

For the first time since this monthly blog began, no UACV strikes have been recorded during February 2014, Elayne Jude reports for Great North News Services. During this unprecedented hiatus, attention has focussed on an American citizen and suspected member of al-Qaida who is allegedly planning attacks on U.S. targets overseas. His case tests the parameters and contradictions of President Barack Obama's new targeting guidelines, and has attracted high profile media interest. Pentagon UACVs are barred from the country - undisclosed by some of the press at the US government's request but later revealed as Pakistan - where he's hiding, the CIA cannot strike militarily against a US citizen, and the Justice Department's case against him is incomplete. The Defense Department was reportedly reluctant at first to place the individual on the targeting list. But eventually the Pentagon came around, according to an anonymous aide aide, who added that the C.I.A. had supported a lethal strike from the beginning. The White House press secretary would not comment on specific operations, quoting Obama's speech last May on drone policy. Lethal force must only be used "to prevent or stop attacks against U.S. persons, and even then, only when capture is not feasible and no other reasonable alternatives exist to address the threat effectively." The target must also pose "a continuing, imminent threat to U.S. persons" - the legal definition of catching someone in the act of plotting a lethal attack. U.S. strikes have killed four Americans since 2009, including al-Awlaki, according to official statistics. Before Obama's plan to transfer drones from the CIA to the Pentagon, either outfit could strike alleged US citizens suspected of terrorism. The CIA was empowered to use UACVs against host countries' objections. The Pentagon can only strike in war zones, in permitting countries or in lawless areas where the national government's security forces cannot reach. The sole legitimate targets are al-Qaida-linked suspects. Political opinion is polarised. Senate and House appropriators are said to have blocked funding to transfer the CIA's RQ-170 fleet to the Pentagon. Civil rights groups struggle to see any difference. A clause in the new policy allows the administration to use the C.I.A. to carry out a strike if circumstances justified it. "So little has changed since last year, when it comes to government secrecy over killings," said Amnesty International's Naureen Shah. "The policy is still the stuff of official secrecy and speculation, when it should be a matter of open debate and explicit constraints." The fallout continues from a drone strike in December in Yemen that killed at least a dozen people and defied Obama's new rules, with the release on 19 February of Human Rights Watch's report on the incident. The WaPo's Greg Miller: "...The report by Human Rights Watch concluded that the strike...targeted a line of vehicles that were part of a wedding procession, and that evidence indicates 'some, if not all those killed and wounded were civilians.' The findings contradict assertions by U.S. officials that only militants were killed in the operation, although the report acknowledged that members of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula... may have been among the dead. Overall, Human Rights Watch "found that the operations did not comply with the targeted killing policies that President Obama outlined" ... [requiring] 'near-certainty' that no civilians would be harmed." The 28 page report is available here: <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2014/02/19/wedding-became-funeral-0> UK Armed Forces Minister Mark Francois has announced that Watchkeeper will begin overflying Salisbury Plain imminently. "Significant recent progress has been made on the Watchkeeper programme to satisfy the regulatory authorities that the system will be safe to fly...[Watchkeeper] "should commence flying from Boscombe Down in early March 2014", he said on 27 February, in response to a parliamentary question. In response to a freedom of information (Fol) request to Drone Wars UK, the Ministry of Defence has disclosed

how RAF crews using unmanned US aircraft under British RoE have launched missiles in conflict zones. British crews piloted US Reaper and Predator drones in Afghanistan on 2,150 occasions between 2006 and 2012. British forces have also flown thousands of missions with the British fleet of 10 Reapers.

The MoD has also provided a breakdown of the number of missiles fired by UK between May 2008 and April 2013. The intensity peaked in November 2011, when 25 were fired. The RAF fired 94 Hellfire missiles in Afghanistan during 2013. The British have launched a total of 457 missiles since 2008.

The continuing uncertainty about how many, if any, U.S. troops will remain in Afghanistan post 2014 calls into question the American programme over Pakistan. In the absence of a military ground presence, the bases used for launching drones would be closed.

Asked at a Pentagon press conference whether the military would consider basing drones in India, Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel said "we have to consider everything, as we are."

White House spokesman Jay Carney said Thursday that any further reduction in drone operations would be tied mostly to Afghan President Hamid Karzai's unwillingness to let U.S. forces stay beyond 2014.

Rep. Mike Rogers, R-Mich., chairman of the House Select Committee on Intelligence, said in response: "Let me be the first to say publicly, the president's May 2013 policy changes for the U.S. targeted strikes are an utter and complete failure, and they leave Americans' lives at risk."

Other potential host countries include Kyrgyzstan, whose agreement with the US to use its airbase in Manas expires in July; and India, which would certainly arouse hostility in Pakistan.

And on 28th February, Ben Emmerson, UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism, released his third annual report on the effects of drone warfare on civilians:

The Special Rapporteur examines the use of remotely piloted aircraft, or drones, in extraterritorial lethal counter-terrorism operations, including in the context of asymmetrical armed conflict, and allegations that the increasing use of remotely piloted aircraft, or drones, has caused disproportionate civilian casualties, and makes recommendations to States. This report constitutes the continuation of the Special Rapporteur's interim report on the use of drones to the General Assembly.

<http://justsecurity.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/Special-Rapporteur-Rapporteur-Emmerson-Drones-2014.pdf>