Over 100 Groups Demand Biden End ‘Unlawful’ Drone Strikes Outside War Zones

*by **MEE Staff**, published on **Middle East Eye**, June 30, 2021*

More than 100 organisations have urged US President Biden to end “*unlawful*” drone strikes and the use of other lethal force outside of traditional combat zones.

In a letter released on Wednesday, 113 activist groups framed the issue as a matter of racial justice, and said drone strikes had “exacted an appalling toll on Muslim, Brown and Black communities in multiple parts of the world”.

“We appreciate your stated commitments to ending ‘forever wars,’ promoting racial justice, and centering human rights in US foreign policy,” the groups said in the letter.

> *“Disavowing and ending the lethal strikes program is both a human rights and racial justice imperative in meeting these commitments.*

> *“Twenty years into a war-based approach that has undermined and violated fundamental rights, we urge you to abandon it and embrace an approach that advances our collective human security.”*

Organised by the Human Rights and Security Coalition, the letter was co-signed by 77 human rights and anti-war groups in the United States and 36 groups based abroad, including in countries where the US has conducted the drone strikes in

question, such as six groups from Yemen, three from Somalia, two from Pakistan and one from Libya.

> *"The US has been killing people for nearly 20 years in Yemen, but to this day it has not adequately investigated civilian deaths and injuries, or clearly recognized the severe harm caused to families and communities,"*

Radhya al-Mutawakel, chair of the Yemen-based Mwatana Organization for Human Rights, said in a statement.

> *"The Biden administration should break with these damaging practices, and ensure thorough investigation and accountability for harms that have occurred,"*

she continued.

> *Signatories on the letter to @POTUS calling for an end to the U.S. lethal strikes program come from wide array of perspectives and areas of focus. The wonderful and courageous @RAlmutawakel of @MwatanaEn has this to say pic.twitter.com/2mtkI2jVeE*
>
> *— Hina Shamsi (@HinaShamsi) June 30, 2021*

The US's drone programme has long been the target of human rights groups that have denounced the use of the armed unpiloted technology, particularly when used outside of traditional combat zones, such as in Afghanistan or Iraq.

On Sunday, the US carried out air strikes in Iraq and Syria on what it said were weapons depots. At least four members of Iran-backed groups were killed. While the US labelled the strikes as "*defensive*" in nature, both Iraqi and Syrian officials accused the US of violating their sovereignty.

‘Chart a new path forward’

The last major expansion of the US’s drone programme took place during the Obama administration when Biden was vice president. While Obama eventually tightened restrictions on the strikes during his second term, former President Trump loosened the rules when he was in office.

Shortly after taking office in January, Biden initiated a review of the use of armed drones and commando raids outside of standard war zones, imposing temporary restrictions. Such drone strikes now require additional high-level reviews to be approved, but have not been banned outright.

Pentagon spokesperson John Kirby in March told the New York Times that the restrictions were typical with a new administration, as it takes a “*broader review of national security issues across the board, including the legal and policy frameworks that govern these kinds of matters*“.

In their letter, the organisations acknowledged the review, calling it an “*opportunity to abandon this war-based approach and chart a new path forward that promotes and respects our collective human security*.”

As Biden has pledged to make progress in matters of social justice, the organisations also pointed to links between the US’s drone programme and issues of race.

> *“This program is a centerpiece of the United States’ forever wars and has exacted an appalling toll on Muslim, Brown and Black communities in multiple parts of the world,”*

they wrote.

> *“It has caused lasting psychological trauma and deprived families of beloved members, as well as means of survival,”*

they added.

> *“In the United States, this approach has contributed to further militarized and violent approaches to domestic policing; bias-based racial, ethnic and religious profiling in investigations, prosecutions and watchlisting; warrantless surveillance; and epidemic rates of addiction and suicide among veterans, among other harms. It is past time to change course and start repairing the damage done.”*

***Featured Image:** A military drone replica is displayed in front of the White House during a protest against drone strikes on 12 January 2019 in Washington, DC (AFP/File photo)*