

After Nameless Thousands, Can Two Western Hostage Deaths Dent ‘Kill List’ Tactics?

Apology and Redress Should be Available for All Civilians Killed in U.S. Drone Strikes, Not Just U.S. Citizens and Europeans

By [Jon Queally](#)

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In the wake of [Thursday's revelation](#) that the U.S. government, specifically the CIA, killed one American and one Italian hostage held by al-Qaeda in a drone attack in Pakistan earlier this year, will a renewed and possibly elevated debate on the Obama administration's so-called "[kill list](#)" or assassination campaign finally break into the mainstream?

In a [televised](#) address, President Obama said he "takes full responsibility," that a full investigation was being conducted, and that relevant information would be de-classified and released to the public.

"Our hearts go out to the families of Dr. Warren Weinstein, an American held by al-Qaeda since 2011, and Giovanni Lo Porto, an Italian national who had been an al-Qaeda hostage since 2012," read a White House press [statement](#). "Analysis of all available information has led the Intelligence Community to judge with high confidence that the operation accidentally killed both hostages."

Though long-standing critics of the Obama's drone war and the existence of a presidential "kill list" have been issuing objections for years over the legality of the program and the number of innocent people from foreign countries—including Pakistan, Afghanistan, Yemen, Somalia, and elsewhere—who have been killed, maimed, or left traumatized by these bombings, observers noted that when it came to the U.S. media on Thursday, it was the death of two Western hostages that finally caught the attention of the broader public.

As journalist Glenn Greenwald, one of the most consistent and outspoken critics of Obama's drone policy, [wrote](#) on Friday, "In all the years I've been writing about Obama's drone killings, yesterday featured *by far* the most widespread critical discussion in U.S. establishment journalism circles."

This dynamic was also noticed by *Huffington Post* staff writers Ryan Grim and Jason Linkins in a piece titled, [A Drone Program That Has Killed Hundreds Of Civilians Finally Killed Some That The White House Regrets](#). They wrote:

Watching the coverage of these tragic deaths, a viewer would be left with the impression of a drone program that has had a stellar record of accuracy up until it unfortunately killed two innocent people. But, in fact, killing innocent people has been a central part of the drone program from the very beginning,

and is in many ways an inescapable consequence. It's not that a perfect program finally slipped up. Rather, a program that has killed [somewhere between 400 and 1000 civilians in Pakistan alone](#) finally killed an American civilian, to whom no wrongdoing can be even tangentially attributed.

Weinstein and Lo Porta won't be the last innocent people to meet their untimely end in this fashion, but the next innocent people to die probably won't end up meriting a special press conference and investigation into what went wrong.

Naureen Shah, director of Amnesty International USA's Security and Human Rights program, [called](#) the Obama administration's admission on what happened with these two hostages a welcome step, but made it clear that "apology and redress should be available for all civilians killed in U.S. drone strikes, not just U.S. citizens and Europeans. The U.S. government could be just as transparent about the hundreds of other drone strikes it has conducted in Pakistan and Yemen."

And as journalist Ryan Devereaux [asked](#) in his Friday headline at *The Intercept*, "When will Obama apologize for all the other innocent victims of drone strikes?"

[Writing](#) for the *Guardian* on Friday, Trevor Timm, director of the Freedom of the Press Foundation, notes that the Obama administration has proven its tightly-held belief, time and again, that "it can kill US citizens overseas without a trial or even a finding by any independent body." He continues:

The Obama administration claims it tightened its drone strike policy in 2013 after a minor uproar following its admission that it's drones had killed a US citizen for the first time. Obama said in a [speech that for him to approve](#) a drone strike going forward: "there must be near-certainty that no civilians will be killed or injured – the highest standard we can set". But now the White House is [saying, on the one hand](#), that the recent strike was "fully consistent" with that policy and on the other hand, that they're [conducting](#) an "internal review" to see if they should improve it.

That's why an "internal review" will tell us little we don't already know and will almost certainly fail to bring any real accountability to the use of drones. We need a full independent congressional inquiry and public accounting for all drone strikes, not just the ones in which Americans have died. As [multiple experts remarked](#) on Thursday, what about the 3,800 other who have been killed?

Meanwhile, the U.K.-based *Bureau of Investigative Journalism* (TBIJ), which has tracked the deaths and injuries of drone victims closer than any other global outlet, [reported](#) on Thursday that though the killing of Westerners is not a new or isolated phenomenon, it represents a miniscule fraction of those who end up killed by such attacks. "Western casualties are a tiny percentage of the total killed by CIA and Pentagon drone operations in Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia," TBIJ stated. "The Bureau has established a country or region of origin for 2,350 people killed by drones. Of that total, the 38 Westerners [we found] comprise just 1.6%."

Altogether, [wrote](#) independent journalist Kevin Gosztola, Thursday's White House announcement "is a reminder of everything that is wrong about the power the Obama

administration has claimed to assassinate people with drones.” And explains:

The government does not know who it is killing but claims they are dangerous and thus pose an automatic ‘imminent threat’ to Americans. It does not know ahead of time if compounds attacked have hostages or innocent civilians until after deaths are reported. And, because the administration claims the extraordinary power to extrajudicially assassinate an American involved with terrorism if it does not want to capture that person, the administration says next to nothing about American terrorists if they happen to be killed in drone strikes.

But why is this? According to Greenwald, the answer is as “clear” as it is “troubling”:

Foreign Muslims are so dehumanized, so invisible, that they are just equated with Evil Threats even when nothing is known about them. Indeed, Obama [officially re-defined the term “combatant”](#) to mean “all military-age males in a strike zone.” In other words, as The New York Times reported in 2011, all males between 18 and (roughly) 54 killed by U.S. drones are presumed to be combatants — terrorists — “unless there is explicit intelligence posthumously proving them innocent.” That mentality is the ultimate in dehumanization.

There are so many heinous stories of U.S. drones blowing up children and innocent adults. Obama [used cruise missiles and cluster bombs](#) to kill 14 children and 21 women in a Yemeni village (weeks after winning the Nobel Peace Prize), while [a 2012 drone strike](#) attacked a Yemeni wedding convoy and “killed 12 passengers in the vehicle, including three children and a pregnant woman.” Except for those who [watch shows like Democracy Now](#) or [certain Al Jazeera shows](#), virtually no Americans ever learn the name of any of those victims, or even hear that they exist at all.

It shouldn’t take the drone-killing of an American citizen to enable a mainstream discussion of how much deceit and recklessness drives these killings. But it does. And that fact, by itself, should cause a serious examination of the mindset behind all of this.

And as Devereaux [reported](#) on Friday, “When asked by *The Intercept* if the president’s words meant there would be a policy change in how the U.S. deals with claims of civilian casualties resulting from counterterrorism operations, an administration official declined to comment.”

For his part, Timm holds out little hope—despite the spark of interest following the news of the hostages deaths—that much will change.

“If there’s ever going to be accountability for the CIA and military drone program,” he declared, “we need a fully independent commission, divorced from the intelligence committees. Without it, this controversy will just fade back into the background, where it will stay hidden under the government’s ever-expanding veil of secrecy.”

And as *HuffPost*’s Grim and Linkins observed:

Naturally, even though everyone is deeply regretful about the deaths of these two men, there’s no reason to believe that the drone program won’t continue

be conducted with the same robustness as it was before this tragedy was disclosed to the American people. [As Obama told the New Yorker's David Remnick](#) last year, he's "wrestled" for a long time with the fact that "American drones have killed between some four hundred and a thousand civilians—a civilian-to-combatant ratio that could be as high as one to three."

On Thursday, they concluded, the announced death of two more victims—and yes, Westerners—may have "finally pinned him to the mat."

Or not.

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