though the tactic has become more common over the last century. But what makes targeted killing different from assassination, which the United States banned decades ago? And how has the legal justification evolved for a practice that has become so prominent that the president now **personally decides** which enemies of the state should live or die?

### 1907

Following a half-century of **efforts** to develop international rules for warfare, a peace conference at The Hague produces a treaty **prohibiting** "belligerents" in an "armed conflict" from killing "treacherously individuals belonging to the hostile nation or army." But key terms such as "treacherously" and "armed conflict" aren't defined in The Hague Convention or its successor agreement, the 1949 **Geneva Conventions**. To this day, these ambiguities in the law of war **cloud** distinctions between peacetime and wartime, and between illegal assassinations and legal efforts to kill specific individuals.



**1914**

The Austro-Hungarian empire **accuses** the Serbian government of playing a role in the assassination of its heir to the throne, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, by Gavrilo Princip, a Bosnian Serb nationalist. The standoff helps spark World War I.

**1944**

In the final months of World War II, the British plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler. Schemes **include** sending a sniper to take out the Führer during his morning walk and poisoning his tea. British officials **debate** whether killing Hitler will help them win the war -- not whether assassinating him is legal -- but the plans are never implemented.



**1961**

The Cold War ushers in a flurry of state-sponsored extrajudicial political assassinations outside the bounds of war, including the killing of recently ousted Congolese Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba, who appeared to be drifting into the Soviet orbit, by domestic rivals acting with **Belgian assistance**.

**1967-1972**

The CIA spearheads the **Phoenix program**, a covert counterinsurgency seeking to "neutralize" Viet Cong operatives in South Vietnam. President Richard Nixon embraces the effort, which kills more than 26,000 Viet Cong by the end of 1972. "We've got to have more of this," he reportedly **tells** his budget director in 1969. "Assassinations. Killings. That's what [the Vietnamese communists are] doing."

**1972**

Israeli Mossad agents begin **covertly hunting down** and killing Palestinian militants abroad in retaliation for their suspected role in the **murder of 11 Israeli athletes** and coaches at the Munich Olympics. The operation **causes an uproar** in 1973 when Israeli agents mistake a Moroccan waiter in Norway for the mastermind of the Munich attack and gun him down.



### 1975-1976

After Seymour Hersh's famous *New York Times* exposé on the CIA's illegal activities, the Senate's **Church Committee** uncovers assassination attempts against foreign leaders such as Cuba's Fidel Castro. In response, President Gerald Ford issues an **executive order** banning "political assassination" by the U.S. government -- an order future presidents **reaffirm**. But the assassination ban applies to peacetime, not wartime. "[S]hort of war," the committee **concludes**, assassination "should be rejected as a tool of foreign policy."

### 1986

The human rights group **Americas Watch** begins using the phrase "**targeted killings**" synonymously with "**assassination**" to distinguish the killing of specific people outside combat by military forces and death squads **in El Salvador** from the indiscriminate killings they also perpetrated.



### 1998

In response to the **bombings of U.S. embassies** in Kenya and Tanzania, President Bill Clinton **launches** cruise missiles at Osama bin Laden's suspected training camp in Afghanistan and **authorizes** covert operations to capture the al Qaeda leader if possible and kill him if necessary. Administration officials reason that the assassination ban does not apply to a military target like bin Laden, who planned the embassy attacks, and that the United States would be exercising pre-emptive self-defense if it killed him.



### 2000

Israel, which has been **targeting terrorist leaders** since the 1970s, conducts its **first publicly**

**acknowledged** assassination, dispatching a helicopter gunship to kill Palestinian militia leader Hussein Obaiyat in Bethlehem. **International media** begin referring to Israel's "targeted killing" policy against Palestinian militants, and George W. **Bush's administration** comes out **in opposition** to the practice.

### **2001-2002**

Days after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the U.S. Congress passes the **Authorization for Use of Military Force**, enabling the government to **kill members of al Qaeda** and its affiliates as part of America's **first war against a nonstate actor**. The Bush administration's new national security strategy builds on the Clinton team's rationale for targeting bin Laden. "To forestall or prevent ... hostile acts by our adversaries," the document **explains**, "the United States will, if necessary, act preemptively."

### **November 2002**

In its first targeting of a suspected terrorist outside Afghanistan, the CIA uses an armed drone -- a technology **pioneered by the Israelis** -- to kill al Qaeda leader Qaed Salim Sinan al-Harethi and, unwittingly, a **Yemeni-American** traveling with him in Yemen. Amnesty International accuses the United States of engaging in "**extra-judicial executions**," but the Bush administration defends the **strike** and the **killing of U.S. citizens** working for al Qaeda. "We will fight the war on terrorism wherever we need to fight the war on terrorism," White House press secretary Ari Fleischer says.



### **2006**

Task Force 145, an elite U.S. unit charged with hunting America's most wanted terrorists, tracks down Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, al Qaeda's chief in Iraq, who is **soon killed** by a U.S. airstrike.

### **2009**

As Barack Obama **dramatically ramps up** drone strikes in Pakistan during his first several months in office, the media begin applying the phrase "targeted killings" to U.S. counterterrorism more frequently. The *New York Times* notes that some CIA veterans are drawing "comparisons to the Israeli policy of 'targeted killings' of Hamas leaders."

### **March 2010**

State Department legal advisor Harold Koh distinguishes targeted killings from unlawful assassinations. "A state that is engaged in an armed conflict or in legitimate self-defense is not required to provide targets with legal process before the state may use lethal force," he says in a **speech**, adding that though the technology may be new, the concept isn't. During World War II, he notes, "American aviators tracked and shot down the airplane carrying the architect of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor."

### **March-August 2010**

The American Civil Liberties Union files lawsuits demanding more information about the Obama administration's drone program and challenging its authority to target American-born Muslim cleric Anwar al-Awlaki. "If other states were to claim the broad-based authority that the

United States does, to kill people anywhere, anytime, the result would be chaos," **notes** Philip Alston, former **U.N. special rapporteur** on extrajudicial, summary, or arbitrary executions.

#### **May 2011**

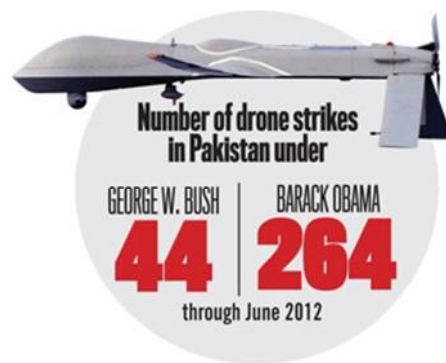
Navy SEALs enter Pakistan and **kill bin Laden** in Abbottabad. The White House insists that the raid was "kill or capture" and that the al Qaeda leader, who **was unarmed** at the time of the operation but had weapons **within reach**, was only shot because he resisted.

#### **September 2011**

The U.S. drone program **claims** its first (deliberate) American target -- Awlaki -- in a strike in Yemen justified by a **secret Justice Department legal memo**.

#### **January 2012**

Obama **acknowledges** U.S. drone strikes in Pakistan for the first time. "For us to be able to get them in another way would involve probably a lot more intrusive military actions than the one that we're already engaging in," he says.



#### **May 2012**

The **New York Times** reports that Obama personally approves the names of terrorist targets on a "kill list," fueling a national debate about the **ethics and legality** of targeted killing -- and the very future of warfare.