Can the Drone War Be Made More Humane?

*by **John Kiriakou**, published on **Covert Action Magazine**, January 23, 2022*

An article in the latest issue of Foreign Affairs magazine, widely seen as the official mouthpiece of the neoliberal foreign policy establishment, posits that the U.S. government's drone program could be made more humane, killing *"fewer innocent civilians,"* while still targeting the bad guys who find themselves on the White House *"Kill List"*.

Billboard in Sana, Yemen pointing to human costs of U.S. drone war there. [Source: peoplesdispatch.org]

The authors, three professors from Cornell University[1], point to a recent *New York Times* article that said,

"Airstrikes (during the Afghanistan and Iraq conflicts) allowed America to wage war with minimal risk to its troops. But for civilians on the ground, they brought terror and tragedy."

They write that the Pentagon admitted to 188 civilian deaths by drone since 2018, but that the real total "*is likely hundreds more than that*." My own educated guess is that civilian deaths by drone number well into the thousands. But that's not the only problem with the drone program.

Any drone program, whether it's run by Americans at the Pentagon or the CIA, Saudis in Yemen, or any other combatant anywhere in the world, is illegal, immoral, and unethical.

Lamenting the loss of civilian lives, promising to make drones more precise, and paying off the families of dead civilians doesn't make it right. And the mainstream media seem either unable or unwilling to recognize this.

The New York Times published an interview with a spokesman for the U.S. Central Command, in which he said without any challenge from the journalists,

> *"Mistakes do happen, whether based upon incomplete information or misinterpretation of the information available. We try to learn from those mistakes."*

That's simply not true.

Did the Pentagon learn anything when it bombed an innocent family in Afghanistan while the father was loading bottled water into the trunk of his car, killing 10 people, including seven children?

Innocent family killed in the last U.S. drone strike in the long Afghan War. [Source: cnn.com]

Did it learn anything when it launched an attack on *"ISIS headquarters,"* targeting *"white bags of ammonium nitrate"* and a *"homemade explosives factory,"* which turned out to be the longtime home of two brothers and their wives and children; the white bags turned out to be bags of cotton. And a *"heavy object being dragged into a building"* was a child. What was the lesson learned there?

What *The New York Times* and other outlets won't tell you is that many drone strikes are specifically meant to attack civilians.

Image of a mosque that was destroyed by a U.S. drone strike in Jinah Syria in March 2017 that killed 46 civilians. [Source: chicagotribune.com]

Just look at what's happening in Yemen, where the Saudi and Emirati governments are using U.S.-made drones to terrorize the civilian population under the guise of fighting the Shia Muslim Houthi *"rebels."* The U.S. and its allies deem the latter to be Iranian proxies.

Even the pro-Pentagon Military Times reported that in 2018 fully one-third of all drone strikes in Yemen were against civilian targets.

People are seen near a bus destroyed by an airstrike that killed dozens of children, in a photograph taken on August 12, 2018 in Saada, Yemen.

People are seen near a bus destroyed by an airstrike that killed dozens of children, in a photograph taken on August 12, 2018 in Yemen.
[Source: hrw.org]

In one such incident in August 2018, the Saudi military, using U.S. drones and U.S. missiles, blew up a school bus in Dhahyan, Yemen, killing 26 children and wounding another 19, a clear war crime.

In 2019, a Saudi drone strike on a Yemeni vegetable market killed 13 people, including children, and wounded another 23. Also in 2019, the U.S. rocketed a wedding in Afghanistan, killing at least 40 civilians. (The Pentagon had claimed that it was an attack on the Taliban and bragged that a "*foreign fighter*" from Bangladesh also had been killed.)

Afghans wheel victim of wedding attack to their grave. [Source: cnn.com]

The truth of the matter is that the drone program makes Americans less, rather than more, safe. I can tell you from first-hand experience that nearly every al-Qaeda fighter that I captured or interviewed when I headed counterterrorist operations for the CIA in Pakistan told me that he had never had any problem with the United States, *until we launched drone attacks on his village*.

It had never occurred to most young al-Qaeda fighters to take up arms against the United States until they heard the sound of "*the dragonfly*," as they call the drones, until the drone fired rockets indiscriminately at their homes, until the drone killed their fathers, brothers, cousins, uncles, and friends.

What else, then, would we expect them to do? I would probably seek revenge, too.

There is a way to change this situation, of course.

It's not to "*learn from the mistakes of the past*," as the CENTCOM spokesman maintains. It's to end the drone program permanently.

Has nobody at the White House, the Pentagon, or the CIA ever thought that perhaps wars are supposed to be difficult to fight?

Perhaps there should be a danger to soldiers. That might make policymakers think twice before putting U.S. lives on the line.

Drones aren't better for warfighting. They're worse. They put our country in long-term danger.

Every patriot should oppose them.

1. Paul Lusehnko, Sarah Kreps, and Shyam Raman. ↑

Featured Image: Billboard in Sana, Yemen pointing to human costs of U.S. drone war there. [Source: peoplesdispatch.org]

John Kiriakou is a CIA whistleblower. Since he left prison, he has worked as a writer and commentator in the alternative press.