

# WIN WITHOUT WAR



## Progressive Foreign Policy Debrief

*Intel for Advocacy*

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SL: A more humane extrajudicial killing program?

### The Takeaway:

- Administration after administration has claimed the power to conduct unilateral, secretive, extrajudicial killings outside of officially recognized U.S. war zones, in violation of both international law and basic human rights protections. This practice is known as the U.S. “lethal strikes” program.
- As the Biden administration nears the end of its review of the current lethal strikes policy, signs point to the end result being mere tweaks to the status quo. But a slightly more restrained global endless war is still a global endless war.
- The U.S. lethal strikes program is unlawful. It is ineffective. It is violent. It is immoral. And it is a humanitarian disaster. It’s time to end it altogether.

## End the Lethal Strikes Program.

CW: Description of violence

On the afternoon of August 29, a Hellfire missile [struck](#) Zamari Ahmadi’s sedan as he returned to his home in Northwestern Kabul. Ahmadi, a husband, a father, and an aid worker who had applied for his family to be resettled in the United States, was killed. So, too, were nine others in the vicinity, including three of his children who had run out to greet him at his return. Though the Biden administration defended the bombing as a “righteous” precision strike against a member of the self-described Islamic State, subsequent reporting uncovered the truth of this [massacre](#).

As shocking as Ahmadi’s illegal killing is, the truth is that it’s hardly unique. For every Zamari Ahmadi, whose death drew the world’s attention because it coincided with the U.S. withdrawal, there are countless more whose stories will never see the light of day. This is the reality of the U.S. lethal strike program.

### Endless War Goes Global

20 years ago, in the wake of the September 11 attacks, the United States went to war — not only in Afghanistan, not only in Iraq, but across the world. In Yemen in 2002, George W. Bush unleashed the first death by U.S. drone strike, launching a war that successive administrations have continued under a claimed unilateral power to authorize secretive extrajudicial killings outside of any recognized battlefield. While it began with President Bush, President Barack

# WIN WITHOUT WAR



Obama scaled up this program with deadly consequences and little transparency. Later, Donald Trump took the program to its terrifying next step, allowing military commanders – rather than the president – to conduct lethal strikes as they saw fit.

Typically conducted through drone warfare, these “lethal strikes” have become the rule, not the exception, in U.S. foreign policy, a hallmark of the endless war era that treats the world as a battlefield, and anyone the United States declares an “enemy” (and whomever happens to be near them) as a target to be killed.

## **Guidelines for Murder**

Over the two decades of this program’s existence, different administrations have adopted different sets of “rules” (but really guidelines) for where and when these lethal strikes could be conducted. First, Obama’s Presidential Policy Guidance (PPG), then Trump’s revised Principles, Standards, and Procedures (PSP) — these seemingly sterile policy guidelines actually dictate the fate of peoples’ lives, while creating a cover of humanity to a program that is inhumane through and through. When President Biden took office, he announced that his administration would be conducting a review of the rules that he inherited from Trump. Recent [reporting](#) indicates that the Biden administration’s review may soon be over, and the result is likely to land somewhere between Obama’s guidelines, and Trump’s [looser rules](#). But while some may hail these new guidelines for their incremental improvement on Trump’s, we want to be clear: minor tweaks to an opaque, illegal program of world-spanning killings and resultant civilian casualties are nothing to celebrate — and they certainly are not “[ending forever wars](#).”

## **Secret Rules, Secret Bombings, Secret War**

It’s difficult to discuss the U.S. lethal strikes program with any specificity because it is, by design, stunningly opaque. How do we decide who can be the target of these strikes? (It seems to be that anyone in the area of a suspected adversary is [guilty by association](#).) How is the administration designating what is and is not a “recognized battlefield?” (What does it even *mean* to say that something’s not a war zone while you’re bombing it?) How many strikes are occurring? (One 2017 study found that the U.S. had only recognized [one fifth](#) of the strikes it had conducted.) How often are civilians being killed? (We surely can’t trust official tallies that count [all “military-age males”](#) as enemy combatants.) *What countries* are we even bombing? (Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Pakistan, Somalia, Yemen... where does the list end?) Which part of the U.S. government is doing the bombing? (Late in Obama’s second term, the CIA was reportedly prevented from conducting *drone* strikes, but Trump [reversed](#) that policy.)

For a policy that has profound ramifications not only for its victims, but for the peace and security of the entire world, it’s shameful that these questions cannot clearly be answered. But it is just this murkiness that allows administration after administration to continue to wield the power of extrajudicial murder with little challenge.

# WIN WITHOUT WAR



## Terror from the Skies

Despite the secrecy, investigative reporting has shed light on a handful of the tragic cases like Ahmadi's. In 2009, a missile tore into the home of 14-year-old Pakistani [Faheem Qureshi](#) as his family celebrated his uncle's return from a trip. At least nine were killed, and Faheem was permanently injured. Obama green-lit this attack on only his third day in office. In 2013, the United States launched four Hellfire missiles at a convoy of cars in Yemen presumed to be carrying members of al Qaeda. In reality, the convoy was a [wedding procession](#). 12 were killed, and at least 15 wounded. (This is not to be confused with the U.S.-supported, Saudi-led coalition's [2015 bombing](#) or the [2018 bombing](#) of a wedding party that killed at least 130 and 20 people in Yemen, respectively). In 2019, a U.S. drone strike intended for an "Islamic State hideout" in Afghanistan [killed](#) at least 30 civilian pine nut farmers as they were resting from a hard day's work. Earlier this year, one drone strike in Afghanistan successfully accomplished its goal of killing the leader of a Taliban offshoot — with [60 civilian casualties](#) in the process.

## Flawed To Its Core

For all of the question marks around the U.S. lethal strike program, there are some things we do know: it has killed [thousands upon thousands](#) of civilians, and permanently injured or traumatized countless more, with little accountability; it has forced communities, primarily Black, brown, and Muslim, around the world to live in [near-constant terror](#) of sudden death from above; it is a [violation](#) of international law, and makes a mockery of any claim to U.S. support for a rules-based international order; it is, despite how it is marketed, [imprecise](#); it is an entirely ineffective deterrent to terrorism, fueling violence and giving cause for [anti-U.S. sentiment](#); and it is a cornerstone of the global endless war architecture that has led to the deaths and displacement of millions of people while undermining both international peace and domestic security. These facts are fundamental to the lethal strikes program, and no cosmetic changes to the rules of engagement will change that.

## NGOs, Congress Want to End the Lethal Strikes Program

There is only one solution to the flaws of the lethal strike program: ending it. Earlier this year, Win Without War joined over 110 organizations, representing human rights, racial justice, environmental, humanitarian, faith-based, pro-peace, and veterans' organizations in [calling on](#) the Biden administration to use their review as an opportunity to end the program of lethal strikes outside of war zones altogether. This week, Senators Durbin and Leahy sent [a letter](#) to President Biden demanding the same. While it looks like Biden's policy review will result in more of the status quo — and, in fact, Biden has just [doubled down](#) on his commitment to their use in Afghanistan — we'll keep fighting to stop the lethal strikes, [repeal](#) the 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force which is claimed as much of the program's (dubious) legal justification, and, ultimately, live up to the promise that Biden has failed to keep: ending endless war in all of its forms.

# WIN WITHOUT WAR



## BURIED LEDES

One of the reasons our #EndlessWars are endless is that the president has far too much unchecked warmaking power. Yesterday, a [bipartisan group of Representatives](#) introduced the **National Security Reforms and Accountability Act to rein in these [runaway powers](#).**

**In the aftermath of 9/11, around 200 songs were [shadow banned](#) from U.S. radio:** some deemed triggering, others considered too critical of the status quo. The playlist is an important look into how the U.S. responds to crisis — and criticism.

**Haiti's elections have been [postponed indefinitely](#)** by standing Prime Minister Ariel Henry. Meanwhile, **the U.S. continues mass deportations of Haitian asylum seekers**, a disturbing yet familiar, (and illegal) policy for the purported defender of the rules-based international order.

**A [new rule](#), to be published next week, seeks to protect DACA** from further xenophobic legal challenges. This stands in harsh contrast to the treatment of [Haitian asylum seekers](#) at the border, prompting the question: *when will immigrants finally be welcome here?*

Cool cool cool: **Those younger than 40 today will experience a terrifying new [climate reality](#).** Compared to those born 60 years ago, kids born this year will face “seven times more heatwaves, twice as many wildfires, and almost three times as many droughts, river floods and crop failures.”

**The EU Parliament [recently voted](#) to call for a boycott of the UAE's Expo 2020** — a big, shiny event the UAE is hosting to whitewash its human rights abuses at home, in Yemen, in Libya, and throughout the region. The U.S. should follow suit and #BoycottDubaiExpo.

Yet another reason not to be buddy-buddy with the UAE dictatorship — **the UAE royals were [found to be](#) behind Trump-bundler Tom Barrack's illicit lobbying campaign to influence U.S. policy to favor the UAE.** Reminder: secret lobbying on behalf of a foreign government is \*not\* A-OK!

With the upcoming [Nuclear Posture Review](#), the president will assess if the U.S. has the “right” stockpile of nukes. While past presidents have stuck to the status quo, **this review is a chance for Biden to realize...maybe we \*don't\* need more of the deadliest weapons on earth?**

And finally, we hope you're ready to [jump into this weekend](#); let it be a good one!