

# WEIGHING IN ON THE DRONE DEBATE: ARGUMENTS TO CONSIDER WHEN ASSESSING THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION'S TARGETED KILLING OF AMERICAN CIVILIANS

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The Obama Administration's use of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV) to strike American citizen Anwar al-Awlaki has elicited intense debate on the targeted killing of Americans abroad. In this paper, I lay out a framework to examine the positive and negative consequences of strikes on American nationals as they relate to U.S. national security and counter-terrorism objectives. By engaging with literature on the effectiveness targeted killing program at large, questions of scope and democratic opposition, and the existing limitations and historical use of such strikes, I find that there is evidence to merit the consideration of a number of major critiques of the targeting of American citizens with UAV. I contend that questions of efficacy, domestic opposition, moral hazard, and the overextension of executive authority should all be considered when assessing if strikes against citizens contribute to American national security.

On September 30, 2011, senior al-Qaeda recruiter and jihadist imam Anwar al-Awlaki (Aulaqi) was confirmed dead after being shot by Hellfire missiles from two American Predator drones. The death of al-Qaeda's most active operational affiliate, deep within the hostile Yemeni desert, was cause for celebration within the Obama White House. The strike on Awlaki, the latest of thousands of killings by unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV),<sup>1</sup> proved exceptional not only because of the high target value, but also because of his nationality. For the first and only time since, the U.S. intentionally remotely targeted an American citizen.

The killing of Anwar al-Awlaki, coupled with the collateral deaths of his son, Abdulrahman al-Awlaki, and al-Qaeda operative Samir Khan, both U.S. citizens, opened a Pandora's box of concerns regarding the targeted killing of Americans. The debate gained traction across scholarly communities and popular media. In the interest of promoting the strongest possible policy, it is critical to determine if the use of drone strikes against American targets is a net benefit or harm to U.S. national security. Given that answering this question far exceeds the scope of this paper, I seek to define and substantiate several critical tradeoffs inherent in the program in order to structure this ongoing debate.

This contribution is made by conducting an evaluative literature review to substantiate two of the most significant considerations: that strikes against Americans do not reduce (or may even increase) terrorism, and that such strikes are not a politically viable tactic due to their negative externalities. The stakes are high: combatting terror with targeted strikes costs lives and could create obstacles to regional

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peace and U.S. security. Given the proliferation of UAV technology in blood-averse, “post-heroic” counter-terror operations,<sup>2</sup> this analysis could guide research to the most tractable issues regarding targeted killing of Americans.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The Executive’s choice to target U.S. citizens, regardless of their perceived threat to the country, is one that rightly elicits extreme scrutiny.<sup>3</sup> By undertaking this course of action, the Administration knowingly acts in a manner inspiring domestic controversy and carrying significant risks. Since this issue is so politically polarized, it is all the more necessary to engage in an objective analysis of the costs and benefits of such strikes.

The current debate regarding the efficacy of targeted killing can be divided into four general camps.<sup>4</sup> The first of these positions is that of the Obama Administration; that drone strikes are an effective tool to further U.S. security objectives.<sup>5</sup> Along with the President’s spokespeople, Brookings Fellow Daniel Byman frames the use of UAVs against designated terrorists as an imperfect, but best available option that minimizes collateral damage in the elimination of top terrorist operatives.<sup>6</sup> While much of the pro-drone rhetoric has addressed the larger debate over counterterror use of UAV, certain scholars have defended drone use against Americans. One such commentator, Professor Michael Paulson, states that the citizenship of high-value targets such as Awlaki has no bearing on the “vitally important” nature of UAV strikes as a component of American security policy, and that the focus on nationality can serve to distract from the effectiveness of strikes against enemy combatants.<sup>7</sup>

Three primary schools of thought oppose this normative support for the current targeted killing program. The first of these schools comes in direct opposition to the central thesis of Byman and Paulson, claiming that strikes against citizens work contrary to American aims. For if unmanned targeting U.S. citizens is to be considered effective, there must be solid evidence that decapitation strikes work generally. Forwarded most prominently by Micah Zenko<sup>8</sup> and Jeffery Simon,<sup>9</sup> this school claims that the killings like that of Awlaki are poor indicators of success in the fight against violent extremism. “Decapitation” strikes fail to fundamentally damage flexible, established terrorist networks, such critics claim, and as such it is impossible to measure progress by counting eliminations of high value targets.<sup>10</sup>

A subgroup of the ineffectiveness camp goes even further, to suggest that collateral damage produced by drone strikes could spur more terrorist activity than it prevents. By engendering the resentment of local civilians who lose family members in strikes, the U.S. risks aiding terrorist recruitment, exacerbating poverty-driven radicalism, and reducing local support and intel for allied states.<sup>11</sup>

The second school of thought cautioning against current drone policy extends beyond the general program to address considerations dealing specifically with U.S. citizens. This group advocates awareness of a moral hazard that results from drones’ military superiority and ease of use. Coauthored by Professors John

Kaag and Sarah Kreps, “The Use of UAV in Contemporary Conflict” presents the argument that drones’ technological advantage has begun to serve as the very justification for their use, thus violating international standards of proportionality and making it unacceptably easy to kill Americans instead of capturing them. This carries the potential to draw the U.S. into further unnecessary and unbeneficial strikes.<sup>12</sup> Scott Shane, author of *Objective Troy*, an account of the strike on Awlaki, professes that Awlaki would have “been heartened” to learn that the strike that killed him has drawn America further into a battle with radical Islam.<sup>13</sup>

The third school of thought counter to the administration’s use of drones warns of the potentially dire consequences of lacking a formalized set of legal criteria for targeting citizens. Professor Lloyd Gardner asserts that the targeting of Awlaki introduced a “mechanism [for the Obama Administration] for continuing operations with proven results . . . to amend the U.S. Constitution to suit the current occupant of the White House’s interpretation of national security needs.”<sup>14</sup> Though ostensibly a legal issue, this concern is also important when assessing the program’s effectiveness: if implemented with improper restraint, future iterations of current policy could make Americans unjustifiably unsafe abroad from their own government. This critique speaks to a larger policy debate of the balance between executive overreach and program effectiveness, a subject central to issues of detention, interrogation, and intercepting communications in the last decade.<sup>15</sup>

## ARGUMENT

With existing literature in mind, I wish to examine the degree of substantiation on both sides of the debate, broken down in reference to the following questions:

1. Does the drone program work to strengthen American national security?

Specifically,

(A) To what extent do decapitation strikes reduce terrorist operations?

(B) What is the potential for collateral damage to negate security gains?

2. Are strikes against U.S. citizens politically viable solutions to fight terror?

Specifically,

(A) Can domestic opposition inhibit the program from achieving increased security?

(B) Do we risk striking citizens out of convenience, not necessity?

(C) Do current legal restrictions limit future administrations from threatening the personal security of American citizens?

My goal for this analysis is to examine the degree to which evidence exists that each opposing position merits a reappraisal of current, pro-strike policy. Upon scrutiny, there exists compelling evidence that each major critique should be given bearing. Most attention will be paid to the first question, as the most available empirical evidence deals with the benefits and drawbacks of overseas strikes, where both sides draw on ample support.

In addition to providing for the possibility of such strikes being ineffective and potentially incurring resentment due to collateral damage, I contend that the Administration may also need to include in its calculus domestic opposition to extrajudicial killings when targeting U.S. citizens. Scholarly data analysis and trends in American media coverage indicate that the scale of the program may play a significant role in all of these drawbacks, each being exacerbated by increases in intensity.

The question of moral hazard, though significant, is perhaps the most difficult to examine on an empirical basis. Though it is critical to engage with the larger, moral aspect of allowing non-judicial killings of citizens, here I will seek to examine the possibility of the existence of a “slippery slope.” A comparison of the theoretical objections to the overall drone program and the historical record illustrative of restraint with respect to American nationals (targeting only the dangerous Awlaki) indicates that this particular objection is worthy of consideration, but presently lacks a consistent body of evidence to demonstrate increasingly frequent, unnecessary use to be a detrimental effect of the UAV program.

Finally, significant evidence exists to consider the objection that the overextension of executive authority could unnecessarily jeopardize Americans’ rights and therefore personal security. This issue is addressed through examination of leaked documents defining the “kill chain” based primarily on Executive judgment, in combination with appraisal of conflicting expert opinions justifying the status quo vs. increased judicial oversight.

Effectively, I assert that while the pro-strike camp’s rationale appears to stand on a solid theoretical base, there are strong and diverse reasons for policymakers to consider the possibility such strikes are, in practice, misguided, ineffective or even counterproductive to their goals. To support this claim, I survey available empirical evidence for each objection.

### **EVIDENCE—THE EFFICACY OF DECAPITATION STRIKES**

A number of scholars have forwarded a strong argument that the targeted killing program is fundamentally incapable of crippling anti-American terrorist networks. Any comprehensive assessment of the targeted killing of Americans, therefore, must include consideration that selective killing may be an ineffective weapon for national defense.

In her paper, “Attacking the Leader, Missing the Mark,” Jenna Jordan presents a robust argument that “decapitation” strikes are generally ineffective at incapacitating terrorist networks. Citing inability to conduct attacks as the measure of success, Jordan finds a mere 17% success rate among decapitation efforts of all kinds.<sup>16</sup> By adopting western bureaucratic structures, damage from individual strikes can be minimized through leadership replacement mechanisms.<sup>17</sup> Further, in instances most analogous to the strike on Awlaki, a member of the long-established al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) network, rates of success are empirically even lower. Jordan asserts that, “The rate of collapse for decapitated groups with

between 100 and 500 members is nearly 35 percent lower than for groups with 25 to 100 members. Even using a conservative estimate, destabilizing al-Qaida will be difficult.”<sup>18</sup> The evidence Jordan analyzes provides strong support for the idea that the targeted killings of top al-Qaeda leaders are unlikely to achieve the objective of dismantling the organization.

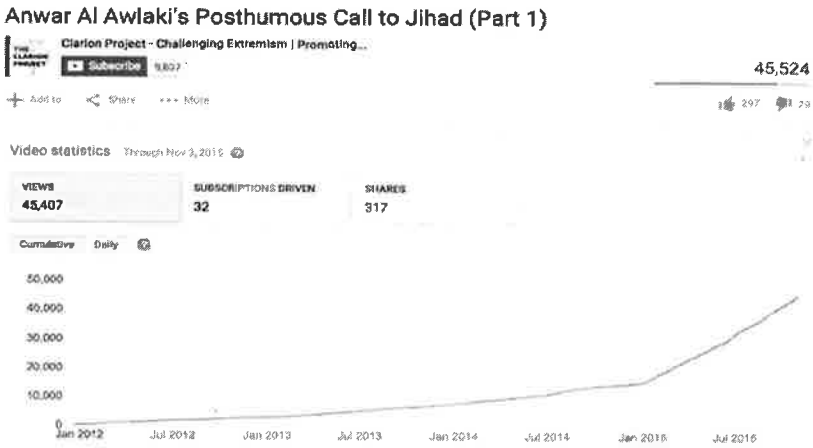
On the other side of this debate, however, it is important to examine the specific circumstances regarding Awlaki’s uniquely dangerous nature. It is reasonable to assert that Awlaki’s influence was exceptional, even among al-Qaeda leadership, and therefore his targeting had a much higher chance of damaging AQAP than the median strike Jordan examines. The main theoretical justification for the importance of decapitation strikes in such cases is laid out by Bruce Hoffman, who claims al-Qaeda operates on two levels: as a “bottom-up” organization reliant on new recruits, and as a “top-down” group whose self-perpetuation depends on core leaders.<sup>19</sup> Because of this latter aspect, one could convincingly assert Awlaki was vital to al-Qaeda leadership.<sup>20</sup>

Linked to numerous 9/11 perpetrators and having called repeatedly and planned actively for the mass-murder of Americans,<sup>21</sup> Awlaki was decidedly unique among the top American targets long before his killing even took place. Inspire, al-Qaeda’s international, mass-market publication attracted a cadre of devoted readers under his direction, to the point where analysts referred to it as his “baby.” Biographer Scott Shane considered Awlaki irreplaceable to Inspire, claiming his personal contributions were exceptionally “dogmatic and vicious.”<sup>22</sup> The most important reason Awlaki stood in a class of his own, however, was his connections to homegrown terrorism. Awlaki was the chief influence of British terrorist Roshonara Choudhry, Ft. Hood shooter Nidal Malik Hasan, and Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, the Detroit “Christmas Day Bomber.” For the latter two men, Awlaki became “the center of their ideological universe.”<sup>23</sup> With around 11% of visitors to Awlaki’s website coming from the U.S., he is aptly considered the grandfather of lone wolf terrorists.<sup>24</sup>

In conjunction, these attributes convinced President Obama to orally argue for his elimination as early as December 2009.<sup>25</sup> Since 2010, the President additionally asked Homeland Security Advisor John Brennan to give him updates on Awlaki during every “Terror Tuesday” briefing, becoming “fixated” on his importance within AQAP.<sup>26</sup>

While substantial justification to the President’s rationale to target Awlaki clearly exists, it is important to consider what has transpired since his killing. Two incidents of terror in January of 2015 evidence the Imam’s continued inspirational effects on jihadis. Both the attackers of the satirical French magazine *Charlie Hebdo* and a foiled lone wolf bomb-plotter in Ohio explicitly cited Awlaki as inspiration for their actions.<sup>27</sup> An analysis of internet traffic on his most popular radical sermon on YouTube (Figure 2) provides further evidence that Awlaki has had a posthumous impact on many; views have steadily risen since its upload in January 2012, with the majority coming in the last six months.

Figure 1: Traffic on Anwar al-Awlaki's Most Popular Jihadi Sermon on YouTube



It is useful to note the difficulty in measuring the actual outcomes of the Awlaki case: there are simply no measures of how many terrorist attacks were never planned or potential jihadis left unradicalized by the absence of Awlaki's leadership and sermons. Though Awlaki's sermons have continued to reverberate across nations, it is far from certain the extent to which his killing limited the damage he was capable of causing.

Finally, when weighing the decision to issue a decapitation strike like that against Awlaki, it is important to critically examine Jordan's definition of success with respect to the Administration's national security objectives. Specifically, targeted killings can be used as one of many tools designed to constrain terrorist activity, and not with complete organizational collapse as the singular, expected outcome. As one unnamed White House counterterrorism advisor succinctly explained in 2010, "The president was skeptical that kinetic strikes will end the war on terror, but he is not skeptical that they can stop a terrorist who is planning to kill Americans in Times Square."<sup>28</sup> Author Daniel Klaidman furthers this point, contending that the continuation of the drone program after hundreds of strikes in Yemen, Somalia and Pakistan evidences the Executive became convinced of its benefits, even if they are short term.<sup>29</sup> While a 17% chance of complete success may not justify strikes on Americans, much higher chances of stopping immediate threats to the homeland may make the program worthwhile. The ability to distinguish exceptional cases would therefore be vital to increasing the probability of a strike devastating terrorist networks and plans. The challenge of correctly selecting these cases, however, is extremely daunting, and no existing methodology could be considered foolproof to determine whether a target fits these criteria.

## THE HARM OF COLLATORAL DAMAGE

The second contention against the use of drones—that strikes killing innocent foreign nationals make the program ineffective or worse—has been heavily discussed with respect to the American UAV targeted killing as a whole. Its application to the targeting of U.S. citizens will therefore require some extrapolation. Negative externalities such as increased terrorist recruitment or restricted access to intelligence, however, will still apply if collateral damage kills innocents regardless of the target's nationality.

The first potential issue with collateral damage is the possibility of host nation opposition. Assuming, for the purpose of debate, that decapitation strikes are effective measures for improving national security, there is a strong interest in access to airspace and permission to bomb in host nations' sovereign territory. This access has been challenged in the two nations where the vast majority of drone strikes occur: Yemen and Pakistan. Claiming that 3% of drone casualties have been civilians since 2008,<sup>30</sup> the Pakistani Parliament unanimously voted to end U.S. strikes in 2012.<sup>31</sup> The Yemeni Parliament followed suit (not unanimously) in 2013.<sup>32</sup> With the real civilian casualty rate in Pakistan estimated as high as 17%, there is reason to fear the enforcement of such resolutions if popular resentment for the program grows due to collateral damage.<sup>33</sup>

There is also empirical evidence that civilian casualties counteract American aims. In Pakistan, local violence has increased in proportion to drone strikes.<sup>34</sup> Analyzing data from coalition action in Iraq, Luke Condra et al. have found that violence spikes after civilian casualties are caused by counterinsurgent forces.<sup>35</sup> It is no stretch to apply these findings to analogous violence via foreign drone strikes. Using interview accounts, journalists have asserted high frequency UAV bombings directly fueled anti-Americanism in north Pakistan.<sup>36</sup> In 2013, Deputy Chief of the U.S. Mission in Yemen Nabeel Khoury publically warned that each produced 40–60 new AQAP recruits for every person (operative or civilian) killed, due to the nature of tribal bonds in the areas being bombed.<sup>37</sup> Even if this is an overestimate, the potential for massive terrorist recruitment is well documented elsewhere. One study by New York University Law School's Global Justice Clinic cited several mechanisms that make strikes counterproductive and resentment inducing, including killing wage earners, bankrupting families, and creating poor mental health from living in fear of further strikes.<sup>38</sup> In sum, there is strong evidence that the current drone program, at minimum, has significant externalities limiting its effectiveness.

While these issues merit attention, three points qualify the extent to which collateral limits efficacy. First, though Yemen and Pakistan have called to ban American drone strikes, neither program has stopped after almost a decade of strikes. With respect to the targeting of Americans, it is highly unlikely that the Awlaki case (which saw zero civilian casualties) evidences caution with respect to collateral. Unless expanded exponentially, or if the lack of casualties in the Awlaki bombing was

more unrepeatable luck than patience, UAV bombings of U.S. nationals will probably not shift the balance on this specific issue.

Second, there is good reason to believe the U.S. is rapidly improving on the rates civilian casualties to target deaths. The aforementioned data from the New America Foundation on strikes in Pakistan shows that, though historical rates may be as high as 17%, only 6/365, or 1.6%, of the casualties within the last three years have not been militants.<sup>39</sup> This stunning improvement from peak rates in 2010 and 2011 can be attributed to improvements in targeting, according to Professor Avery Plaw et al. These developments, including better HUMINT and the use of smaller “Scorpion” missiles instead of the traditional “Hellfire” missiles in urban areas, give “reason to believe . . . it is likely to prove broadly sustainable at least for the immediate future.”<sup>40</sup>

Third, there is a convincing case to be made that if the U.S. is committed to decapitation strikes, drone warfare provides the lowest rate of civilian casualties possible. While media interest over the technology and names like “Predator” and “Reaper” “connote killer drones and U.S. military imperialism,”<sup>41</sup> they use live stream data, longer monitoring and better precision to minimize collateral in ways that traditional bombers cannot.<sup>42</sup> Using data from the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, Slate estimates that drone strikes in Yemen have one-third of the civilian casualty rate than traditional bombing missions. In Somalia, no collateral damage has been reported, and drones are up to “seven times safer” for local populations than conventional bombing.<sup>43</sup> In aggregate, these rebuttals provide a case in support of an improving program less problematic than alternative bombings. This analysis must be qualified by assuming an inability to use ground forces, however, since non-aerial methods using Special Forces or police create less collateral damage than drone strikes.

## THE RISK OF DEMOCRATIC OPPOSITION

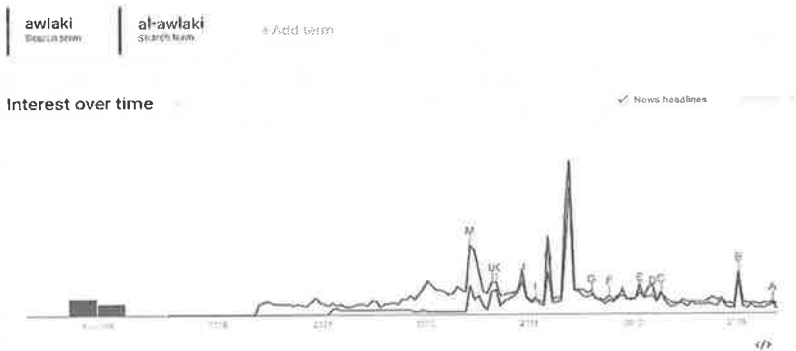
While previous contentions have dealt with the efficacy of the current program, another negative externality could threaten the continuation of drone strikes against citizens: domestic resentment and fear could kill the program, regardless of targets’ values or the extent of prevented terrorist activities. This issue regarding UAV strikes is unique to targeting Americans, and thus lacks a large body of scholarship upon which to draw.

There is substantial reason to judge the American public as opposed to what politicians such as Ron<sup>44</sup> and Rand<sup>45</sup> Paul have contended count as the extra-judicial killings of American citizens abroad. Coming from the libertarian right, the Pauls and the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) have ostensibly valued Constitutional objection over the value of Awlaki’s elimination, filing that the targeting violated the fourth and fifth amendments.<sup>46</sup> Whether real or imagined, their position is consistent with the professed views of the American public; a March 2013 Gallup Survey found a mere 13% of Americans support drone strikes against American citizens.<sup>47</sup> Immediately after the Awlaki strike, articles ran in the *L.A. Times* and over NPR criticizing the decision and questioning its legal grounds.<sup>48</sup>



While this outcry could be reasonably expected to challenge the Awlaki strike and force the Administration to change tact, this has yet to occur. Regardless of professed opinion and Congressional resistance, the American public appears to be willing to weigh a dislike of the means with the perceived boon to national security, at least in the Awlaki case. As Ann Rogers and John Hill claim in *Unmanned: Drone Warfare and Global Security*, “as long as it is perceived that American lives are saved and terrorists are being killed, US public interest is quiescent.”<sup>49</sup> Despite the “years long” attempts to seek legal redress and public support, Anwar al-Awlaki’s father Nasser al-Awlaki garnered little sympathy and received “no judicial condemnation of the strikes”<sup>50</sup> And despite the initial media scrutiny, Google Trends data (Figure 2) indicates that, after October 2011, interest for “al-Awlaki” and “Awlaki” stabilized at 5–15 percent of peak interest immediately following the news release of the strike.<sup>51</sup>

**Figure 2: Google Interest in the Phrases “al-Awlaki” and “Awlaki,” 2008–Present**



Even if public dissatisfaction may not kill the program, there is inevitable political risk to any Administration who chooses to target citizens. Since the general disapproval of contra funding during the Reagan Administration, Presidents have become well versed in the constraints of public opinion. Documented in the case of Guantanamo Bay Prison, criticism of enhanced interrogation made its way to the Supreme Court, where dissatisfied justices “held the President accountable” for executive overreach.<sup>52</sup> Administrations also run the risk of Congressional restriction, as evidenced in both 2005, when a Republican Congress limited Bush’s interpretation of indefinite detention,<sup>53</sup> and in 2013, with the multiparty retooling of the Patriot Act in response to dissatisfaction over the extent of the NSA’s wiretapping.<sup>54</sup>

### MORAL HAZARD

The political viability of targeting U.S. citizens is also brought to attention by critics who argue that the Administration may begin to claim the utility of drones as the very justification for their use. From Cornel West labeling Obama’s terms “the drone Presidency,”<sup>55</sup> to Kaag’s and Kreps’ contention that drones’ unmanned status

circumvents the wording of the 1973 War Powers Act,<sup>56</sup> many have alleged that unnecessary strikes are already a facet of current policy due to the ease of conducting a perpetual “nano-war.”<sup>57</sup>

Compelling evidence for this theory comes from the President himself—in a 2008 “Town Hall” meeting, Obama responded to a question regarding killing Americans, stating,

“I taught Constitutional law for ten years, I take the Constitution very seriously. The biggest problems that we’re facing right now have to do with George Bush trying to bring more and more power into the executive branch.”<sup>58</sup>

While not outright stating he would not target Americans, one could reasonably conclude he disagreed with the concept. By 2011, however, Daniel Klaidman asserts that Obama, though “plagued with chronic self-doubt,” became willing to target citizens of high value. As Klaidman eloquently states, “capturing was proving to be difficult, killing was much easier.”<sup>59</sup>

In the case of Anwar al-Awlaki, there is considerable evidence that the convenience of UAV bombing irresolutely entered Obama’s calculus. According to Klaidman, one unnamed White House official claimed that, “in this one instance, the president considered relaxing some of his collateral requirements.”<sup>60</sup> While Awlaki eventually left the building he co-inhabited with children, allowing Obama to order a strike without inevitable collateral, the rationale for the incident was cited as still “largely an exercise in post hoc justification,” hardly what should be expected for a strike years in the works.<sup>61</sup> With five other Americans killed collaterally since the inception of the UAV targeted killing program, it is reasonable to consider the moral hazard facing the Administration.<sup>62</sup>

While those who assert the Administration is in danger of succumbing to moral hazard are far from baseless, the historical record on the targeting of American citizens appears to favor the President. Perhaps most significantly, the strike on Awlaki in September 2011 was and has been the singular reported strike against an American citizen. Not only has this method not been used since, but a reasonable argument can be made that Awlaki fit a highly unique set of criteria that, if followed, can prevent any moral slide in the future. As stated previously, Awlaki was almost universally considered America’s top target for roughly two years prior to his killing.<sup>63</sup> In concurrence with the ex post-facto analysis of Jeffery Simon in his book *Lone Wolf Terrorism*,<sup>64</sup> The CIA and DoD both judged capture preferable but infeasible, citing his in-absentia Yemeni jail sentence of 10 years impossible to guarantee due to the country’s ungovernable security situation.<sup>65</sup> As one White House official put it, “If Anwar al-Awlaki is your poster boy for why we shouldn’t do drone strikes, good f\*\*\*\*\*g luck.”<sup>66</sup> President Obama’s defense was equally straightforward; he is quoted as summarizing his choice succinctly, stating, “this is an easy one.”<sup>67</sup> The theoretical nature of this portion of the debate, along with

substantial evidence on both sides, lends itself to further evaluation and reflection as the Executive chooses how to act in future decisions.

### PERSONAL INSECURITY VIA LACK OF FUTURE LEGAL RESTRICTION

The final aspect of the debate herein addressed deals with the alleged lack of legal restrictions on the Executive's exclusive control over targeted killings of citizens via UAV. To understand the impact of this, it is first important to identify the criteria by which strikes are approved. Legal scholar Michael Eshaghian lists the criteria the Obama Administration uses to issue a strike: 1. The target must be a senior terrorist leader, 2. The target must be an immediate threat, 3. Capture must be infeasible, and 4. A strike must follow American law-of-war principles.<sup>68</sup> Leaked "drone papers" from The Intercept confirm that the President's discretion is the singular check within the system after targets are vetted by the NSC.<sup>69</sup>

Scholars and politicians have been eager to attack the second criterion used by the Administration. Speaking on Awlaki, who was involved in plotting but not actively engaged in violent activity, Congressman Ron Paul stated, "I oppose anyone who would argue that the President has the power to kill American citizens not involved in combat."<sup>70</sup> Kaag and Kreps echo this, claiming the term "enemy combatant," is "extremely vague and does very little to articulate the legitimacy of military targets."<sup>71</sup> Perturbed by the arbitrary nature of the criteria, they forward an ad-hoc court system to assess a target's value if he is a U.S. citizen.<sup>72</sup>

In defense of executive authority, Obama expounded upon how the process is the best available option. In 2013, he stressed that the U.S. strikes only with "near certainty that no civilians will be killed or injured, the highest standard we can set."<sup>73</sup> Additionally, the President personally signs off on every strike outside of Afghanistan and Pakistan, claiming,

"The decision to use force against individuals or groups—even against a sworn enemy of the United States—is the hardest thing I do as President. But these decisions must be made, given my responsibility to protect the American people."<sup>74</sup>

In response to the ad-hoc court proposal, the White House raised concerns that, in situations like Awlaki's, a single car ride can be the difference between success and stagnation. Given the immediate necessity to act in quickly changing situations, one Federal Court asserted that the judiciary is "institutionally ill-equipped to assess the nature of battlefield decisions."<sup>75</sup>

Despite consistently enforced protocols that have limited strikes to only the dangerous Awlaki, it appears that the Administration has set up little that legally defends American citizens in their safety and right to trial from new Executive leadership altering selection methodology. Though balanced, the current system appears to lack checks on power, the absence of which may or may not be critical to the expediency of the program.

## IMPLICATIONS

While the most contentious issues regarding drone use against American citizens are both multifaceted and far from determined, the importance of UAV targeted killing is certain. Lloyd Gardner concludes, “if there had been any remaining questions about it, the death of Anwar al-Awlaki settled the matter: the drone had replaced counterinsurgency.”<sup>76</sup> At least in cases where strikes were once infeasible, drones have allowed America eliminate top al-Qaeda leaders like Awlaki. With American ordinance bombing ISIS’s Western leaders in hostile Iraq and Syria, this issue is at the forefront of public agendas.

In determining what credible analysis of targeted killing of American citizens entails, I posit four recommendations. Each addresses the battle between negating immediate threats and ensuring policy is sustainable, limited, and operating in the country’s long-term interest. One subset of issues addresses if such strikes work, and another addresses the political consequences and domestic costs incurred by the Administration for having such a policy.

First, there must be a conversation about the degree to which the program must incapacitate terrorist network to be worthwhile. Though convincing scholarship asserts such strikes cannot singlehandedly destroy al-Qaeda, they may work well in the short term.

Second, killings have not lacked and will not lack consequences through negative externalities. Since the targeting of American civilians has been a minuscule fraction of the total drone campaign, the most important factor to keep in mind with regard to collateral damage and domestic frustration is scale. Evidence confirms that singular attacks may be conducted with good cause and high accuracy, yet the entire drone program has also proven that more frequent bombings come with myriad repercussions to American interests. A cost-benefit analysis of these risks should be systematically employed when considering strikes.

Third, scholars have presented a compelling case that the utility of drones may come to be the reason for their use. While it remains to be said whether or not the current Administration has fallen victim to the moral hazard of convenience, danger of a “slippery slope” must be considered when choosing to kill instead of capture U.S. citizens.

Fourth and finally, it is critical to acknowledge the extent to which the executive has power absent of external checks over the target vetting process. Whether or not this is necessary for the timely functioning of the program, this will determine the future of the targeted killing program and could jeopardize individual Americans’ security in their persons.

## NOTES

- 1 Over 2,400 in May 2014. Source: Matt Sledge, "The Toll of 5 Years of Drone Strikes," *Huffington Post*.
- 2 Edward N. Luttwak, "Give War a Chance," *Foreign Affairs*, 1999, 40.
- 3 Jennifer Griffin, "Two U.S.-Born Terrorists Killed in CIA-Led Drone Strike." Fox News.
- 4 Much of the literature regarding this debate deals with the drone program at large. This paper seeks to incorporate the useful portions of this generalized debate alongside scholarly opinion and evidence regarding the targeting of American nationals specifically.
- 5 John Brennan (Assistant to the President on Homeland Security and Counterterrorism), in an official press statement on June 29, 2011, laid out the official White House doctrine on drone strikes as the first line of attack in a world where, "If our nation is threatened, our best offense won't always be deploying large armies abroad but delivering targeted, surgical pressure to the groups that threaten us." Source: John Brennan, "Remarks on Ensuring Al-Qa'ida's Demise." Lecture, White House Press Statement, Washington, D.C., June 29, 2011.
- 6 Such operatives have typically been, as in the case of Anwar al-Awlaki, top al-Qaeda operatives in Yemen and Pakistan. Byman cautions that "superb intelligence is necessary" in order for strikes to be effective. Further, he qualifies his support to situations where arrest is infeasible and, without UAV action, the target could operate in regions entirely lacking jurisdiction, such as Yemen and northern Pakistan. Byman ultimately contends that strikes against leadership are flawed, but usable short-term measures against groups like al-Qaeda. Source: Daniel Byman, "Do Targeted Killings Work?" The Brookings Institution, July 14, 2009. Scott Shane, author of Anwar al-Awlaki biography *Objective Troy*, lays out the Obama Administration defense of drones as the best option in the war on terror, stating that "the Bush years had proven that a big conventional fighting force was no way to take them [terrorist organizations] on . . . targeted strikes are a way of minimizing the chance of getting drawn into a bigger conflict . . . A little killing, in other words, might prevent a lot of killing." Source: Scott Shane, *Objective Troy: A Terrorist, a President, and the Rise of the Drone*, (1) New York: Penguin Random House, 2015, 211–212.
- 7 Michael Stokes Paulson, "Drone On: The Commander in Chief Power to Target and Kill Americans," *Harvard Journal of Law and Public Policy* 38 (2015): 43–61. David Sanger affirms this argument in *Confront and Conceal*, claiming Obama's decapitation strikes, even down to "al-Qaeda's middle management," had proven a resounding success in Pakistan and Afghanistan by 2010. Sanger asserts the administration's "light footprint" strategy has been enabled by UAV targeting, a "perfect tool" in an era of unpopular wars in remote areas. Source: David Sanger, *Confront and Conceal: Obama's Secret Wars*, New York: Crown Publishers, 2012, 255, 243.
- 8 Micah Zenko, "Why Drones Are Overrated," *NY Daily News*, September 29, 2010.
- 9 Simon writes, "The void created by the killing of influential terrorists such as Anwar al-Awlaki is quickly filled by others ready and willing to fan the flames of hatred and intolerance." Source: Jeffery D. Simon, *Lone Wolf Terrorism: Understanding the Growing Threat*, Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 2013, 142, 210. Author George Michael furthers this, claiming al-Qaeda's "malleability is part of its strength." Source: George Michael, *Lone Wolf Terror and the Rise of Leaderless Resistance*, Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2012, 152.
- 10 Jenna Jordan, "Attacking the Leader, Missing the Mark," *International Security* 38, no. 4 (2014): 7–38.

11 Center for Human Rights and Global Justice, "Living Under Drones," *NYU Law*, Sept., 2012. Additionally, Jordan claims, "Decapitation efforts could instigate retaliatory attacks, fuel recruitment, or generate more sympathy for the movement, ultimately strengthening it." Source: Jordan, "Attacking the Leader," 37. See also: Pir Zubair Shah, "My Drone War," *Foreign Policy Online*, Feb. 27, 2012.

12 Kaag and Kreps contend that, unlike previous weapons of above-average ease of use and lethality, weaponized drones place distance between democratic leaders and their decisions to engage in violent conflict, with no risk of immediate death on the side of the aggressor. Source: John Kaag, John and Sarah Kreps. "The Use of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles in Contemporary Conflict: A Legal and Ethical Analysis," Northeastern Political Science Association, 2012: 1–26. See Also: John Kaag and Sarah Kreps, Kaag, John, and Sarah Kreps, "The Moral Hazard of Drones," *New York Times Opinionator*, July 22, 2012.; Kaag, John, and Sarah Kreps. *Drone Warfare*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014, 16.

13 Shane, *Objective Troy*, 318.

14 Lloyd C. Gardner, *Killing Machine: The American Presidency in the Age of Drone Warfare*, New York: New Press, 2013., 176–178. Gardner goes on to (perhaps extremely) assert that drones threaten America's future by "creating and sustaining an endless, seemingly mystical war against terrorism," and require the abandonment of the Constitution. Source: *Ibid.*, 233. ACLU deputy legal director Jameel Jafar argues this authority is also a serious concern, stating, "It is a mistake to invest the president—any president—with the unreviewable power to kill any American whom he deems to present a threat to the country." Source: Brian Montopoli, "Ron Paul, ACLU Condemn Anwar Al-Awlaki Killing," CBS News, Sept. 30, 2011. Legal expert Micahel Eshaghian furthers this argument, warning that the unrestricted Executive authority could expand of the current targeting to lower-value targets, killing American who should be legally arrested. Eshaghian asserts, "The process currently given to targets clearly lacks a judicial component. Thus, there must be some changes in order to comply with procedural due process . . . In other words, there may be a real danger that a targeted-killing program may morph in the future to target citizens who do not meet the perhaps stringent standards required today." Source: Michael Eshaghian, "Are Drone Courts Necessary? An Analysis of Targeted Killings of U.S. Citizens Abroad Through a Procedural Due Process Lens," *Texas Review of Law and Politics* 18 (2014): 192.

15 Concern over the "escalating intensity" of counterterrorist strategies in the Obama and Bush White Houses has prompted significant scholarly review in recent years. Source: Charlie Savage, *Power Wars*, New York: Hachette Book Group, 2015, 35. See also: Daniel Klaidman, *Kill or Capture: The War on Terror and the Soul of the Obama Presidency*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, and Jack Goldsmith, *Power and Constraint: The Accountable Presidency after 9/11*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2012.

16 Jordan, "Attacking the Leader."

17 "Employment contracts lay out duties, holidays, salaries, travel, rewards, and punishment." Source: *Ibid.*, 24.

18 Jenna Jordan, "When Heads Roll: Assessing the Effectiveness of Leadership Decapitation," *Security Studies* 18, no. 4 (2009): 719.

19 Bruce Hoffman, "From the War on Terror to Global Counterinsurgency," *Current History* 105, (2006): 424.

20 Awlaki was a "target of legitimate interest" to the U.S. in 2011. Source: Michael, *Lone Wolf Terror*, 141.

- 21 Shane, *Objective Troy*, 21–22.
- 22 Ibid., 248–51.
- 23 Shane, *Objective Troy*, 190.
- 24 Simon, *Lone Wolf Terrorism*, 139.
- 25 Daniel Klaidman, *Kill or Capture*, 264.
- 26 Gardner, *Killing Machine*, 169. See also: Klaidman, *Kill or Capture*, 261.
- 27 Shane, *Objective Troy*, 317.
- 28 Klaidman, *Kill or Capture*, 118.
- 29 Ibid., 120–122. Hoffman adds, “Accordingly, a new approach is vital. Its success will depend on a strategy that combines the tactical elements of systematically destroying and weakening enemy capabilities (the “kill or capture” approach) alongside the equally critical, broader strategic imperative of breaking the cycle of terrorist recruitment.” Source: Hoffman, “From the War on Terror,” 428.
- 30 Bradley Jay Strawser, *Opposing Perspectives on the Drone Debate*, New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014, 13–14.
- 31 Richard Leiby, “Pakistan Calls for End to U.S. Drone Attacks.” *Washington Post*, April 12, 2012.
- 32 Hakim Almasmari, “Drone Strikes Must End, Yemen’s Parliament Says,” CNN. Dec. 13, 2013.
- 33 Sanger, *Confront and Conceal*, 249.
- 34 Jon Masters, “Targeted Killings,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, May 23, 2013.
- 35 They find a civilian killed by coalition forces leads to an average .16 more insurgent attacks per 100,000 citizens in the following week. Source: Luke Condra, and Jacob N. Shapiro, “Who Takes the Blame? The Strategic Effects of Collateral Damage,” *American Journal of Political Science*, 2011, 179. Further, de Mesquita et al. find that as violence of any kind increased in Pakistan’s tribal regions, rebel groups were more likely to engage in further violence. This finding may also indicate the potential for strikes to jeopardize regional stability in unintended manners. Source: E. Bueno De Mesquita, C. C. Fair, J. Jordan, R. B. Rais, and J. N. Shapiro, “Measuring Political Violence in Pakistan: Insights from the BFRS Dataset,” *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, 2014, 536–58.
- 36 Shah, “My Drone War.”
- 37 Nabeel Khoury, “Remarks on Drone Warfare, U.S. Mission in Yemen,” Lecture, Aden, Yemen, Oct. 22.
- 38 Global Justice Clinic, *Living Under Drones*, 73–80.
- 39 These six casualties include those labeled, “unknown,” not just those confirmed to be civilian. Source: “Drone Wars Pakistan: Analysis.” New America’s International Security Database. 2015.

- 40 Avery Plaw, Matthew Fricker, and Brian Glyn Williams, "Practice Makes Perfect?: The Changing Civilian Toll of CIA Drone Strikes in Pakistan," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 5, no. 5–6 (2011): 55.
- 41 John Karlsrud and Fredrik Rosen, "In the Eye of the Beholder? UN and the Use of Drones to Protect Civilians," *Stability International Journal of Security and Development* 2, no. 2 (2013): 3.
- 42 *Ibid.*, 1.
- 43 William Saletan, "Civilian Deaths Would Be Much Higher Without Drones," *Slate*, April 24, 2015, 1.
- 44 Montopoli, "Ron Paul, ACLU, Condemn Anwar al-Awlaki Killing"
- 45 Andrew Kirell, "Watch: Rand Paul Filibusters Another Obama Appointee over Drone Memos." *Medialite*. May 21, 2014.
- 46 "Al-Aulaqi v. Panetta—Constitutional Challenge to Killing of Three U.S. Citizens." American Civil Liberties Union, June 4, 2014.
- 47 Kaag, *Drone Warfare*, 63.
- 48 Carrie Johnson "Debate Erupts Over Legality Of Awlaki's Killing," NPR, Sept. 30, 2011. See Also: Carol Williams, "Awlaki Death Rekindles Legal Debate on Targeting Americans," *Los Angeles Times*, Sept. 30, 2011.
- 49 Rogers and Hill, *Drone Warfare and Global Security*, 93.
- 50 Shane, *Objective Troy*, 300.
- 51 This does not necessarily contradict the uptick in YouTube hits previously mentioned—Google traffic better indicates overall public interest, specific sermons views may demonstrate interest among only followers.
- 52 Goldsmith, *Power and Constraint*, 178.
- 53 *Ibid.*, 184.
- 54 Savage, *Power Wars*, 600.
- 55 Belinda Luscombe, "Cornel West: Obama Administration Is a 'Drone Presidency'" *Time*. Oct. 2, 2014.
- 56 Kaag, *Drone Warfare*, 76. Kaag and Kreps elucidate the mechanism by which killing becomes easy to execute beyond the strategically necessary, proffering, "semiautonomous weapons systems undermine the cultivation of virtues such as courage due to the fact that they protect soldiers from enemy retaliation." Source: *Ibid.*, 146.
- 57 Ann Rogers and John Hill, *Unmanned: Drone Warfare and Global Security*, London: Pluto Press, 2014, 93.
- 58 CQ Transcriptions, "Senator Barack Obama Delivers Remarks at Campaign Event," Lancaster, PA, March 31, 2008. Found in: Shane, *Objective Troy*, 225.
- 59 Klaidman, *Kill or Capture*, 119.



60 Ibid., 264

61 Ibid.

62 Adam Taylor, “The U.S. Keeps Killing Americans in Drone Strikes, Mostly by Accident,” *Washington Post*, April 23, 2013. A mere two weeks later, Obama called the strike that killed Anwar al-Awlaki’s son, Abdulrahman al-Awlaki “a f\*ck up.” The State Department subsequently listed his cause of death as “unknown,” despite confirmed media reports on the strike. Source: Shane, *Objective Troy*, 296–298.

63 The CIA gave Awlaki the extremely rare classification of “a continued and imminent threat” because “Awlaki as a leader of AQAP was determined to attack the United States and was working relentlessly toward that goal.” Source: Shane, *Objective Troy*, 221. Harold Koh (Legal Advisor to the Department of State) likened the reason to put al-Awlaki on the kill list to “battered spouse syndrome”—there is reason to act preemptively when the subject demonstrates a consistent pattern of activity. Source: Klaidman, *Kill or Capture*, 219.

64 Simon claims there was an inability to capture or kill Awlaki another way. He agrees with the Administration (that “military countermeasures will not be effective”). Source: Simon, *Lone Wolf Terrorism*, 213.

65 Shane, *Objective Troy*, 263.

66 Gardner, *Killing Machine*, 175.

67 Shane, *Objective Troy*, 224.

68 Eshagian, “Are Drone Courts Necessary?”

69 Cora Currier, “The Kill Chain: The Lethal Bureaucracy behind Obama’s War.” *The Intercept*. Oct. 15, 2015.

70 Kirell, “Watch: Rand Paul Fillibusters”

71 Kaag, *The Moral Hazard of Drones*.

72 Senator Angus King (I-ME), argued that Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA) courts could serve as examples. Source: Joe Wolverton, “Congress Considers Special Drone Court,” *New American*, Feb. 14, 2013.

73 Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President,” Fort McNair, May 23, 2013. In January 2012, Obama publicly defended his process, saying, “We are very careful in terms of how it has been applied . . . This is a targeted, focused effort at people who are on a list of active terrorists.” Source: Sanger, *Confront and Conceal*, 251.

74 Currier, “The Kill Chain.” Also: Obama, “Remarks.”

75 Al-Aulaqi v. Obama, 727 F. Supp.2d I, 45 (D. D.C. 2010).

76 Gardner, *Killing Machine*, 179.

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