

Obama institutionalizes state assassinations

By Bill Van Auken
25 October 2012

The Obama administration has created a new extra-legal system known as the “disposition matrix” to institutionalize the selection and targeting of enemies of the US state for assassination, according to an article published Wednesday in the *Washington Post*.

The *Post* reports that the system is “designed to go beyond existing kill lists,” creating a centralized data base that contains “the names of terrorism suspects arrayed against an accounting of the resources being marshaled to track them down, including sealed indictments and clandestine operations.”

The data base joins “biographies, locations, known associates and affiliated organizations” with “strategies for taking targets down.” While the article includes among these strategies “extradition requests, capture operations and drone patrols,” the reality is that overwhelming preference has been given to assassination by drone strikes.

On the day the article appeared, another drone strike was reported in Pakistan. One of the pilotless aircraft fired two missiles into a house in North Waziristan near the Afghan border, killing a woman and two men and severely wounding two children. Last week, Pakistan’s interior minister, Rehman Malik, reported that there have been 336 drone attacks on Pakistan over the last eight years, claiming 2,300 victims. Fully 80 percent of those killed, he said, were innocent civilians.

On October 21, another drone strike was reported in Yemen in the country’s eastern Ma’rib Province. A missile was fired into a car, killing four occupants. This brings to 34 the number of known drone attacks in Yemen.

Citing Yemeni military sources, the Saudi newspaper *Al-Sharq al-Awsat* reported that Washington is preparing a dramatic escalation of the drone war in Yemen. It reported that a US C-17 military cargo plane landed in the capital of Sanaa on Monday, bringing in a load of drones and missiles.

As the *Post* article notes, the Central Intelligence Agency has put forward a proposal to substantially expand its own armed drone fleet, solidifying its role as the US government’s paramilitary “Murder, Inc.”

It also reports that the US military’s Joint Special Operations Command has sent commando teams into Africa and transformed its base in Djibouti into a “launching pad for counterterrorism operations across the Horn of Africa and the Middle East.” At the same time it has set up “a secret targeting center across the Potomac River from Washington,” putting it within “a 15-minute commute from the White House so it could be more directly involved in deliberations” on the drawing up of kill lists.

All of these actions reflect a consensus within US ruling circles that the “global war on terrorism” launched under the administration of George W. Bush will continue for at least another decade.

As one unnamed senior administration official told the *Post*: “We can’t possibly kill everyone who wants to harm us. It’s a necessary part of what we do... We’re not going to wind up in 10 years in a world of everybody holding hands and saying, ‘We love America’.”

Indeed not. Another decade of US assassinations and massacres by drones spreading across South Asia, the Middle East and Africa will no doubt create millions of bitter enemies of US imperialism, leading to ever longer “kill lists” and continuously expanding wars.

While the administration and its apologists routinely justify the drone assassinations as necessary to defend the US from terrorist attacks, in reality, the great majority of those killed in Pakistan are targeted for resisting the US occupation of neighboring Afghanistan, while in Yemen they are killed for opposing the US-backed regime there.

In both countries, the US military and the CIA increasingly carry out what are known as “signature

strikes,” in which the identity of those to be killed is not known—much less whether they are plotting against the US. Rather, they are targeted for patterns of activity that supposedly make them suspect.

The *Post* article stresses “the extent to which Obama has institutionalized the highly classified practice of targeted killing, transforming ad-hoc elements into a counterterrorism infrastructure capable of sustaining a seemingly permanent war.”

Last May, the *New York Times* published a lengthy article describing how Obama held weekly meetings at the White House with military and intelligence officials—so-called “terror Tuesdays”—to pore over biographies and mug shots of potential victims and decide which ones to place on the “kill list.” It established that Obama personally approved every strike in Yemen and Somalia, as well as at least a third of those carried out in Pakistan. A top security official described the US president as “quite comfortable” with deciding who should die.

But, as the *Post* article points out, “Targeted killing is now so routine that the Obama administration has spent much of the past year codifying and streamlining the processes that sustain it.” Today, it adds, “the system functions like a funnel, starting with input from half a dozen agencies and narrowing through layers of review” before the names of proposed assassination targets reach the White House.

Significantly, the “disposition matrix” has been developed by the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC), an agency created in 2004, operating under the direction of the US president, the National Security Council and the Homeland Security Council. In all three of these executive agencies, John Brennan, Obama’s homeland security adviser and the founding director of the NCTC, plays a leading role. As a former top aide to Bush’s CIA director George Tenet, Brennan defended the practices of torture and extraordinary rendition.

Earlier this year, Attorney General Eric Holder approved sweeping new guidelines allowing the NCTC to access, search and retain data collected by all US government agencies, giving it a vast store of information on every US citizen, culled from tax records, travel documents, federal benefits and many other sources. That a secretive executive branch agency which collects massive amounts of data on US citizens

is also in charge of developing the criteria for state assassinations abroad has the most chilling implications.

The administration has already targeted and killed several US citizens, including the New Mexico-born cleric Anwar al-Awlaki and Samir Khan, who died in a September 2011 drone strike in Yemen, and Awlaki’s 16-year-old son, who was killed in another strike two weeks later.

The Obama administration has arrogated to itself the most extreme power that can be asserted by any dictatorship—that of ordering citizens put to death without presenting charges against them, much less proving them in a court of law. Instead, an un-elected and unanswerable “kill committee” places their names on a list, the president approves them, and airborne robots are sent to execute them.

In an interview last month with CNN, Obama made the absurd claim that American citizens placed on kill lists are afforded “the protections of the Constitution and due process.” The “due process” that the former constitutional law professor has in mind is the workings of the “disposition matrix” and the kill lists, in which the president and his intelligence and military aides act as judge, jury and executioner.

In Monday’s presidential debate, Obama and his Republican challenger Mitt Romney were equally enthusiastic in their support for such extra-judicial executions by means of drone strikes. No matter which of the two candidates wins the November 6 election, the drone wars will escalate and the wholesale assault on core constitutional and democratic rights will deepen.

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