

Opinion

The Secret Death Toll of America's Drones

President Trump is making it harder to know how many civilians the government kills by remote control.

By The Editorial Board

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Kevin Sudeith/Warrug.com

[The Pentagon says](#) American airstrikes in Somalia have killed no civilians since President Trump accelerated attacks against Shabab militants there two years ago.

Amnesty International investigated five of the more than 100 strikes carried out in Somalia since 2017 by drones and manned aircraft, and in just that small sampling [found that at least 14 civilians were killed](#).

The Pentagon says airstrikes by the American-led coalition fighting the Islamic State [killed at least 1,257 civilians](#) in Iraq and Syria as of the end of January.

[Airwars](#), a university-based monitoring group, estimates that those strikes [killed at least 7,500 civilians](#) in those countries.

Those disparities show how poorly the American public understands the human cost of an air war fought largely by remote-controlled drones. Drones have been the main weapon in the counterterrorism fight for more than a decade. They kill extremists without risking American lives, making combat seem antiseptic on the home front. But the number of civilians killed in these attacks is [shrouded in secrecy](#).

President Trump has made it even harder to lift that shroud, by allowing the Central Intelligence Agency to keep secret how many civilians are killed in the agency's airstrikes outside of the Afghan, Iraqi and Syrian war zones — in places like Yemen, the lawless border region of Pakistan and North Africa.

President Barack Obama aggressively expanded drone use in these airstrikes. But he eventually came to understand the [need for more transparency](#) and accountability, and, under pressure, he put some sensible safeguards in place.

Among them was a July 2016 order requiring the government to issue annual public reports on the civilian death tolls in those areas.

Mr. Trump [revoked](#) that order this month. His National Security Council called it superfluous because Congress had subsequently passed a law mandating that the Pentagon publicly report any civilians killed in any of its operations. But that law covered only the Pentagon, not the separate C.I.A. drone campaign, which has [broadened](#) under Mr. Trump.

Experts say that, under President Trump, airstrikes have surged in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria, as well as in Somalia. In Yemen, it is unclear to what extent the Americans, as opposed to the Saudi-Emirati coalition, are responsible. In Afghanistan, the number of American strikes that killed or injured civilians more than doubled in the first nine months of 2018 compared with the corresponding period in the previous year and killed more than 150 civilians, according to the [United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan](#).

Mr. Trump has also eroded constraints on civilian casualties.

Since taking office, [he has rescinded rules](#) that required the military and the C.I.A. operating outside of hot battlefields like Afghanistan and Iraq to limit their targets to high-level militants rather than foot soldiers. He also, by eliminating an elaborate interagency approval process, gave military commanders more authority to order drone strikes.

Yet, even under the previous rules, no matter how precise the weapons, how careful the planners and how skilled the fighters, mistakes, faulty intelligence, even miscalculated decisions often led to civilians being killed. The official data ranges from none to maddeningly vague, and the safeguards to mitigate civilian deaths are insufficient.

The military adopted an elaborate system under the Obama administration to minimize civilian casualties, including a requirement that forces have “near certainty” that no civilian will be harmed before launching an attack. But [reporting by The Times and others in 2017](#) showed that the Pentagon had killed far more civilians in Iraq than it acknowledged.

The Obama administration estimated that over its two terms drone strikes had killed [between 64 and 116 civilians](#) in 542 airstrikes outside the major war zones. [Micah Zenko, co-author of a new book, “Clear and Present Safety,”](#) calculated the real tally at roughly 324.

Drones, for all their faults, are less indiscriminate than B-52s or almost any other weapon. But they are also a seductive tool, potentially tempting presidents and military commanders to inflict grave damage without sufficient forethought.

A lack of transparency and accountability for civilian deaths helps enemies spin false narratives, makes it harder for allies to defend American actions and sets a bad example for other countries that are rapidly adding drones to their arsenals. It could also result in war crimes, as some critics have claimed.

Congress needs to insist on better data as the Pentagon [inspector general investigates](#) civilian casualty reporting.

There is no such thing as combat without risk. With drone combat, much of the risk falls on innocents. Americans need to understand the full cost and consequences of those risks.

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