

Obama's "Smart War": US Drone Killing Machine Now on Autopilot

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For years now I have been pointing out that [Obama's lasting legacy](#) would be his ill-advised decision back in 2009 to normalize assassination, which his administration successfully rebranded as "targeted killing". This was supposed to be the latest and greatest form of "smart war": the use of unmanned combat aerial vehicles (UCAVs), or lethal drones, to go after and eliminate evil terrorists without risking US soldiers' lives.

It all sounds so slick and, well, Obama cool. The problem is that any sober consideration of Obama's foreign policy over the course of his eight years as president reveals that the reality is altogether different. Judging by the murder and mayhem being perpetrated all across the Middle East, "smart war" was not so smart after all.

It's not easy to tease out how much of the mess in the Middle East is specifically due to Obama's accelerated use of lethal drones in "signature strikes" to kill thousands of military-age men in seven different lands. For he also implemented other, equally dubious initiatives. Planks of Obama's bloody "smart power" approach included deposing Libya's dictator Muammar Gaddafi in 2011, and massively arming (from 2012 to 2013) a group of little-understood "appropriately vetted moderate rebels" in Syria.

Adding fuel to the fire, Obama oversaw the largest exportation of homicidal weapons to the Middle East ever undertaken by a single US president. Saudi Arabia wasted no time in using its US (and also UK) military provisions to lay Yemen to waste. Conjoined with Obama's use of drones in that land, the result has been a horrific civil war in which many civilians have been killed and many civilian structures destroyed.

As if all of this were not bad enough, Obama also managed to drop more than 26K bombs in 2016, after having dropped more than 23K in 2015. Given all of this very warlike behavior in undeclared wars, no one can truly say precisely how much drones are to blame for the ongoing carnage throughout the Middle East. What is beyond dispute is that together these measures culminated in a huge expansion and spread of ISIS and other radical jihadist groups.

At the same time, given the tonnage of bombs dropped by Obama in seven different countries, the use of drones does seem to have led directly to a willingness of the president to use also manned combat aerial vehicles, notably in countries with which the United States was not at war when Obama assumed his office. While his predecessor, George W. Bush, can be properly credited with the destruction of Afghanistan and Iraq, Obama

managed to contribute heartily to the destruction of Libya, Yemen, and Syria, while [attacking the people of Somalia as well](#).

Enter Donald J. Trump, who became the new US president on January 21, 2017. On that same day, two drone strikes in Yemen killed a slew of people, three of whom were said to be “suspected Al Qaeda leaders”. The US government has not confirmed that it launched the strikes. It is the policy of the CIA, put in charge by Obama of the drone program “outside areas of active hostilities” (in countries such as Yemen, Pakistan, Somalia, et al.), not to share the details of its covert operations. This would seem to imply that the drone strikes on January 21, 2017, were not the doings of the Pentagon, now under the direction of [General James “Mad Dog” Mattis](#), who was sworn in on the same day as the new president.

Trump’s choice for CIA director, Mike Pompeo, has not yet been sworn in, as his confirmation process is still underway. In other words, [the drone strikes carried out under the auspices of the CIA this past weekend](#) were done so without a director in place. Obama therefore succeeded not only in normalizing assassination as “targeted killing” when the implements of homicide used are missiles, and they are launched by the CIA, but he also left the killing machine on autopilot. Note that the former CIA director, John Brennan, who first served as Obama’s drone killing czar, before being promoted to director, has spent his time in recent days [bashing the new president](#), not serving as Trump’s interim adviser.

The incineration of military-age men using missiles launched from drones has become so frequent and commonplace that US citizens, including legislators, did not blink an eye at the fact that the killing machine set in motion by President Obama is now effectively on autopilot. It’s worth remembering that, once upon a time, acts of war were to be approved by the congress. Now even acephalic agencies such as the directorless CIA are permitted to use weapons of war to kill anyone whom they deem to be worthy of death. All of this came about because Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Barack “no boots on the ground” [Obama wanted to be able to prosecute wars without appearing to prosecute wars](#). *Fait accompli*.

Laurie Calhoun, a philosopher and cultural critic, is the author of [We Kill Because We Can: From Soldiering to Assassination in the Drone Age](#) (Zed Books, September 2015; paperback forthcoming in 2016) and [War and Delusion: A Critical Examination](#) (Palgrave Macmillan 2013; paperback forthcoming in 2016). [Visit her website](#).

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