

Washington launches new drone assassination program in Syria

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The United States Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the Pentagon's Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) are carrying out a secret drone missile assassination program in Syria, the *Washington Post* reported late Tuesday.

The existence of the so-called targeted killing program has come to light in the wake of last month's assassination of a British citizen identified as 21-year-old Junaid Hussein, a hacker who is described as a cyber expert for the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

Hussein is alleged to have had some connection to one of the two armed men who were shot and killed outside a "Draw Mohammed" contest staged by right-wing anti-Muslim groups in Texas last May. He is also said to have been responsible for hacking the Twitter and YouTube accounts of the US Central Command, the Pentagon command responsible for the wars in the Middle East and Afghanistan. He was sentenced to six months in jail in Britain in 2012 for hacking and publishing information from an address book of former prime minister Tony Blair.

US officials who spoke to the *Post* on condition of anonymity claimed that the drone assassination program in Syria was directed exclusively at "high-value targets." They insisted that Hussein fell into that category because of his alleged involvement in "recruitment," which may mean little more than his postings on social media.

The *Post* report, citing an unnamed senior US official, also referred to "others killed in a recent weeks" in strikes carried out under the CIA-JSOC assassination program.

The extension of the drone killing operation into Syria marks a further expansion of a practice of assassinations that has been found illegal by United

Nations agencies and which the Obama administration had previously claimed it was scaling back.

It moreover involves the CIA, a civilian agency which by definition cannot claim that its killings are carried out in accordance with the laws of war.

The White House indicated last April, after President Barack Obama's admission that a January CIA drone strike in Pakistan had killed two Western hostages, US and Italian aid workers Warren Weinstein and Giovanni Lo Porto, that the administration would take the drone killings out of the hands of the CIA and centralize them under the command of the Pentagon. At the time, Obama stressed the need for "transparency" in the assassination program.

Instead, yet another front in the secret drone war has been uncovered, and the CIA, instead of being removed from it, has joined in a seamless operation with the US military's special forces.

The *Post* cited unnamed officials as stating that this "hybrid approach" involved the CIA "finding and fixing" those targeted for assassination, while JSOC was responsible for "the 'finish'", i.e., the actual killings. The officials went on to indicate that "the cooperation between the CIA and JSOC in Syria is increasingly viewed as a model that could be employed in future conflicts."

JSOC, it should be pointed out, has been involved in atrocities equal to or surpassing those of the CIA. In December 2013, it targeted a convoy of vehicles carrying people to a wedding in Yemen, killing between 12 and 17 of them.

The *Post* article did not make clear how those targeted for assassination in Syria were being selected. Earlier reports established that Obama had personally chosen the individuals to be incinerated by Hellfire missiles in regular White House sessions known as

“terror Tuesdays.” These assassinations amount to arbitrary executions in which charges are not presented against those to be killed, much less proven through any kind of judicial process.

Syria has now joined Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, Libya, Afghanistan, Iraq and other countries where drone strikes have been launched. The reference to “future conflicts” makes clear that Pentagon’s planned expansion of its drone fleet (with the number of daily flights to be increased by up to 50 percent over the next four years) will see illegal killings introduced into other parts of the world with all of the attendant slaughter and terrorization of civilian populations.

The CIA-JSOC drone attacks amount to only a small fraction of the 2,450 air strikes carried out by US-led regular military forces against ISIS over the past year. This public campaign of airstrikes has had little effect in terms of dislodging ISIS from the broad swathes of Syrian and Iraqi territory that it has occupied.

The CIA-JSOC operation appears to have a different purpose, which may be tied to the CIA’s earlier function in Syria, which was funneling arms and aid to the so-called “rebels,” the Islamist sectarian militias that serve as proxies for the West, Saudi Arabia and the other reactionary Sunni monarchies of the Persian Gulf in a war for regime change against the government of President Bashar al-Assad.

An effective assassination campaign against “high-value targets” in ISIS would decapitate the Islamist group, while leaving its fighters to be recruited into a new front deemed acceptable by the CIA to receive US arms and assistance.

The extension of the drone killing program into Syria represents another escalation of a US-led intervention that has turned the country into a vast killing field, while destroying its economy and infrastructure.



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