

Next Generation Warfare: Combat Drones Become Fastest-growing Weaponry in Global Military Arsenal

by *Prakash Nanda*, published on *Eurasia Times*, November 28, 2021

Around this time last year (2020), Azerbaijan had conquered almost the entire Armenian exclave of Nagorno-Karabakh. If the war had attracted global attention, it was mainly because of one feature.

And that was the widespread use of armed drones of Turkish production, which decimated and demoralized the unprepared Armenians from the air.

In fact, the importance of armed drones nowadays is such that almost all the major countries are acquiring more and more armed drone systems. A side effect of this proliferation is an increase in their exports, a fact that was conclusively proved last week with the release of two reports.

On November 25, Reportlinker.com announced the release of '*Aircraft Insulation Market by Platform, Type, Material, Application and Region – Forecast to 2026*'. According to the report, the global aircraft insulation market size is projected to grow from \$5.5 billion in 2021 to \$8.2 billion by 2026, at a CAGR of 8.3% from 2021 to 2026.

Based on this, the report says that the UAV platforms happen to be the fastest segment of the aircraft insulation market. It is not much affected by the COVID-19 outbreak. And major

players of this market are DuPont (US), Triumph Group, Inc. (US), Transdigm Group, Inc. (US), Zotefoams (UK), BASF SE (Germany), Rogers Corporation (US), Safran Group (France), and Evonik Industries (Germany).

The other report coming on November 23, estimates that the Global Defense Drone Market will generate \$16,902.0 million and exhibit a CAGR of 7.9% from 2021 to 2028, owing to increasing defense expenditure in many countries around the world.

The Asia-Pacific region is anticipated to observe the fastest growth by 2028, the report, which, incidentally, is prepared by "*Research Dive*", a market research firm based in Pune, India, says.

Based on payload, the small drones sub-segment is estimated to generate a revenue of \$7,901.2 million by 2028 and hold dominating market share over the forecast period. This is majorly owing to the effectiveness of small drones to lift a payload up to 25 kg, and perform computerized command, communication, control, and information functions.

Based on application, the combat operations sub-segment is expected to generate a revenue of \$6,556.2 million by 2028 and is predicted to witness the fastest growth during the analysis period. This is mainly due to the rising need for upgrading the existing unmanned aerial attack systems for threat elimination missions and target identification in military aviation.

Based on region, the Asia-Pacific market for defense drones is expected to surpass \$4,071.7 million by 2028 and witness the fastest growth in the global industry over the forecast period. The increasing military expenditure of major countries

in the region, such as China, India, Japan, Australia, and others is the major factor predicted to boost the regional market growth by 2028.

..Turkish Bayraktar TB2 is now export-hit and Ankara has ensured that the development and production of the drone can run as autonomously as possible. Among TB2's customers are now Ukraine and Poland.

The US, of course, is the leader in the market as it has used drones in conflicts for long, particularly in asymmetric conflicts with low intensity – both to cover ground groups from the air and to target suspected terrorist targets. In Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, and Yemen, the US MQ-1 Predator and MQ-9 Reaper systems have been used extensively.

Proliferation Of Military Drones

All told, if military drones are becoming increasingly indispensable for the armed forces all over the world, there are essentially four reasons behind this trend.

One, they are less costly but pretty effective as operational intelligence platforms for proper data flow and they provide real-time surveillance to detect ballistic missile threats.

Two, they can be used in remote locations where the communication systems are poor. They are thus able to provide vital data, irrespective of location. As a result, the control center of the user is able to plan and prepare for uncertain attacks. They, thus, help in making well-informed decisions.

Three, and this is a corollary of the above, in heavy fighting zones, drones help in providing information to the command center to identify the targets better, improve safety, and protect infrastructures from any kind of external threats or risks. In this sense, they greatly reduce putting military

personnel in harm's way or in combat...

Four, drones are proving also lethal to enemy combats as regular airplanes. This means that it is easier to neutralize enemy power using a drone with minimal human casualties.

However, the biggest criticism against military drones is that they often cause collateral damages to civilian lives and property....No wonder why US MQ-1 Predator and MQ-9 Reaper are such dirty words in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria.

But then, modern warfare is increasingly becoming insensitive to civilian opinions. National interests weigh over notions of rights and wrong in fighting wars, particularly when the enemies happen to be those who have the scantiest respect for these very notions of rights and wrongs.

And that explains why the armed drone market is growing and will grow further.

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Ukrainian Government Deploys Armed Drones Against

Separatists

by Jason Melanovski, published on World Socialist Website, November 16, 2021

Despite its obligations under the signed 2015 Minsk Accords peace agreement, the Ukrainian government is continuing to ramp up its military capabilities against Russian-backed separatists in eastern Ukraine. In late October, it deployed Turkish-made Bayraktar TB2 drones there for the first time ever.

In response to an ostensible shelling by separatists, Ukraine used the TB2 drone to destroy a Russian-made howitzer, provoking the deployment of Russian troops to the Ukrainian border and the renewed risk of a full-scale war between Moscow and NATO-backed Kiev.

The attack in the separatist-controlled village of Hranitne, which was reported on favorably by the *New York Times* on Tuesday, is another demonstration that the government of President Volodymyr Zelensky is committed to a policy of escalation as it seeks to reintegrate the breakaway provinces of Lugansk and Donetsk in eastern Ukraine.

For the past year the Ukrainian ruling class has sought to deepen military ties with the Turkish government, with both powers seeking to diminish Russian naval control over the strategic Black Sea region. The Ukrainian government offered Ankara advanced missile technology and in exchange received the coveted Turkish-made armed aerial drones.

Drones played a pivotal role in Azerbaijan's defeat of Russian-backed Armenia last year in the Nagorno-Karabakh war, and the Ukrainian oligarchy quickly became enamored with their potential use against its own Russian-backed separatists.

Kiev received the first shipment of drones in July and plans

to purchase approximately 50 of the TB2 drones. In September, the two sides signed a memorandum to create a joint drone training and maintenance center in Ukraine.

Russia has predictably reacted with hostility to the use of drones in Ukraine, which could spark a new wave of targeted bombings and assassinations by Kiev in the more than seven-year-long war that has claimed the lives of over 14,000.

Speaking Saturday on Russian state television about drones and Ukraine, President Vladimir Putin accused the Zelensky government of violating the 2015 Minsk accords, which specifically ban the use of aerial weapons:

“Now the current president cheerfully reports they’re using Bayraktars, that is, unmanned aerial vehicles. Europe said something incomprehensible and the US even supported it and officials in Ukraine openly say that they used them and will use them further.”

With Russian troops now amassed across its northern border in response to its drone use, the Zelensky government has continued to duplicitously depict Russia as the aggressor while domestically preparing for war and refusing to abide by the 2015 Minsk peace accords that call for a cease fire, free elections, and a special federated status for the breakaway provinces.

Speaking of the reported Russian troop buildup, Zelensky hypocritically stated via a recorded video speech,

“I hope the whole world can now clearly see who really wants peace and who is concentrating nearly 100,000 soldiers at our border.”

In reality, the right-wing government of Zelensky, which originally came to power thanks to mass opposition to the militaristic, nationalist policies of former President Petro

Poroshenko, has taken increasingly reckless actions in order to provoke Russia and gain military and economic support from its imperialist backers, namely the United States, France and Germany.

In March of this year, Zelensky and the country's National Security and Defense Council provocatively approved a strategy that is aimed at retaking Crimea and reintegrating the strategically important peninsula. This step ultimately led to a similar Russian troop buildup along the border last spring, although Moscow later withdrew its forces.

In addition to the purchase of Turkish drones, Zelensky's foreign policy since that time has only increased the risk of all-out war between the two countries.

Following the pull-back of Russian forces, the Zelensky government spent the summer begging for NATO membership and held a number of joint military and naval drills that were openly directed against Russia.

In August, the Zelensky government held its inaugural *"Crimea Platform"* summit, which brought together its imperialist backers in Kiev. Zelensky took photos with world leaders and declared *"Crimea is Ukraine."*

In response, the Russian government openly declared its opposition to Ukraine's NATO accession, stating,

"President Putin has repeatedly noted the issue of the potential broadening of NATO infrastructure on Ukrainian territory, and (he) has said this would cross those red lines that he has spoken about before."

NATO's major powers have recklessly backed Kiev's escalation. On Monday, French President Emmanuel Macron warned Putin via a phone conversation that he would be prepared to defend Ukraine in case of war between the two countries.

"Our willingness to defend Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity was reiterated by the president," a French adviser to Macron told reporters regarding the phone call between the leaders of the two nuclear-armed countries.

The US has sent a missile destroyer, the tanker USNS John Lenthall and the staff ship USS Mount Whitney, to participate in the US Joint Forces Command Europe military drills in the Black Sea.

This past Sunday, the British press reported that the UK was preparing to send 600 troops to Ukraine.

Ukraine itself has deployed 8,500 troops to its side of the border with Russia and announced that parts of its naval fleet would move from the Black Sea to the Sea of Azov, whose waters are claimed by Russia.

The tensions between Moscow and Kiev are escalating as the conflict between neighboring Poland and Belarus escalates over a refugee crisis in which thousands of desperate migrants seeking safe harbor in the EU have been trapped at the border and brutalized by Polish forces. Russia, which is allied to Belarus' government, is accused of playing a central role in orchestrating the crisis.

The drone defense dilemma: How unmanned aircraft are redrawing battle lines

*by Tom Kington, published on **Defense News**, February 14, 2021*

ROME – First there was the video from Libya of a Turkish drone

destroying a Russian Pantsir missile defense system.

Next came the veteran S-300 air defense system – also Russian – being taken out in Nagorno-Karabakh by an Israeli-built Harop loitering munition.

In the conflicts in Libya and Nagorno-Karabakh last year, unmanned platforms often made short work of the ground-based systems designed to neutralize them, paving the way for easy attacks on vulnerable troops.

What is more, experts say, is that the balance of power between drones and air defense systems is shaping up to be a key to global wars in the near future.

“Libya, Nagorno-Karabakh and also Syria have just showed us that if a fielded force cannot protect its airspace, then the large scale use of UAVs can make life extremely dangerous,”

said Justin Bronk, an air force research fellow at the Royal United Services Institute in England.

Turkey’s Bayraktar TB2 armed drone grabbed the headlines during the Libya conflict last year, which saw Turkey deploy the platform to defend the U.N.-backed Tripoli government against strongman Khalifa Hifter, who relied on Russian Pantsir systems.

Able to fire their Roketsan munitions from outside the range of the Russian systems, the TB2s scored hits, helping stop Hifter’s advance.

“Turkey also sent in engineers who improved the software of the drones on the fly, while there was no similar learning curve with the Chinese UAVs operated by the UAE to assist Hifter,”

said Jalel Harchaoui at the Switzerland-based Global

Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime.

"The bold and effective use of TB2s in Nagorno-Karabakh in October was made possible by the previous success in Libya," he added.

An enclave belonging to Azerbaijan but governed by breakaway ethnic Armenians, Nagorno-Karabakh has been a flashpoint between Azerbaijan and Armenia for years. It exploded in a brief and bloody war between September and November.

Turkey, which backed Azerbaijan, reportedly sent in UAV trainers ahead of the conflict. TB2s alongside Israeli loitering munitions were soon racking up successes, with Dutch warfare research group Oryx reporting 134 Armenian tanks destroyed compared to 22 lost by Azerbaijan.

"Turkey built up its UAV expertise after leasing Israeli UAVs, then put that expertise to use building its own after frustrations over the limits placed on its use of the Israeli systems," Bronk said. "The TB2 has a similar aerodynamic profile to the Heron, while the Turkish Anka UAV is similar to the Hermes 450."

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Manufacturer Bayraktar has sold the TB2 to Qatar and Ukraine, while Serbia is eyeing a purchase, raising the TB2's profile as a competitor to the Chinese Wing Loong II, 50 of which have been exported.

"China and Turkey are vying for sales, which begs the question: Why doesn't Russia have the equivalent of a TB2 to sell? I am very surprised they are almost absent in this market," Harchaoui said.

The drone's contribution to the hostilities in Nagorno-

Karabakh came with a price, as Canada suspended arms exports to Turkey amid claims the TB2 contained Canadian parts, while a U.K. firm supplying parts to the drone also canceled its contract.

A number of nations, including the U.K., are meanwhile beefing up their defenses for ground forces, said Bronk.

"In light of this threat, the British Army has recently ordered a short/medium-range [surface-to-air missile] system called Sky Sabre. If deployed forward in significant numbers, it should dramatically reduce the Army's vulnerability to both surveillance and attack by hostile UAVs in situations where friendly air cover is unavailable," he said.

Drones are not, however, invulnerable, he added.

"U.S. and British Reapers and Predators in Syria had lots of problems with Russian electronic warfare. Since the Reaper can be targeted, you can imagine that less sophisticated platforms can be more easily affected," he said.

Bronk expects that more militaries will spend more money on air defense to balance out the drone threat – *"particularly countries which don't have strong air forces."*

"One option is the Russian SA-17 system, which has a 75-kilometer range compared to the 10 kilometers of TB2 missiles, or the cheaper and more contained SA-15 with a 10-kilometer range. Western products include the [National Advanced Surface-to-Air Missile System] NASAMS, which already helps to defend Washington, D.C., with a roughly 15-kilometer range and the NASAMS 2 with a 30- to 40-kilometer range," he said.

Peter Roberts, the director of military sciences at the Royal United Services Institute, said the world is waking up to the

reality of modern warfare.

“For a while there was the romantic view that either drones or tanks or missiles would win wars on their own,” he said. “There is no silver bullet on the battlefield, and this is an era which is rediscovering that.”

Roberts added that urban warfare is also undergoing a revival, as is the art of deception in war.

“Whether it’s the Russians in Ukraine or the Iranians, the use of decoys is back – something we once knew about, then forgot in the 1990s.”

The world is also returning to an era of proxy wars, he said, from Libya to Nagorno-Karabakh to Yemen.

“That means wars fought on the edge of great powers using mercenaries and sponsored guerilla groups and insurgents,” he said. “It also means more sophisticated weapons in the hands of smaller, nonstate groups like the Houthis in Yemen using cruise and ballistic missiles and drones. It is potentially very nasty.”

***Featured Image:** An Israeli Heron-TP unmanned aircraft sits on the tarmac during the April 2018 Berlin Air Show. (Sebastian Sprenger/Staff)

Russia's

Real-World

Experience is Driving Counter-Drone Innovations

by **Samuel Bendett**, published on **Defense News**, May 23, 2021

The Russian military is actively working to develop concepts, tactics, techniques and procedures against aerial drones. The Russian Ministry of Defence has invested heavily to defend its forces against the growing threat and proliferations of UAVs large and small, from those manufactured by foreign states to those used by a growing slate of nonstate actors and terrorist organizations.

This investment comprises the development of technologies, incorporating the lessons learned from its own military and from other forces' combat, and continuing to refine its electronic warfare capabilities as a key element of counter-unmanned aerial system tactics, techniques and procedures.

Learning from experience

Russia's own involvement in the Syrian conflict started in 2015 when it brought its military in direct conflict with forces and coalitions fighting the government of President Bashar Assad. While Russia considers Syria its own "*sandbox*" for testing multiple weapons systems, the unpredictable Syrian military battlespace also resulted in nonstate actors experimenting with commercial off-the shelf drone technologies by launching multiple mass UAV attacks against the Russian base at Hmeimim.

At the same time, the Russian military was a keen observer of combat drone use against its allies in Syria and in Libya.

The ongoing drone use by the anti-Assad Syrian forces against Russian targets, along with Yemen's Houthi forces against Saudi Arabian targets, and the recently concluded war in

Nagorno-Karabakh confirmed the MoD's conclusion: A robust electronic warfare defense, together with early warning radars and anti-aircraft systems, can provide adequate protection against the growing use of UAVs by global belligerents.

In Syria, the MoD dubbed this triple c-UAS layer as the "*echeloned defense*" that was effective against do-it-yourself-type drones, but that is still unproven against more sophisticated military drones currently in service with multiple combatants around the world.

Following the conclusion of the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War, Russian military experts remain committed that the above-mentioned "*echeloned*" combination would have worked well against Azerbaijani drone attacks, especially given that some form of this echelon comprising EW and anti-aircraft systems in service with the Armenian forces was able to blunt certain Azeri UAV operations. As Turkish combat drones in Libya and Syria attacked Moscow's allies, the older Soviet and Russian-made anti-aircraft systems had limited success against adversarial UAVs, but could not be more effective without other "*echeloned*" elements described above.

The continuous Houthi drone strikes against Saudi targets also expose the limits of modern Western-made anti-aircraft systems like the Patriot; such systems may not be adequate against small UAVs with very low radar signatures. The cost of deploying such anti-aircraft systems against small drones may be prohibitively expensive, necessitating a different approach to dealing with this new and evolving threat.

Finally, Russian support for the separatist forces in eastern Ukraine confirmed the importance of drones as a key intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance element in today's combat, and the importance of robust EW defenses should the Ukrainian military start fielding more sophisticated UAVs against pro-Russian forces.

Concepts and Technology

According to Lt. Gen. Alexander Leonov, chief of the Russian air defense forces, the ongoing efforts by nonstate actors and terrorist organizations to improve their UAVs and their usage methods indicate that in the near future, the threats associated with the use of drones may increase not only in Syria but also in other countries.

He points out that Russia gained valuable experience in countering such drone attacks, and that these skills and knowledge are now reflected in air defense combat manuals and are part of tactical, select and reconnaissance training. In fact, the Russian Ministry of Defence notes that today, all military districts across the country have units to counter adversarial drones.

The Russian experience defending its Khmeimim base from UAV strikes has become the foundation of its military's c-UAS training program. Starting in 2019, all major military exercises and drills include the defense against an adversary's massed drone attacks. The electronic warfare systems and technologies emerged as a key concept in this training. Across the Russian military services, in numerous drills, exercises and maneuvers, EW training is regularly conducted against adversarial drones, and practically all c-UAS drills feature EW systems as a key element.

Such symbiotic pairing typically unfolds in drills where the "adversary" forces use UAVs as key ISR elements against Russian troops, vehicles and systems.

Typically, the Russian military uses a combination of portable and wheeled EW systems. The Borisoglebsk and Zhitel systems are often tested in such drills; the EW specialists conduct electronic reconnaissance, then collect and analyze intelligence data, followed by conducting radio interference to "drown" adversarial UAV control channels along with drones'

communication channels with GPS navigation satellites.

In another typical c-UAS exercise that was conducted this year, the “adversary” force used several UAVs to conduct reconnaissance and coordinate artillery strikes against Russian positions. The Southern Military District’s mobile EW groups used an R-934BMV automated jamming station, the Silok-01 electronic warfare system and the Pole-21 advanced radio suppression system to discover enemy UAVs in order to interfere with their communications and suppress their control channels, rendering them useless for further operations.

In Syria, the MoD confirms that a combination of hand-held and stationary systems are used to suppress and jam drones that continue to harass and attack Russian positions. Using such systems allows the Russian military to directly influence UAVs’ control and navigation channel receivers. The EW troops intercept control channels, and the operator monitors the position of the UAV and proceeds to take control of the drone, giving the UAVs a command to land.

In Russia, military forces started using Stilet and Stupor portable c-UAS rifles, along with the newest Krasukha-C4 EW complex designed to identify adversarial strike aircraft and to suppress their communications and navigation. In a recent Black Sea drill, the EW detachments used the Krasukha system to target and disable multiple drones flying at low and medium altitudes.

Looking Ahead

Today, the Russian military is making c-UAS training mandatory across its services. In July 2018, the MoD announced that all ground forces, marines and airborne troops will have to learn how to shoot down drones with assault rifles, machine guns, sniper rifles and automatic weapons. This c-UAS concept of operations was developed taking into account the Russian military experience in Syria.

There is also evidence that the Russian MoD is eager to expand its c-UAS training and field activity beyond countering small, low-flying drones. In 2018, Russian EW systems jammed American drones operating in Syria, providing the MoD with valuable data and experience in countering more advanced adversarial UAVs.

The Russian military is also making sure its c-UAS systems and concept of operations involve the latest technologies, such as artificial intelligence, for the greatest advantage against the growing sophistication of the global drone force. New counter-drone radars and UAVs capable of targeting other drones are in development by the Russian military-industrial enterprises.

As the UAV threat will continue to persist, Russian MoD efforts will be directed at the continuing refinement of its c-UAS practices, while seeking to introduce technology capable of offering protection against adversaries' drone developments.

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US Killer Drone Attacks Kill Innocent Civilians

by Larry Gilbert Sr., published AntiWar.com, November, 18, 2021

As a people represented by our government, what gives us the right to go into other countries and indiscriminately assassinate people? Do we think that "American exceptionalism" gives us that right? How would we feel if the roles were reversed? Families around the world are merely trying to live their lives in peace as much as we are here in America.

As a Vietnam War veteran and seeing the ravages of war from that time forward, I have become a member of two organizations, Veterans for Peace and World Beyond War.

At the end of September, I traveled to Indian Springs, Nevada, to join with fellow members as well as members of Code Pink: Women for Peace and other organizations from 12 states. This is where Creech Air Force Base is located – some 50 miles north of Las Vegas.

We spent a week camped out in the desert. We conducted nonviolent protest actions at the entrance to the drone base twice daily, when drone pilots would arrive for work in the morning and leave at the end of their shifts. All the while during the day and night, killer drones were buzzing loudly over us and doing touch and goes on the runway.

The U.S. drone program has been ongoing for some 20 years by the Air Force and the Central Intelligence Agency. As a country, we have used killer drones in Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Libya, Somalia and Yemen. The last I knew, we haven't declared war with these countries, other than Afghanistan and Iraq – our perpetual wars.

Hardly ever have we, the American people, heard of the strikes that are conducted ever so frequently in these countries with no accountability. Thousands of strikes have taken place during these 20 years and thousands of people have been killed, including so many innocent civilians. The civilians killed are merely referred to as "*collateral damage*."

The "*collateral damage*" are families made up of innocent men,

women and children.

As a people represented by our government, what gives us the right to go into other countries and indiscriminately assassinate people? Do we think that "American exceptionalism" gives us that right? How would we feel if the roles were reversed? Families around the world are merely trying to live their lives in peace as much as we are here in America.

On Aug. 29 of this year, as we were withdrawing from Afghanistan, the US fired a drone strike where its missile(s) struck a car parked by Zamarai Ahmadi outside his home. The strike slaughtered him and nine members of his family, including seven children, five of whom were younger than 10.

According to the New York Times, "the Pentagon claimed that Ahmadi was a facilitator for the Islamic State and that his car was packed with explosives, posing an imminent threat to US troops guarding the evacuation at the Kabul Airport."

General Kenneth F. McKenzie Jr., commander of the US Central Command, said "*the drone strike dealt a crushing blow to Islamic State.*" General Mark A. Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of staff, called it a "*righteous strike.*"

I ask, what is righteous about killing 10 innocent people?

It was only after investigative news reports that there was proof that this was in fact an attack on Zamarai Ahmadi, 45, an engineer for a U.S.-based nonprofit. Generally, most drone strikes have no follow-up investigations.

A recent report of the incident said it was an "*honest mistake*" and what the drone pilots and their commanders saw was what they call "*confirmed bias.*" In other words, they saw what they wanted to see.

How often does that happen? I suspect quite often, by those giving the orders to fire the missiles.

Unfortunately, those young Air Force drone pilots have to come into work every morning and fire missiles from drones killing people during the day and go home to their families at the end of their shift, especially after seeing the carnage that they wreaked. I suspect that some of these pilots will suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder after a period of time.

How will they and their families' lives be impacted in the years following? I would encourage those who feel this sense to seek help from organizations such as ours, Veterans For Peace, to assist them.

On another note, the Israeli government flies drones day and night over the Gaza Strip, where Palestinians live in a state of terror that missiles will be fired at them. Aside from that fear, the noise offers another sense of harassment.

It is high time to kill killer drones. Peace and justice.

Larry Gilbert Sr. is a former mayor and police chief of Lewiston, U.S. marshal, and U.S. Army veteran. Distributed by PeaceVoice.

Digging for Peace- Resisting Nuclear Weapons

by Brian Terrell, published on Countercurrents, November 18, 2021

On Wednesday, October 20, I joined "Vrede Scheppen," "Create Peace," about 25 peace activists from the Netherlands, Germany and Austria at the airbase at Volkel, Netherlands, making a

plea for an end to nuclear weapons. This base is home to two Dutch F16 fighter wings and the United States Air Force 703rd Munitions Support Squadron. In violation of international and Dutch law and part of a "*sharing agreement*," the U.S. Air Force maintains 15-20 B61 nuclear bombs there and in violation of the same laws, the Dutch military stands ready for the order to deliver those bombs.

Besides our small multinational protest, on that same day the Dutch and U.S. militaries at Volkel were participating in another international collaboration, this one for a different purpose than ours, the annual NATO exercise "*Steadfast Noon*," literally a rehearsal for the extinction of humanity.

As we gathered at a wayside near the base with F16 fighters roaring over us, a few of the local police watched from a distance. We greeted old and new friends, sang, prayed, shared food and distributed pink shovels and conspired to dig our way into the base, onto the runway and disrupt the practice. Hardly a clandestine plot, this "*digging for peace*" was organized openly and local authorities were informed. Our purpose was get into the base, "*to advocate that the old nuclear bombs be removed and the CO2 emissions of the armed forces be counted in the climate targets and to protest against the arrival of new nuclear bombs*," but our expectation was to be stopped while trying.

As our shovels pierced the sod along the fence that was the first line of defense for some of the most deadly weapons on earth, we looked over our shoulders expecting any moment to have our good work interrupted by a warning, at least, if not by arrest. To our surprise, the police only passively looked on as we dug. Our apprehension turned to elation as it became clear that no one was going to stop us. We began to dig in earnest.



US anti-assassin drone activist Brian Terrell with Dutch colleagues tunneling under a fence at a Dutch air force base where US nuclear weapons are available for Dutch pilots to drop on the world!!!!

On the inside of the fence more police gathered along with a squad of soldiers but except for a carefully restrained dog snarling and pulling on a leash, none of them seemed upset by the scene they were witnessing. Our hole soon became a tunnel and it was not until eight of us, one at a time, crawled through under the fence and climbed up the other side that we were addressed by the authorities. A soldier spoke to me in Dutch and then in English, asking "do you understand that you are under arrest?"

Days before, home on our farm in Iowa, I had dug up our crop of sweet potatoes, enough to feed us through the winter and it was with similar satisfaction that I pulled myself out of the hole I had helped dig and approached the runway, so close to the bombs and the planes that could bring death to millions. At this time and place, nuclear destruction was not an abstraction, nor was our resistance to it. Coming up from that hole felt like coming up out of the grave.

"The Royal Netherlands Military Constabulary arrested eight people Wednesday afternoon when they entered unauthorized military grounds," it was reported in the local news. "We already suspected that a number of people would try to get on the premises. They made a hole under the fence, and once at the airport we stopped them. They didn't resist. It all went

off peacefully," said a police spokesperson.

The prosecutors interrogating us later seemed incredulous as we were that not one of the police or military ever warned that we might be trespassing or tried to stop us in the commission of what they interpreted as our crime. I was the only foreigner arrested along with seven others, ranging in age from their 20s to their 80s. Saved for last, I tried to redirect the questions asked by my interrogators about my previous involvement in such protest in other countries to the real crime, the B61 nuclear warheads that my government is hiding in plain sight in Volkel. I refused to answer questions about the several visas to Afghanistan in my passport, not fearful for myself, but recognizing at that moment the enormity of my privilege as a white man carrying a U.S. passport. After being shuttled for five hours or so between the base and the local police station, we were all released with a warning that criminal charges are pending.

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After many such protests in many places, I never experienced so relaxed a response from the authorities as we were met with at Volkel. No one in uniform expressed anger or even mild impatience with us and our antics. At bases that house nuclear weapons in the United States, signs on the fences carry warnings of lethal force. Even touching such a fence can trigger an armed response. Break-ins like ours on October 20 when they happen in the U.S. almost always merit prosecution and sometimes years in prison. On several occasions, I have spent up to six months in U.S. prisons for even attempting to enter a military base through its public main gate with a petition.

Whether the level of security at a facility with nuclear weapons is as casual as it is at Volkel or the very highest, as at the fortress-like Y-12 facility at Oak Ridge, Tennessee, where in 2012, three Christian pacifists gained access to the

world's largest depot of plutonium, such actions prove that the concept of nuclear security is a myth. Far from keeping a nation secure, the weapons themselves need more protection than any nation can give them. There is no safety in nuclear weapons.

The context of our protest, "*Steadfast Noon*," is explained in classical double-speak in a brief NATO press release on October 18: "*The exercise is a routine, recurring training activity and it is not linked to any current world events*," but at the same time it cites the Allied Heads of State and Government, who at the NATO Summit in June, declared that "*given the deteriorating security environment in Europe, a credible and united nuclear Alliance is essential*."

Along with the Netherlands, Belgium, Italy, Turkey, and Germany also have bases housing U.S. nuclear weapons under similar sharing agreements. These nuclear sharings are not agreements between the various civilian governments, but between the U.S. military and the militaries of those countries. Officially, these agreements are secrets kept even from the parliaments of the sharing states. These secrets are poorly kept, but the effect is that these five nations have nuclear bombs without the oversight or consent of their elected governments or their people. By foisting weapons of mass destruction on nations that don't want them, the United States undermines the democracies of its own purported allies, just as its nuclear posture undermines democracy at home. Far from protecting the host countries from aggression, "*given the deteriorating security environment in Europe*," the presence of U.S. nuclear weapons makes those bases potential targets for preemptive first strikes.

Along with the U.S., the five countries "*sharing*" U.S. nuclear bombs are signatories to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. In addition to provisions that call for keeping nuclear weapons technology from spreading to other nations that all six governments violate, the United States also ignores

Article VI of the treaty, which requires *"all Parties undertake to pursue good-faith negotiations on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race, to nuclear disarmament, and to general and complete disarmament."*

Far from making good faith measures for general and complete disarmament, the United States is pursuing a trillion dollar program of modernizing and *"life extension"* of its ageing nuclear arsenal. As a part of this program, the B61 free-fall bombs currently at Volkel and the other nuclear sharing bases in Europe are scheduled over the next months to be replaced with a new model, the B61-12, with steerable tail fins intended to make them much more precise and deployable. The new bombs also have a facility with which the explosive force can be set from 1 to 50 kilotons, more than three times the power of the bomb that destroyed Hiroshima in 1945.

"More precise and deployable" is another way of saying more likely to be used, and with these new, more flexible weapons on hand, U.S. war planners are thinking up more ways to use them. In a June, 2019, report by the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, *"Nuclear Operations,"* it is suggested that *"using nuclear weapons could create conditions for decisive results and the restoration of strategic stability...Specifically, the use of a nuclear weapon will fundamentally change the scope of a battle and create conditions that affect how commanders will prevail in conflict."* If the doctrine of mutually assured destruction, the knowledge that the devastation wrought by a nuclear exchange would leave no winner, would be total and horrible beyond imagination is what helped prevent a nuclear war over the last decades, then the growing delusion among U.S. war planners that a nuclear war can be won puts the world at unprecedented peril.

NATO boasts of *"Steadfast Noon,"* betraying the arrogant conviction of the Allied Heads of State and Government that despite a *"deteriorating security environment,"* through annual displays of brute force and profligate waste of fossil fuel,

the darkness can be held at bay forever and the exploiters of the earth and its people will bask in the everlasting light of noon. The scholars at *The Bulletin of Atomic Scientists* who have kept a "Doomsday Clock" since 1947, propose instead that the planet is actually closer to midnight, the hypothetical global catastrophe. *The Bulletin's* Clock is now at 100 seconds before midnight and humanity is closer to its destruction than ever before, because *"the dangerous rivalry and hostility among the superpowers increases the likelihood of nuclear blunder... Climate change just compounds the crisis."*

It was a pleasure and honor to dig with my European friends at Volkel in October, as it was to be at Buechel, the German nuclear sharing base in July. My first trip overseas was in 1983, joining with millions of Europeans in the streets protesting the deployment of Pershing II nuclear missiles, starting an insufficient but dramatic reduction of nuclear weapons that is tragically being reversed today. The new B61-12 bombs slated for Volkel and Buechel, like the B61s and Pershings, before them, are made and paid for in the United States and as U.S. citizens, we are responsible to be in solidarity with those in Europe who are resisting them.

I returned home to Iowa to find a letter waiting for me from the Kansas City Municipal Court, ordering me to appear on February 18th to answer to a charge of trespass last May at the National Security Campus there, where the nonnuclear parts of the new improved B61-12 bombs and the rest of the U.S. nuclear arsenal are produced. My conviction for cutting a fence at Buechel in 2019 is under appeal in a German court. I wait expectantly for a royal invitation to offer my defense to similar charges in the courts of the Netherlands.

Brian Terrell is a peace activist based in Maloy, Iowa

Unveiling of Rob Shetterly's Portrait of Daniel Hale

Peace Action and Veterans for Peace of Broome County NY held a very nice event for our heroic killer drone whistleblower, Daniel Hale, at Cornell, an Ivy League university in Ithaca NY, on Armistice Day, November 11, 2021.

After a year of planning, the solidarity group of Peace Action of Broome County NY and Veterans for Peace of Broome County joined forces to have a heart, soul, and mind-touching event to celebrate seventeen American truth-tellers. Artist Rob Shetterly's portraits (over 250 to date) of *Americans Who Tell the Truth* is a traveling art museum.

Broome County (NY) Peace Action and Broome County Veterans for Peace Chapter 90 showed the seventeen portraits (each 37 x31 inches) for weeks at Broome County Public Library, then at Maine-Endwell High School, and for the whole month of November at Cornell's College of Human Ecology. Sixteen of the portraits were selected by vote after an intense study of all *Americans Who Tell the Truth* easily found at www.americanswhotellthetruth.org.

Members of Chapter 90 of Veterans for Peace and Broome County Peace Action, Maine-Endwell HighSchool librarian and students, Cornell Human Ecology faculty, and some students studied Shetterly's portraits and text and voted for sixteen individuals

to show. Veterans for Peace of Broome County and Peace Action Broome County added Daniel Hale to the group selection.

On Armistice Day, 2021, artist Rob Shetterly spoke with passion about his selection of truth-tellers to paint from Sojourners Truth to his most recent subject, Daniel Hale. Hale is now in federal prison for telling the truth about the United States assassination program, a remote execution project labeled as a war on terror. The portrait of Daniel Hale, resting on a large easel, was the focus of our event at Cornell. Daniel's portrait was unveiled during the well-attended ceremony in the small gallery of Martha Van Rensselaer Hall.

Veterans for Peace and Peace Action of Broome County, NY encourage other national chapters of our organizations to make the effort to get a selection of Shetterly's truth-teller portraits of *Americans Who Tell the Truth* into public libraries and schools.

For more information about how to do this, contact Rob Shetterly at americanswhotellthetruth.org or write Jack Gilroy at jgilroy1955@gmail.org to learn how our upstate New York solidarity team organized our two-month exhibit.

Anti Nuke Activism in the Netherlands

By Ann Wright and Brian Terrell, published on Ann's FB Page

The great peace and anti-assassin drone activist Brian Terrell is back on the farm in Iowa after three weeks in the Netherlands and Germany. This is a brief report on his trip to bring attention to US nuclear weapons in the Netherlands and assassin drone connections in Germany:

In Brian's words:

"My first stop was Amsterdam and the Dutch Air Force base at Volkel- along with 7 Dutch friends, we were able to successfully dig a tunnel under the fence and go into the base where a US Air Force squadron keeps a stash of B61 nuclear missiles for Dutch F16s to 'deliver' destruction to perceived enemies under a NATO 'nuclear sharing' agreement. Held by military and civilian police for 5 hours, we were released and expect charges to be filed.

In Germany, gave talks on banning killer drones and nuclear disarmament at the Catholic Worker communities in Dortmund and Hamburg and Elsa Rassback organized appearances in Berlin, Frankfurt and Cologne. This is a pivotal time, as the question of whether or not to arm the German drone fleet is a big issue for the new coalition of parties that will govern Germany for the near future. The German peace movement is also petitioning the coalition parties on the issues of nuclear sharing with the US and Germany's failure to ratify and abide by the The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons.

Brian wrote:

"Our digging took place during the NATO exercise, "Steadfast Noon" (a strange name for the annual rehearsal for the end of the world!) and we are pretty sure that we caused the runway to be closed, making the world safer for an hour or so, anyway. It was great fun, lots of young people, singing, laughter when we realized that we were actually going to make it inside! .

I never saw police or soldiers so chill anywhere-I think that they were amused. In the US we might have been shot or jailed for years. I think that it was important for one US citizen to be in the group and I am glad that I was there. I am hoping to be invited back to the Netherlands for a trial.

We were held for 5 hours, I was interrogated about the number of Afghan visas in my passport, "Do you want to talk about why you visited Afghanistan so many times?" I was asked. No, I did not. The issue dropped there. Privilege of being a white man with a US passport, someone else might have disappeared."

Media accounts of the action:

"The Royal Military Police has arrested eight activists who had penetrated into the military airport of Volkel on Wednesday afternoon. The eight had gained access by digging a hole under the fence surrounding the military airport, reported the military police after reports by DTV News.

According to a spokesman for the military police, the action was peaceful.

"We knew about the demonstration," he said. "We already suspected that a number of people would try to get on the premises. They made a hole under the fence, and once at the airport we stopped them. They didn't resist. It all went off peacefully."

Nuclear weapons

They were activists from Peace Creation who came to demonstrate against nuclear weapons. The activists fear that a new generation of nuclear bombs will come to the Netherlands next year. The action was organized at the head of the runway. This *"to advocate that the old nuclear bombs be removed and the CO2 emissions of the armed forces be counted in the climate targets and to protest against the arrival of new nuclear bombs."*

Fifteen to twenty American B61 atomic bombs have been stored at Volkel Air Force Base since the early 1960s. The Zembla broadcast Target Volkel (2019) shows how the Netherlands has not enforced a veto on the deployment of American nuclear weapons from the airbase. At the moment it is decided to carry out a nuclear attack, Dutch pilots must drop the bombs.

The broadcast also shows that the 15 to 20 American free-fall bombs are outdated and will soon be replaced. The new model, the B61-12, will have steerable tail fins and will therefore be much more precise and deployable. The bombs also have a facility with which the explosive force can be set from 1 to 50 kilotons. That is more than three times the power of the bomb that destroyed Hiroshima in 1945.

The House of Representatives is not informed about the modernization of the B61. The government will not even confirm that there are atomic bombs in the Netherlands: that is a state secret. Yet Zembla discovered in old parliamentary archives that the then Minister of Defense acknowledged as early as 1960 that the Netherlands was home to American atomic bombs.

They also disagree with the deployment of F-16s and other aircraft, which, according to the protesters, *"emit tons of CO2."*

***Featured Image:** *US anti-assassin drone activist Brian Terrell*

with Dutch colleagues tunneling under a fence at a Dutch air force base where US nuclear weapons are available for Dutch pilots to drop on the world!!!!

Ann Wright is a retired US Army Reserve Colonel and a former US diplomat who resigned in 2003 in opposition to the weapons of mass destruction lies of the Bush administration for the invasion and occupation of Iraq. She is the co-author of **"Dissent: Voices of Conscience."**

Brian Terrell is a longtime activist and lives on a Catholic Worker Farm in Maloy, Iowa. Brian is a founding member of the **Ban Killer Drones Network**. He has traveled to Afghanistan several times and been arrested numerous times in civil resistance actions opposing drone warfare.

Murder By Any Other Name

by Scott Ritter, published on Consortium News, November 6, 2021

On Aug. 29, the United States murdered ten Afghan civilians in a drone strike. The U.S. Air Force Inspector Gen., Lt. Gen. Sami D. Said, was appointed on Sept. 21, to lead an investigation into the circumstances surrounding the attack. On Nov. 3, Gen. Said released the unclassified findings of his investigation, declaring that while the incident was *"regrettable,"* no crimes were committed by the U.S. forces involved.

The reality, however, is that the U.S. military engaged in an act of premeditated murder violative of U.S. laws and policies, as well as international law. Everyone involved, from the president on down committed a war crime.

Their indictment is spelled out in the details of what occurred before and during the approximately eight hours a U.S. MQ-9 *"Reaper"* drone tracked Zemari Ahmadi, an employee of Nutrition and Education International, a U.S.-based nonprofit organization that has been operating in Afghanistan since 2003, working to fight malnutrition among women and children who live in high-mortality areas in Afghanistan.

During those eight hours, the U.S. watched Ahmadi carry out mundane tasks associated with life in war-torn Kabul circa Aug. 2021. The U.S. watched until the final minutes leading up to the decision to fire the hellfire missile that would take Ahmadi's life, and that of nine of his relatives, including seven children.

"The investigation," Gen. Said concluded in his report, *"found no violation of law, including the Law of War."* One of the unanswered questions relating to this conclusion was the precise nature of the framework of legal authorities at play at the time of the drone strike, in particular the rules and regulations being followed by the U.S. military regarding drone strikes, and issues pertaining to Afghan sovereignty when it came to the use of deadly force by the U.S. military on Afghan soil.

At the time of the drone strike that murdered Zemari Ahmadi and his family, the policies governing the use of armed drones was in a state of extreme flux. In an effort to gain control over a program which, by any account, had gotten out of control in terms of killing innocent civilians, then-President Barack Obama, in May 2013, promulgated a classified Presidential Policy Guidance (P.P.G.) document entitled *"Procedures for Approving Direct Action Against Terrorist Targets Located Outside the United States and Areas of Active Hostilities."*

The 2013 P.P.G. directed that, when it came to the use of lethal action (a term which incorporated direct action missions by U.S. Special Operation forces as well as drone strikes), U.S. government departments and agencies *"must employ all reasonably available resources to ascertain the identity of the target so that the action can be taken."* The document also made clear that "international legal

principles, including respect for sovereignty and the law of armed conflict, impose important constraints on the ability of the United States to act unilaterally—and the way in which the United States can use force.”

The standards for the use of lethal force set forth in the 2013 P.P.G. contain two important preconditions. First, *“there must be a legal basis for using lethal force.”* A key aspect of this legal basis is a requirement that the U.S. have the support of a host government prior to the initiation of any lethal force on the territory of that nation. This support is essential, as it directly relates to the issue of sovereignty commitments under the U.N. Charter.

When the 2013 P.P.G. was published, the U.S. had the express permission of the Afghan government to carry out lethal drone strikes on its territory for the purposes of targeting both the Taliban and Al Qaeda. Later, this authorization would extend to encompass the Islamic State-Khorasan Province, or ISIS-K.

In 2017, then-President Donald Trump issued new guidance which loosened the conditions under which lethal force could be used in Afghanistan, including the use of armed drones. The Afghan government continued to provide host nation authorization for these strikes. When President Biden assumed office, in January, he immediately directed his National Security Council to begin a review of the policies and procedures surrounding the use of armed drones in Afghanistan.

One of the issues addressed in this review was whether the Biden administration would return to the Obama-era rules requiring *“near certainty”* that no women or children are present in an area targeted for drone attack or retain the Trump-era standard of only ascertaining to a *“reasonable certainty”* that no civilian adult men were likely to be killed.

Complicating matters was the fact that the Biden administration was preparing for the complete withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan, which required that the rules and procedures for use of armed drones in Afghanistan be altered to reflect a new reality where U.S. forces

were no longer being directly supported, and that the armed drone program would be conducted in an environment where the Afghan government was the exclusive recipient of armed drone support. These new rules and procedures were part of what the Biden administration called its “*over the horizon*” (OTH) counterterrorism strategy.

Before the new OTH policies and procedures directive could be issued, however, the reality on the ground in Afghanistan changed completely, making the policy document obsolete before it was even issued. The rapid advance of the Taliban, coupled with the complete collapse of the Afghan government, threw into question the legal underpinnings regarding the authority of the U.S. government to conduct armed drone operations in Afghanistan.

The new rulers of Afghanistan, the Taliban, did not approve of U.S. armed drone operations. Instead, the Taliban had executed a secret annex to the February 2020 peace agreement reached with the Trump administration regarding its commitment to dealing with counterterrorism issues in Afghanistan once the U.S. withdrew. President Biden determined that his administration would be bound by the terms of that agreement.

Two points emerge from this new environment—first, from a legal standpoint, the U.S. military remained bound by the “*reasonable certainty*” of the Trump-era policies regarding the use of armed drones, and second, from the standpoint of international law as it relates to sovereignty commitments, the U.S. had no legal authority to conduct armed drone operations over Afghanistan.



Taliban fighters in Kabul,
Aug. 17, 2021. (VOA,

While the U.S. had not formally recognized the Taliban as the legitimate government of Afghanistan, President Biden's commitment to adhere to commitments made under the terms of the February 2020 peace agreement, coupled with the fact that the U.S. was engaged in active negotiations with the Taliban in Doha and in Kabul regarding issues pertaining to security of U.S. and coalition forces in Afghanistan and Kabul, make clear that for all sense and purpose, the U.S. treated the Taliban as if they were the sovereign authority in Afghanistan.

In Order to Be Legal

For U.S. drone operations on Aug. 29, to be legal in Afghanistan, the U.S. government had to either gain public approval for these operations from a sovereign authority, gain private approval from a sovereign authority, or else demonstrate that a sovereign authority was unable or unwilling to act, in which case the U.S. could, under certain conditions, consider unilateral action.

Gen. Said does not provide any information as to how he ascertained U.S. compliance under international law. Public statements by the Taliban appear to show that they did not approve of U.S. drone strikes on the territory of Afghanistan. Indeed, when the U.S. carried out a similar drone attack, on Aug. 27, targeting what it claimed were ISIS-K terrorists, the Taliban condemned the strike as a "*clear attack on Afghan territory.*"

The second precondition set forth in the 2013 P.P.G. authorizing the use of lethal action was that the target must pose "*a continuing, imminent threat to U.S. persons.*" In his presentation on the Aug. 29, drone strike, Gen. Said stated that "*[i]ndividuals directly involved in the strike...believed at the time that they were targeting an imminent threat. The intended target of the strike, the vehicle, its contents and occupant, were genuinely assessed at the time as an imminent threat to U.S. forces.*"

When promulgating its 2013 P.P.G. on drone strikes, the Obama

administration adopted an expanded definition of what constituted an *"imminent threat"* published by the Department of Justice in 2011, which eschewed the notion that in order to be considered *"imminent"*, a threat had to be a specific, concrete threat whose existence must first be corroborated with clear evidence.

Instead, the Obama administration adopted a new definition that held that an imminent threat was inherently continuous because terrorists are assumed to be continuously planning attacks against the U.S.; all terrorist threats are considered both *"imminent"* and *"continuing"* by their very nature, removing the need for the military to gather information showing precisely when and where a terrorist threat was going to emerge.

To make the case of an *"imminent"* (and, by definition, *"continuing"*) threat, all the U.S. needed to do in the case of Zemari Ahmadi was create a plausible link between him and potential terrorist activity. According to Gen. Said, *"highly classified"* (i.e., Top Secret) intelligence was interpreted by U.S. personnel to ascertain the existence of a terrorist threat.

This assessment was used to create a linkage with Ahmadi, and the subsequent *"observed movement of the vehicle and occupants over an 8-hour period"* resulted in confirmation bias linking Ahmadi to the assessed terrorist threat.

Who Was in Command?

Zemari Ahmadi's actions on Aug. 29, did not trigger the drone attack. Instead, the U.S. appeared to be surveilling a specific location in Kabul, looking for a White Toyota Corolla (ironically, the most prevalent model and color of automobile operating in Kabul) that was being converted by ISIS-K terrorists into a weapon to be used against U.S. forces deployed in the vicinity of Kabul International Airport.

This safe house was located about five kilometers west of Kabul International Airport, in one of Kabul's dense residential neighborhoods. The specific source of this information is not known but given Gen. Said's description of it as *"highly classified"*, it can

be assumed that this information involved the interception of specific communications on the part of persons assessed as being affiliated with ISIS-K, and that these communications had been geolocated to a specific area inside Kabul.

One of the issues confronting the U.S. during this time was the absolute chaotic nature of the command, control, communications, and intelligence (C3I) infrastructure that would normally be in place when carrying out any military operations overseas, including something as politically sensitive as a lethal drone strike. It wasn't just the policy guidelines for the use of lethal drone strikes that were in limbo on Aug. 29, 2021, but also who, precisely, oversaw what was going on regarding the employment of drones in Afghanistan.

The U.S. military and C.I.A. had completely withdrawn from Afghanistan when the decision was made to begin noncombatant evacuation operations (N.E.O.) operating from Kabul International Airport. The deployment of some 6,000 U.S. military personnel was accompanied by an undisclosed number of C.I.A. and Special Operations forces who were tasked with sensitive human and technical intelligence collection, including intelligence sharing and coordination with the Taliban.

To support this activity, an expeditionary joint operations center (JOC) was established by U.S. forces, led by Rear Admiral Peter Vasely, a Navy SEAL originally dispatched to Afghanistan to lead Special Operations, but who took over command of all forces when the former commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan, Gen. Scott Miller, left in July 2021.

Admiral Vasely was assisted by Major Gen. Chris Donahue, a former Delta Force officer who commanded the 82nd Airborne Division. While both Vasey and Donahue were experienced combat commanders, they were singularly focused on the issue of securing the airport and evacuating personnel under a very constrained timeline. Managing drone operations would be handled elsewhere.

As part of President Biden's vision for Afghanistan post-U.S. evacuation (and pre-Afghan government collapse), the Department of

Defense had established what was known as the Over the Horizon Counter-Terrorism Headquarters at Al Udeid Air Base, Qatar. Commanded by Brigadier Gen. Julian C. Cheater, Over the Horizon Counter-Terrorism, comprised of 544 personnel, was tasked with planning and executing missions in support of Special Operations Command-Central across four geographically-separated locations in the United States Central Command area of responsibility, including Afghanistan.

But Gen. Cheater had only assumed command in July, and his organization was still getting settled into its new quarters (Brigadier Gen. Constantin E. Nicolet, the deputy commanding general for intelligence for the Over the Horizon Counter-Terrorism headquarters, did not arrive until Aug. 11.) As such, much of the responsibility for coordinating drone operations into the overall air campaign operating in support of the Kabul N.E.O. (which, in addition to multiple C-17 and C-130 airlift missions per day, included AC-130 gunships, B-52 bombers, F-15 fighters, and multiple MQ-9 Reaper drones) was handled by Central Command's Combined Air Operations Center (C.A.O.C.), located at Al Udeid Air Base, Qatar.

The Video Source

Gen. Said, in his presentation, made mention of *"multiple video feeds"* when speaking of the information being evaluated by U.S. military personnel regarding the strike that killed Ahmadi and his family. This could imply that more than one MQ-9 drone was operating over Kabul that day, or that video feeds from other unspecified sources were also being viewed.

It also could be that the MQ-9 that fired the Hellfire missile that killed Ahmadi and his nine relatives was flying by itself; the MQ-9 carries the Multi-Spectral Targeting System, which integrates an infrared sensor, color, monochrome daylight TV camera, shortwave infrared camera, the full-motion video from each which can be viewed as separate video streams or fused together. In this way, one drone can provide several distinct video *"feeds"*, each of which can be separately assessed for specific kinds of information.

The MQ-9 is also capable of carrying an advanced signals intelligence (SIGINT) pod, producing yet another stream of data that would need to be evaluated. It is not known if this pod was in operation over Kabul on Aug. 29. However, according to *The New York Times*, U.S. officials claim that the U.S. intercepted communications between the white corolla and the suspected ISIS-K safehouse (in actuality, the N.I.E. country director's home/N.I.E. headquarters) instructing the driver (Ahmadi) to make several stops.

Logic dictates that the U.S. military kept at least one, and possible more, MQ-9's over Kabul at all times, providing continuous intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance overwatch during the conduct of the evacuation operation. The primary MQ-9 unit operating in the Persian Gulf region at the time was the 46th Expeditionary Attack Squadron, which operated out of Ali Al Salem Air Base, in Kuwait.

Given the logistical realities associated with drone operations over Afghanistan, which required a lengthy flight down the Persian Gulf, skirting Iran, and then over Pakistan, before reaching the central Afghanistan region, the 46th Expeditionary Attack Squadron more than likely forward deployed a ground control station used to take off and recover the MQ-9 drones, along with an undisclosed number of drone aircraft, to Al Udeid Air Base, in Qatar.

The time of flight from Al Udeid to Kabul for an MQ-9 drone is between 5 and 6 hours; a block 5 version of the MQ-9, such as those operated by the 46th Expeditionary Attack Squadron, can operate for up to 27 hours. It is possible that a single MQ-9 drone was on station for the entire period between when Ahmadi was first taken under surveillance until the decision to launch the Hellfire missile that killed him was made; it is also very possible that there was a turnover between one MQ-9 and another at some point during the mission. In either instance, a long-duration mission such as that being conducted on Aug. 29, would have been logistically and operationally challenging.

The crew from the 46th Expeditionary Attack Squadron was responsible

for launching and recovering the MQ-9 drone from its operating base; once in the air, control of the drone was turned over to drone crews assigned to the 432nd Expeditionary Air Wing, based out of Creech Air Base, in Nevada. These crews work with the Persistent Attack and Reconnaissance Operations Center, or PAROC, also located at Creech Air Base.

The PAROC coordinates between the 432nd Wing Operations Center, which serves as the focal point for combat operations, and the Over the Horizon Counter-Terrorism Headquarters and Central Command Combined Air Operations Center, both out of Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar. The PAROC serves as a singular focal point for mission directors, weather analysis, intelligence analysis and communications for drone operations over Afghanistan.

At each node in this complex command and control system, the video feeds from the drone(s) involved can be monitored and assessed by personnel. Such an overlapping network of agencies was implied by Gen. Said in his presentation, when he spoke of interviewing *"29 individuals, including 22 directly involved in the strike"* for his report.

Given that Gen. Said's remit is limited to the military forces involved, it is not known if he interviewed another party reportedly involved in the drone strike—the C.I.A. Multiple sources have indicated that C.I.A. analysts were involved in evaluating the video feeds associated with the drone strike of Aug. 29, and that they provided input regarding the nature of the target.

C.I.A. Involvement

The C.I.A. operates what is known as the Counterterrorism Airborne Analysis Center out of its Headquarters in Langley, Virginia. There, a fusion cell of intelligence analysts drawn from across the U.S. intelligence community monitor a wall of flat screen monitors that beamed live, classified video feeds from drones operating from around the world, including Afghanistan.

The C.I.A.'s involvement suggests that because of the confusion surrounding the legality of drone operations in Afghanistan following the collapse of the Afghan government, the Biden administration opted to conduct drone operations under Title 50, covering covert C.I.A. activities, as opposed to Title 10, which cover operations conducted under traditional military chain of command.

In any event, what is known is that an MQ-9 drone, flown by pilots from the 432nd Expeditionary Wing operating out of Creech Air Base, in Nevada, was surveilling a specific neighborhood in Kabul on the morning of Aug. 29, where intelligence sources indicated an ISIS-K terrorist cell was in the process of converting a white Toyota Corolla into a weapon—perhaps a car bomb—that was to be used against U.S. forces operating at Kabul International Airport.

The U.S. forces operating in Afghanistan were on high alert—on Aug. 26, ISIS-K fighters had launched a coordinated attack using suicide bombers and gunmen on a U.S. checkpoint at the airport, killing 13 U.S. service members and some 170 Afghans, including nearly 30 Taliban fighters.

According to a timeline put together by *The New York Times*, Zemari Ahmadi left his home, located in a neighborhood about two kilometers west of the airport, in a white Toyota Corolla owned by his employer, Nutrition and Education International (N.E.I.). Ahmadi had worked with N.E.I. since 2006 as an electrical engineer and volunteer, helping distribute food to Afghans in need.

The country director for N.E.I. had called Ahmadi at around 8:45 am, asking him if he could stop by the country director's home and pick up a laptop computer. Ahmadi left his home at around 9 am, and drove to the country director's home, located about five kilometers northwest of the airport. The drone operators were surveilling the compound where the country director lived, having assessed that it was an ISIS-K safe house.

It is at this point the intelligence failures that led to the murder of Ahmadi and his family began. The country director, whose name has

been omitted for security reasons, is a well-known individual whose biometric information, including place of work and residence, has been captured by a highly classified Department of Defense biometric system called the Automatic Biometric Identification System, or ABIS. ABIS, part of what the U.S. calls its strategy of *"Identity Dominance"*, was specifically set up to help identify targets for drone strikes and was said to contain more than 8.1 million records.

The ABIS, when integrated with other data bases such as the Afghanistan Financial Management Information System, which held extensive details on foreign contractors, and an Economy Ministry database that compiled all international development and aid agencies (such as N.E.I.) into a singular searchable Geographic Information System, or G.I.S., gives an analyst the ability to scroll a cursor over a map of Kabul, coming to rest over a given building, and immediately accessing information about who resides there.

Both the country director and Ahmadi, as Afghans affiliated with western aid organizations who moved with relative freedom around Kabul, were included in these data bases.

Massive Intelligence Failure



Zemari Ahmadi.
(Ptipti/Wikimedia Commons)

The fact that a U.S. intelligence analyst could confuse the known residence/headquarters of a U.S.-funded aid organization with an ISIS-

K safe house is inexcusable, if indeed these data bases were available for query.

It is possible that (because of the transitional environment) the events of Aug. 29 transpired with no definitive rules of engagement in place, and that the command and control structure was in a high state of flux, so that the data base was either shut down or otherwise inaccessible. In any case, the inability to access data that had been collected over the course of many years by the United States for the express purpose of helping facilitate the counterterrorism-associated targeting of armed drones represents an intelligence failure of the highest order.

The community of analysts, spread across several time zones and distinct geographical regions, representing agencies with differing legal and operational frameworks, began monitoring the movement and activities of Ahmadi. He picked up a laptop computer from the country director, which was stored in a black carrying case of the kind typically used to carry laptop computers. Unfortunately for Ahmadi, the ISIS-K suicide bombers who attacked the U.S. position at Kabul International Airport on Aug. 26 carried bombs that had been placed in similar black carrying cases, reinforcing what Gen. Said called a chain of *"confirmation bias."*

Ahmadi then went on a series of excursions, picking up coworkers at their homes, dropping them off at various locations, stopping for lunch, and distributing food. Near the end of the day, Ahmadi returned to the N.E.I. headquarters where he used a hose to fill up plastic containers with water to bring home (there was a water shortage throughout Kabul, and Ahmadi's home had no running water.)

Analysts watching Ahmadi's actions somehow mistook the act of using a garden hose to fill plastic jugs with water as him picking up plastic containers containing high explosives that could be used in a car bomb—another case of *"confirmation bias."*

At least 22 sets of eyes were watching this, using multi-spectral cameras capable of ascertaining movement of water, temperature

variations, all in high-resolution video feeds. How not a single pair of eyes picked up on what was really happening is, yet again, a huge failure of intelligence, either in terms of training as an imagery analyst, poor analytical skills, or both.

But even with all of this "*confirmation bias*" weighing in favor of classifying Ahmadi as an "*imminent threat*", neither he nor his family were condemned to die. Under International Human Rights Law, lethal force is legal only if it is required to protect life (making lethal force proportionate) *and* there is no other means, such as capture, of preventing that threat to life (making lethal force necessary).

If Ahmadi's car, upon leaving the country director's home, had headed toward a U.S.-controlled checkpoint around Kabul International Airport, then U.S. personnel monitoring the drone feed would have had every right, under the procedures then in place, to consider Ahmadi a "*continuing imminent threat*" to American life, thereby freeing the drone crew to fire a Hellfire missile at the vehicle to destroy it.

Instead, he drove home, pulling into the interior courtyard of his building complex. At this juncture, Ahmadi and his vehicle could not, under any circumstance, be considered an active threat to American life. Moreover, with the vehicle immobile and still under observation, options could now be considered for "other means", such as capture, to remove the vehicle and Ahmadi as a potential future threat.

While the U.S. and the Taliban had an implicit agreement that U.S. forces would not operate outside the security perimeter of Kabul International Airport, the Taliban were fully capable of sending a force to investigate and, if necessary, detain Ahmadi and his vehicle. The U.S. admits to actively sharing intelligence with the Taliban and acknowledge that the Taliban had proven itself capable of acting decisively to neutralize threats based upon the information provided by the U.S.

The Taliban interest in stopping a suicide bomber was manifest—they had suffered twice as many killed than the U.S. in the Aug. 26 attack on the Airport, and were sworn enemies of ISIS-K. All the U.S. had to do

was pass the coordinates of Ahmadi's home to the Taliban, and then sit back and watch as the Taliban responded. If the Taliban failed to act, or Ahmadi attempted to drive away from his home in the white corolla, then the U.S. would be within its rights under international law to attack the car using lethal force.

However, to get there the U.S. first needed to cross the legal hurdle of exhausting "*other means*" of neutralizing the potential threat posed by Ahmadi's car. They did not, and in failing to do so, were in violation of international law when, instead, they opted to launch a Hellfire missile.

The decision to fire the Hellfire missile was made within two minutes of Ahmadi arriving at his home. According to *The New York Times*, when he arrived, his car was swarmed by children—his, and those of his brother, who lived with him. For some reason, the presence of children was not picked up by any of the U.S. military personnel monitoring the various video feeds tracking Ahmadi.

The drone crew determined that there was a "*reasonable certainty*"—the Trump-era standard, not the "*near certain*" standard that would have been in place had the Biden administration published its completed policy guidance document regarding drone strikes—that there were no civilians present. How such a conclusion can be reached when, on review, the video clearly showed the presence of children two minutes before the Hellfire missile was launched—has not been explained.

But Gen. Said wasn't the only one who saw children on the video feed. At the C.I.A.'s Counterterrorism Airborne Analysis Center in Langley, at least one analyst working in the fusion cell there saw the children as well. According to media reports, the C.I.A. was only able to communicate this information to the drone operators who fired the Hellfire *after* the missile had been launched, part of the breakdown in communications that Gen. Said attributed to the chain of mistakes that led to the deaths of Ahmadi and his family.



Lt. Gen. Sami D. Said.
(U.S. Air Force)

What Gen. Said failed to discuss was the communications channels that the C.I.A. information had to travel to get to the drone operators. Did the C.I.A. have a direct line to the pilots of the 432nd Expeditionary Wing? Or did the C.I.A. need to go through the Over the Horizon Counter-Terrorism headquarters, the Central Command's Combined Air Operations Center (CAOC), the Persistent Attack and Reconnaissance Operations Center, or PAROC, or the 432nd Wing Operations Center, which communicated directly with the drone crew?

According to *The New York Times*, the *tactical* commander made the decision to launch the Hellfire missile, another procedural holdover from the Trump-era, which did away with the need for high-level approval of the target before lethal force could be applied.

The professionalism of those involved in reviewing the drone feed was further called into question when the analysts, observing a post-strike explosion of a propane tank in the courtyard of Ahmadi's apartment complex, mistook the visual signature produced as being that of a car bomb containing significant quantities of high explosive.

Gen. Said's report covers up a multitude of mistakes under the guise of "*confirmation bias*." In his report he notes that "[t]he overall threat to U.S. forces at [Kabul International Airport] at the time was

very high," with intelligence indicating that follow-on attacks were "imminent." Perhaps most importantly, Gen. Said writes that "[t]hree days prior, such an attack resulted in the death of 13 service members and at least 170 Afghan civilians. The events that led to the strike and the assessments of this investigation should be considered with this context in mind."

If that is indeed the standard, then Gen. Said must consider the words of President Biden at a press conference held on Aug. 26, after the ISIS-K attack on Kabul International Airport. *"We will hunt you down and make you pay,"* Biden said. *"We will not forgive, we will not forget."*

Revenge was clearly a motive, with the drone operators leaning forward to put into action the President's directive to hunt the enemy down and make them pay. Did the drone operators see children in the video feed? They say no, even though the C.I.A. analysts saw them prior to the launching of the Hellfire missile, and Gen. Said saw them after the fact.

These same drone operators were riding high on four years of *"hands off"* operations, where they were free to launch drone strikes under a *"reasonable certainty"* standard which was put in place knowing that the result would be more innocent civilians killed.

"Some of the Obama administration rules were getting in the way of good strikes," one U.S. official is quoted saying about the need for looser restrictions. Gen. Said makes no reference to the impact the Trump-era policy had on conditioning drone operators to be more tolerant of civilian casualties, even to the extent that they looked the other way if acknowledgement of their presence could prevent a *"good strike."*

What's Wrong With the Program

The drone strike that killed Ahmadi and his family in many ways embodies all that was wrong with the U.S. lethal drone program as it was implemented in Afghanistan and elsewhere, failing to further legitimate U.S. national security objectives while harming U.S.

credibility by wantonly killing innocent civilians.

A case can be made for criminal negligence on the part of all parties involved in the murder of Ahmadi and his family. But it is unlikely that any such charges will ever be put forward. The attack clearly violates international law, although the Biden administration will claim otherwise.

Gen. Said acknowledges so-called "*confirmation bias*" without getting to the bottom of what caused those involved in the drone strike to get it so wrong. Gen. Said alludes to systemic problems, such as the need to "enhance sharing of overall mission situational awareness during execution" and review "*pre-strike procedures used to assess presence of civilians.*"

But systemic (i.e., procedural) errors can only explain away so much. At some point the professionalism of the individuals involved must come under scrutiny, both in terms of their technical qualifications to carry out their respective assigned missions, as well as their moral character in willingly tolerating the deaths of innocent civilians in the name of mission accomplishment. Gen. Said leaves open the possibility that someone, somewhere, in the chain of command of these individuals can decide that the events of that day was a byproduct of "*subpar performance*" resulting in some form of "*adverse action.*"

That, however, is just another way of excusing murder, of tolerating a war crime committed in the name of the United States.

The day after Ahmadi and his family were murdered by U.S. forces, ISIS-K, operating from a safe house near to where the N.E.I. country director lived, used a modified white Toyota Corolla to launch rockets toward the U.S. positions in and around Kabul International Airport.

Fortunately, there were no casualties. But neither was the ISIS-K attack thwarted by a U.S. drone program that had been tipped off in advance about the nature and location of the attack. The ability to kill innocent civilians while failing to interdict genuine security threats is perhaps the most accurate epitaph one could ascribe to the

U.S. lethal drone program in Afghanistan.

Scott Ritter is a former Marine Corps intelligence officer who served in the former Soviet Union implementing arms control treaties, in the Persian Gulf during Operation Desert Storm, and in Iraq overseeing the disarmament of WMD.

Ban Killer Drones Calls for Release of Kabul Drone Attack Files

Press Release from Ban Killer Drones

The Pentagon must be called upon by people around the world and by the U.S. Congress to make public all of the communications and logs, including communications with the White House, pertaining to the August 29, 2021 drone attack that killed 10 members of the Ahmadi family in Kabul, including seven children, say representatives of the anti-drone war organization BanKillerDrones.org.

“The Pentagon’s assertion that no one did anything illegal to cause the drone deaths of the Ahmadi family members is a shameful side-stepping and a further cover-up of who made what decisions and why in this horrible slaughter,”

said Nick Mottern, a co-coordinator of BanKillerDrones.org.

“We need to see all the records surrounding this incident,

including those that may help us to know the role of President Biden, if any."

Kathy Kelly, a peace advocate who has visited Afghanistan 28 times since the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, and also a co-coordinator of BanKillerDrones.org, said:

"By recommending against any disciplinary action following the slaughter of 10 civilians, seven of whom were children, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin is endorsing reckless cruelty waged through ghastly drone attacks."

Mottern noted that a wide array of international human rights law experts have asserted that U.S. drone attacks violate international law and principles of war, so the use of an armed drone on August 29^h was illegal. Further, he said, Air Force veteran Daniel Hale was sent to federal prison in July at the hands of the Biden Administration for releasing government documents that addressed precisely the faulty intelligence and other problems with the U.S. drone program that led to the August 29th drone attack. *"The use of weaponized drones should have been shelved years ago,"* Mottern said.

He and Kelly said also: *"It is beyond outrageous that the Pentagon has yet to provide full reparations for the killing of Ahmadi family members and has failed to meet their need for speedy passage to the United States."* BanKillerDrones.org has called for reparations of \$3 million for each of the 10 Ahmadi family members killed. *The Washington Post* reported that the Obama administration paid *"nearly \$3 million"* to the family of Giovanni Lo Porto, who was mistakenly killed in a U.S. drone attack in Pakistan in 2015.

"The U.S. ought to be aiding all the hundreds of thousands of Afghans suffering in the wreckage of the U.S. invasion and

occupation," they said, "rather than trying to shrug off the August 29th drone atrocity."

The Ban Killer Drones network is comprised of concerned citizens, in local and national peace and justice organizations, many of them in communities in which there are killer drone control bases. Together they are organizing to achieve a United Nations conference to adopt and ratify an international treaty to ban weaponized drones and military and police drone surveillance.

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