



Obama's Legacy: Murder.gov

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December 02, 2016

In the waning days of his second term, a president's thoughts turn to his legacy. His focus the last few weeks and months often tells us a great deal about how he wants to be remembered by the American people. It is, therefore, surprising and disappointing to see that President Obama is busy institutionalizing the targeted killing apparatus constructed piece by piece after the 9/11 attacks. Obama's last-minute efforts to ensure that the costly and counterproductive war on terror continues will certainly help cement his legacy – as the president who authorized hundreds of secret drone strikes that killed thousands of people, many of them civilians. But they also serve as a terrible reminder of just how far off course American national security policy has gotten.

The primary fruit of this effort is a new task force – “Counter-External Operations Task Force,” designed to give Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) an expanded ability to track and kill terrorists around the world. On the surface, the new entity simply represents the evolution of U.S. efforts to organize more efficiently to confront terrorist groups, a threat that existing national security organizations and processes were poorly suited to manage before 9/11. “Ex Ops,” as it is called in the Pentagon, is an attempt to bring all the necessary intelligence, targeting capabilities, and military capabilities under one roof, instead of leaving them distributed across a large number of different organizations, agencies, and combatant commands as has been the case historically.

If Ex-Ops were only a matter of reorganization it would be a potentially important but generally unremarkable exercise. But it's much more than that.

At root, Obama's move illustrates how American national security has been hijacked by the war on terrorism. Though terrorism is certainly a concern, the United States faces many other, more significant foreign policy challenges now and over the longer term. Russia, China, North Korea, and the proliferation of nuclear weapons come to mind, for example. Nonetheless, it is terrorism – specifically the effort to destroy Al Qaeda and the Islamic State abroad – that seems to drive much, if not most, of the White House national security agenda, including the creation of Ex-Ops.

Moreover, the doubling down on JSOC as the lead organization in the fight against terrorism reveals the sad fact that the United States is still committed to military interventionism despite the clear failure of this approach over the past fifteen years. At best, giving JSOC more power to take on terrorist groups abroad will be irrelevant to the safety of Americans at home. Remember that in the time since 9/11, the only successful Islamist-inspired attacks on American soil have

been those carried out by people living in the United States – many of them American citizens. And though few will lament the eventual destruction of Al Qaeda franchises and the Islamic State, no reorganization of the targeted killing program is going to be able to do anything about homegrown terrorists. Indeed, according to an internal F.B.I. study, killing more terrorists abroad appears to have the effect of increasing the number of U.S. residents angry and motivated enough to consider terrorism in the first place.

Obama's institutionalization of this counterproductive strategy is disturbing evidence that the White House and Pentagon have either lost the ability to interpret information about the world in an objective manner or that there is so much bureaucratic and political inertia in Washington, D.C. that analysis no longer plays an important function in crafting national security policy. Neither scenario is comforting. And either way, it appears that the war on terror will grind forward without any obvious exit strategy.

Most ominously, Obama's moves should terrify those who worry about Donald Trump's readiness for the role of Commander-in-Chief. Though Trump has clearly expressed opposition to large-scale military intervention and nation-building, he has just as clearly expressed aggressive tendencies when it comes to terrorism. Trump's selection of hawkish security advisers raises the prospects that his administration will look for ways to step up the fight against terrorism. By streamlining the process of hunting and killing terrorists, Obama may well be gift-wrapping Trump's favorite new toy just in time for Christmas.

Trump remains mercurial and hard to read on foreign policy, but it does not seem much of a reach to predict an increase in drone strikes and other special operations missions once Trump takes office in January. Whether or not it was Obama's intention, his expansion and institutionalization of the war on terror will be a major element of his legacy.

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