

Who Are The Terrorists, And Can You Know One When You See One?

Farea Al-Muslimi, Drone Killings in Yemen, and Our Presidential Terrorist

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Global Research, April 28, 2013

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Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Terrorism](#)

How is President Obama NOT a terrorist, like President Bush and other presidents before him?

What does it mean to be a terrorist? Isn't someone who commits or colludes in a terrorist act quite simply a terrorist?

What is a terrorist act?

Isn't a terrorist act an act of violence designed to murder, maim, and terrorize civilians?

Is there a difference between a terrorist act and an act of war? Not necessarily. The bombing of London 1941 and Hiroshima 1945 were acts of war, and they were both terrorist acts. The former failed, the latter succeeded, and the ripples of nuclear terror continue spreading almost 70 years later.

American drones, Reapers and Predators especially, are weapons of terror. Sometimes they are aimed at specific targets, sometimes they hit those targets, and sometimes they kill indiscriminately. People on the ground can hear or see the drones, but can't know what the drones will do, and that uncertainty gives drones their power to terrorize.

Even unarmed surveillance drones terrorize populations below, who have no way of knowing if unarmed drones are armed or not.

What Terrorist Wouldn't Love to Have a Drone Fleet?

The drone is the American government's terrorist weapon of choice in recent years. Government officials have said they like it because they can target particular individuals who pose some real or imagined threat to the U.S. They don't say, although it appears to be true, that they also like killer drones because even when they miss their target and only achieve wanton killing, that "protects" Americans, too.

American government terrorists have used lethal drones to kill people abroad for a decade or more. The government still keeps much of the drone program secret, especially the actual results of drone strikes. It seems actual carnage, actual dead women and actual dead babies, might undercut widespread popular support for drone killings that are believed to be highly selective and accurate in taking out our legitimate enemies, and only our legitimate enemies.

Most of Congress has apparently felt that way and still does. Until recently, no Senate or House committee had held a single public hearing to find out just what the program of presidential assassination-by-drone was, much less why it was right or even legal for the executive branch to execute people, based on secret “evidence,” without due process that included a trial or verdict.

Finally, on April 23, 2013, the Senate Judiciary Committee’s subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights and Human Rights, chaired by Democratic Senator Dick Durbin of Illinois, held a hearing entitled “Drone Wars: The Constitutional and Counterterrorism Implications of Targeted Killing.” The hearing began at 4 p.m.

The Executive Branch Chose Not To Talk About its Acts of Terror

Even though this was the first ever public Congressional hearing on “Drone Wars,” the Obama administration chose not to participate. And the Senate chose not to issue any subpoenas to compel executive branch testimony.

The Senate did postpone the hearing once, to give the administration more time to prepare a witness. In the end, all the White House contributed was an email from a National Security Council spokes woman that said in part that the White House would work:

“to ensure not only that our targeting, detention and prosecution of terrorists remains consistent with our laws and system of checks and balances, but that our efforts are even more transparent to the American people and the world.”

The hearing’s six witnesses included three retired military officers, two lawyers, one think tank director, and a Yemeni journalist who testified to how wonderfully his life was changed by a U.S. State Dept. exchange program that brought him from a remote mountain village to spend his senior year in high school in southern California.

How Does a Yemeni Feel When His Home Village is Bombed?

The journalist is Farea al-Muslimi, who lives and works now in Sana’a, the Yemeni capital, located about a nine hour drive north of his home village of Wessab. In his testimony, he said,

“Just six days ago, my village was struck by an American drone in an attack that terrified the region’s poor farmers....

“I could never have imagined that the same hand that changed my life and took it from miserable to promising one would also drone my village. My understanding is that a man named Hammed al-Radmi was the target of a drone strike. Many people in Wessab know al-Radmi, and the Yemeni government could easily have found and arrested him. Al-Radmi was well known to government officials, and even to local government—and even local government could have captured him if the U.S. had told them to do so.

“In the past, what Wessab’s villagers knew of the U.S. was based on my stories about my wonderful experiences here. The friendships and values I experienced and described to the villagers helped them understand the America that I know and that I love. Now, however, when they think of America, they think of the terror they feel from the drones that hover over their heads, ready to fire missiles at any time. What the violent militants had previously failed to achieve, one drone strike accomplished in an

instant. There is now an intense anger against America in Wessab."

Farea al-Muslimi first wrote about the attack on Wasseb, that killed five alleged militants, the following day in the new media website Al Monitor that centers on Middle East news. The video of al-Muslimi's five and a half minutes of Senate testimony has gone viral on YouTube.

It's Not That We Shouldn't Dismember People, It's That We Do It Properly

Georgetown Law Professor Rosa Brooks, who served as the Pentagon's special coordinator for rule of law and humanitarian policy during Obama's first administration, testified somewhat gingerly at the same hearing that:

"... right now we have the executive branch making a claim that it has the right to kill anyone anywhere on earth at any time for secret reasons based on secret evidence in a secret process undertaken by unidentified officials. That frightens me.

"I don't doubt their good faith, but that's not the rule of law as we know it."

Why a former Obama administration official was talking about her own fear was not explored. But something else al-Muslimi said helped put the lawyer's fears in fuller perspective:

"The drone strikes are the face of America to many Yemenis. I have spoken to many victims of U.S. drone strikes, like a mother in Jaar who had to identify her innocent 18-year-old son's body through a video in a stranger's cellphone, or the father in Shaqra who held his four- and six-year-old children as they died in his arms.

"Recently in Aden, I spoke with one of the tribal leaders present in 2009 at the place where the U.S. cruise missiles targeted the village of al-Majalah in Lawdar, Abyan. More than 40 civilians were killed, including four pregnant women.

"The tribal leader and others tried to rescue the victims, but the bodies were so decimated that it was impossible to differentiate between those of children, women and their animals. Some of these innocent people were buried in the same grave as their animals."

Who Cares What Blows You Up, Once You're Blown Up?

But wait, some might say, cruise missiles are different from missiles from drones, and technically that's correct. It's also morally meaningless. The remote killing of civilians remains an act of terror, and a war crime, and it really doesn't matter if drone missiles have less explosive power and therefore kill innocent people at a slower rate.

These days, in America, drone wars are not part of a moral debate. Discussion of anonymous killing from the air has raised a debate about technicalities, sometimes important technicalities of ordnance, tactics, law, and constitutionality.

If the debate were about morality, we'd admit that our country commits terrorist acts with relative impunity - and then we'd consider whether that's the country we want to go on being.

Terrorism is generally thought to be a weapon of the weak, but there's no inherent reason it

can't work even more effectively for the strong, at least in the short term. Especially when the strong have the media ability to redefine their terrorist acts as "targeted killings" or, better, "signature strikes."

What's good about the "war on terrorism" (for America) is that it's a war we can't lose. Those foreign terrorists, no matter how you add them up, cannot become an existential threat to the United States. They don't have the numbers or the resources.

So why does the U.S. pursue fundamentally impotent enemies with such implacable ferocity? Especially, why does the U.S. pursue terrorists in ways that create more terrorists than we kill?

Or is that the point?

What if the Point of the War on Terror is to Sustain the War on Terror?

Since 9/11 our government, with the consent of all too many of the governed, has taken us down the road of permanent war against an abstraction – terrorism – rooted in a racist premise, that the terrorists are mostly Arabs or Muslims or some sort of poor, brown people.

They envy us our freedoms, as some like to say, with apparently unintended irony, since the course of permanent war abroad has been accompanied by a permanent state of security at home that looks more and more like the latest incarnation of a police state.

That enlarged authoritarian presence in our lives likely contributes to concern about the constitution and the rule of law – even when those concerned ignore the rule of lawlessness in places like Yemen. Taking this situation as a whole, the constitution looks more and more like collateral damage.

On its face, American anti-terrorism terrorism is insanely stupid in its ineffectual circularity. Or is it fiendishly clever, however planned or unplanned, in its seemingly infinite self-perpetuation?

When our President and our government commit terrorist acts, they do so partly in our name. When our Congressmen and our Senators seek to justify the government's terrorist acts, or to cover them over with a transparent film of legality, they do so partly in our name. When our judges allow the terrorist acts of the American government to go unchallenged and unaccountable, they do so partly in our name.

These are the fundamental elements of our three-branch government conspiring to commit terrorist acts around the world, thereby making us all terrorists, except those who resist.

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