

Drone Warfare Update #3 February 2021..... Tom Joyce

Drone Warfare: Before, During and After Trump

Barack Obama published a memoir in November, *A Promised Land*. In it, he emphatically defends his drone warfare policy. He writes that the young men and boys that he targeted “had been warped and stunted by desperation, ignorance, dreams of religious glory.” Thus he continues that the circumstances of the war in Afghanistan forced him into a “more targeted, non-traditional warfare” Obama inherited this new method of air war and increased it tenfold, from the Bush administration, across South Asia, the Middle East and northeast Africa. He ended up commanding 563 air strikes, mostly by drones, in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia and Yemen. (Bureau of Investigative Journalism).

Far from resolving the historic religious and political animosities in South Asia and the Middle East, many of us tie the rise of militant fundamentalist groups such as the Islamic State to the U.S.-led military intervention. In September Brown University’s Cost Of War project released an authoritative report concluding that;

- Three million people have been killed as a result of the U.S.-led two decades of war caused by hunger, disease, the collapse of the health care system, and targeted killings;
- 37 million people, mostly civilians, have been displaced among 8 countries;
- reaching levels not seen since World War II.

Trump inherited the Obama drone targeted killing strategy and escalated it particularly in Afghanistan Iraq, Syria and Somalia, while aerial bombing by proxy continued in Yemen and Libya. Shocking rates of civilian deaths ensued as I’ve reported earlier. Civilian deaths will be Trump’s legacy in the drone warfare history.

The Biden campaign and transition made no mention of a policy regarding drone warfare. During the Democratic Party nominating campaign the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) sent a questionnaire to candidates touching on various human rights issues. One question asked if candidates would pledge to end the CIA involvement in killing airstrikes. Biden didn’t respond to the survey.

From the beginning of the Obama administration, Biden was a strong advocate of what he termed, “counterterrorism plus”, one plane of which was aggressive drone bombing of suspected enemies. His team, now as President, for Pentagon head, Director of National Intelligence and Secretary of State suggest a strategy of moving troops around while leaving all of the targeted killing programs in place, under the guise of ending the endless wars.

Biden's foreign policy team, all now confirmed, give reason to suspect that not much will change with the U.S. endless wars. Secretary of the Pentagon, Lloyd Austin, a career military officer until his recent retirement, was General of the Central Command. The Central Command oversees military operations in the Middle East and South Asia. He carried out all of the Bush, Obama and Pentagon war fighting in Afghanistan and surrounding countries. Austin, after retiring, has been on the Board of Raytheon, a corporation heavily profiting from the military sales in the Middle East.

Tony Blinken, the new Secretary of State was known in his senior position in the Obama State Department as favoring the arming the disparate range of Syrian rebel forces, which turned out to be predominantly in the Islamist fundamentalist sector. Avril Haines, the new director of national intelligence, a third Obama era holdover (as deputy director of the CIA) was heavily involved in supporting the regime change wars of the 21st century.

Biden, himself, was among the more moderate of Obama advisors in the area of Middle East policy despite his going along with the consensus regarding drone warfare. Concerned about the influence of radical Islamist elements in the Syrian rebellion and the likely chaos in Libya, he opposed military escalation in both countries. According to Ben Rhodes, Obama's deputy national security advisor, "the only senior official who consistently opposed sending more troops to Afghanistan was Joe Biden."

Hopefully, those instincts will discourage further military escalations.

These endless wars are likely to be maintained by Biden who apparently intends to replace the 2001 Authorization for the Use of Military Force as legal justification to continue the extrajudicial killing campaign.

Judge Rules in Suit Over Sanctions on War Crime Investigation

As reported in the Drone Warfare Update #2, 4 U.S. law professors had been targeted by the Trump administration for their support for an International Criminal Court investigation. The ICC is investigating extrajudicial killings and other war crime of the 19-year war in Afghanistan. Early in January, a federal judge issued an injunction barring the administration from targeting the four with criminal and civil penalties.

The Costs Of War

The previously mentioned Costs Of War Project, a joint Boston and Brown Universities' research study, issued the [Afghanistan's Rising Civilian Death Toll Due to Airstrikes, 2017-2019](#) in December 2020.

In 2017 the Pentagon relaxed the rules for initiating airstrikes (the military has stopped differentiating between piloted aircraft and drone bombing) and escalated the air war in Afghanistan. Its goal was to gain an advantage during peace talks with the Taliban. Between 2017 and 2019 civilian killings from U.S., Allied and Afghan forces dramatically increased. In 2019, 700 civilians were killed by airstrikes, more than any year since the beginning of the war.

The other disturbing conclusion of the Costs Of War is that the U.S. military has created, armed and funded an Afghan Air Force. "As a consequence, the AAF is harming more Afghan civilians than at any time in its history. The uptick in civilians killed by AAF airstrikes between July and September 2020 was particularly striking. In the first six months of this year, the AAF killed 86 Afghan civilians and injured 103 civilians in airstrikes. That rate harm nearly doubled in the next three months. Between July and the end of September, the AAF killed 70 civilians and 90 civilians were injured."

This program of creating the AAF has cost U.S. taxpayers \$8 billion in the last ten years.

The Central Command stopped publishing the summary of airstrikes in Afghanistan in March 2020 because of the fear of it affect on peace talks with the Taliban.

The U.S. military has contested the Costs Of War civilian casualty numbers, admitting to 97 (compared to 546 in the study) civilian deaths by airstrikes in 2019. However, the U.S. doesn't deny harming Afghan civilians as part of its military strategy. The U.S. made 65 "condolence payments" totaling \$314,000 in 2019.

Trump withdraws Troops from Somalia: Pentagon Continues War Fighting in Africa

Former President Trump's lame duck withdrawal of 800 U.S. military personnel from Somalia served to buttress his claim to be ending "endless wars." In fact, the troops were relocated to neighboring countries, similar to the "withdrawal" of troops from Afghanistan. Speculation is that the troops will be moved to the expanding base at Manda Bay in Kenya and to bases in Djibouti, where most of the airstrikes into Somalia emanate from.

Neither Pentagon war planners nor their civilian directors have indicated any intent to stop engaging in armed conflicts. This war fighting is being done predominantly by drones and piloted aircraft. And thus, can be conducted from any number of bases on the African continent.

The main Islamist force that the U.S. is fighting in Africa is Al-Shabaab. Its forces are disparate and also scattered throughout a number of African countries. A U.S. Inspector General's report to Congress in November concluded that, "Despite many years of sustained Somali, U.S. and international counterterrorism pressure, the terrorist threat in East Africa is not degraded. Al-Shabaab retains freedom of movement in many parts of southern Somalia and has demonstrated an ability and intent to attack outside of the country, including targeting U.S. interests."

The latest U.S. airstrike into Somalia on Jan. 7 was reported to have killed 5 Al-Shabaab members.

Formerly secure AFRICOM (Pentagon's Africa Command) documents obtained by Freedom Of Information Act (by VICE World News) show that an expansion to six bases in Somalia has been planned. This would place it on par with Niger as the African country with the most U.S. bases. Two of the bases would obtain the same designation as the \$100 million U.S. drone base in Agadez, Niger. The expectation – given the current troop withdrawal – is that the work of these bases will be done by military contractors and short term deployments of U.S. troops.

Amnesty International and Airwars, the UK-based air strike monitoring organization both express fears that the "withdrawal" will make the Pentagon even less accountable for civilian deaths and injuries in Somalia. The strikes will continue but AFRICOM will be even further insulated and isolated from attack locations. Already there is a great discrepancy in reporting civilian deaths. AFRICOM has admitted killing 5 civilians in 4 attacks over 13 years in Somalia. Airwars evidence suggests as many as 13 Somali civilians were killed in 2020 alone, and between 69 and 142 in U.S. airstrikes since 2007.

This is another repetition of the war against the Taliban in Afghanistan and against ISIS there and in Iraq and Syria and the Houthi rebellion in Yemen.....the endless war.