

# Pentagon to expand drone killing program

By Niles Williamson  
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The Department of Defense is planning to significantly grow the United States' notorious drone assassination and surveillance program over the next four years.

Nearly 14 years into the so-called global war on terror which was launched by President George W. Bush in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., the demand for Hellfire missile strikes against reputed terrorists is reportedly outstripping the Air Force's current capabilities.

According to a report published Monday in the *Wall Street Journal* the number of daily flights will increase by 50 percent from the current 61 to as many as 90 a day by 2019. This will be the first significant expansion of the program since 2011.

In addition to the Air Force, which currently oversees most operations, the drone killing and spying operations will be expanded to include missions carried out by the Army, Special Operations Command as well as government contractors.

The program, which began under Bush, has been dramatically expanded by President Barack Obama. Unmanned drones are one of Obama's favored weapons for carrying out targeted killings. With a further expansion of the plans, the next president will have even more options available for raining down death and destruction upon targets throughout the world.

Flights by American drones over the Middle East and North Africa as well as the Asia Pacific have become routine over the last decade and a half. The US has routinely flown drones from bases in Somalia, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Turkey, Afghanistan and the Philippines.

Drone strikes have been launched against targets in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Yemen, Iraq, Syria, Libya and

Somalia. The list of countries subjected to US drone strikes is likely to expand as the fleet and number of daily missions being flown expands.

MQ-1 Predator and MQ-9 Reaper Drones armed with deadly payloads of Hellfire missiles, Paveway laser guided bombs and other munitions have been deployed by the Obama administration to carry out hundreds of airstrikes in more than half a dozen countries since 2008.

Obama personally selects individuals for death from a kill list on "Terror Tuesdays" without charges or any pretense of due process and routinely brags in speeches about the people he has killed, including American citizen Anwar Al-Awlaki, murdered by a Hellfire missile in Yemen in 2011.

"Demand exceeds supply in this type of mission," Pentagon spokesman Navy Captain Jeff Davis told reporters on Monday. The Air Force claims that there is a shortage of drone pilots and current pilots and crews are being overworked due current requirements. Defense Secretary Ashton Carter authorized the Air Force to reduce its number of daily drone missions from 65 to 60 by October in an effort to ease pressure on pilots.

The Pentagon's plan calls for the Air Force to continue to fly 60 drone flights a day, with the Army responsible for 10 to 20 daily flights, Special Forces commanding four, and outside contractors flying 10 unarmed flights per day. The Air Force will continue to fly drone missions on behalf of the CIA, which it has done since 2013 when responsibility for the Obama administration's still secret drone wars in Yemen and Pakistan officially changed hands.

According to a senior defense official cited by the *Wall Street Journal*, the expansion of the drone program will be directed at improving surveillance and intelligence gathering operations in Ukraine, Iraq, Syria, the South China Sea and North Africa.

The growth of the fleet and the number of flights will also be accompanied by a growth of the program's capacity for carrying out killings via airstrikes.

A report released earlier this year documented the carnage that has been wrought upon the population of Yemen by Obama's drone war against Al Qaeda in Arabian Peninsula. The first airstrike carried out by the Obama administration in Yemen utilized a cruise missile loaded with cluster bombs, killing at least 44 civilians including five pregnant women and 21 children. Since then at least 122 drone strikes have been launched.

Yemenis have repeatedly testified to the terror of seeing a US drone hovering above their village, not knowing if they would be the next casualty. In addition to targeted killings, in 2012 Obama authorized the use of "signature strikes" in Yemen targeting people for death based simply on activity that the CIA had determined marks a terrorist, such as openly carrying firearms, which is common in Yemeni society.

According to conservative estimates tallied by the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, US drone strikes have killed at least 3,271 people in four countries—Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia and Afghanistan—since late 2002. Of those killed more than 500 have been confirmed to be civilians, including pregnant women and children.

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