

The Year in Ideas: Extra-judicial killings became a public darling in 2011

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On Sept. 30, a barrage of Hellfire missiles shot out from beneath an unmanned U.S. drone in the skies of Northern Yemen. Fired by a remote operator — possibly stationed in the Middle East or even the suburbs of Las Vegas — the 45 kilogram missile streaked down toward a vehicle carrying Anwar Al-Awlaki, a radical imam who was believed to have helped plan both the 2009 Fort Hood shootings and the attempted Christmas Day bombing of a Detroit-bound airliner.

The tiny drone had likely been trailing the imam for hours. Insulated in the car, it is possible Al-Awlaki had not even heard the conspicuous buzz of the aircraft before its missiles obliterated him. The first U.S. citizen targeted by a CIA strike was dead.

Republican presidential candidate — and staunch libertarian — Ron Paul criticized the killing, saying it reinforced the “practice of the president assassinating people who he thinks are bad guys.” An American Civil Liberties Union spokesman called it a “mistake to invest the president — any president — with the un-reviewable power to kill any American whom he deems to present a threat to the country.”

But after a few days, cable news producers had trouble getting anyone opposed to the killing in front of a camera.

Born in New Mexico, Al-Awlaki still held U.S. citizenship and under the U.S. Constitution he was guaranteed a “speedy and public trial.”

Nevertheless, according to an October Angus-Reid poll, a majority of Americans — be they Democrat, Republican, Texans or New Englanders — believed the strike on Al-Awlaki was justified. A further 48% said they had no problem with drones killing any U.S. citizens overseas — as long as they had links to terrorism.

Assassinations and targeted, extra-judicial killings used to be a rare U.S. tactic. But this year, between al-Awlaki, the shooting of Osama bin Laden and dozens of other drone strikes on foreign militants, 2011 was the year targeted, extra-judicial killings became the darling of the U.S. public.

Indeed, in a country mired by economic problems and an unending war in Afghanistan, extra-judicial killings of foreign militants have become one of the few things most Americans can agree on. When Republicans accused Barack Obama of “appeasing” Islamic radicals in early December, the President shot back, “ask Osama bin Laden and the 22 other out of 30 top al-Qaeda leaders who have been taken off the field whether I engage in appeasement, or whoever is left out there.”

“President Obama went into office thinking we could put all these characters on trial and I assume someone told him that that was not such a hot idea,” said Barry Cooper, a senior fellow with the Canadian Defence & Foreign Affairs Institute.

Since taking office, Mr. Obama has authorized more than 250 drone strikes on northern Pakistan alone — more than four times as many as his predecessor George W. Bush. In May he authorized the risky U.S. special forces raid that killed bin Laden in his bedroom. “There was never any question of detaining or capturing him — it wasn’t a split-second decision. No one wanted detainees,” a special-operations officer told New Yorker writer Nicholas Schmidle.

Targeted killings by the United States are nothing new, said Gavin Cameron, a terrorism expert at the University of Calgary's political studies department. When Libyan agents bombed a West Berlin nightclub in 1986, President Ronald Reagan responded with air strikes against Libyan targets. After al-Qaeda bombed two U.S. embassies in Africa in 1998, President Bill Clinton authorized cruise missile strikes on suspected al-Qaeda targets in Sudan and Afghanistan.

What is different now is the frequency of the attacks. On Dec. 21, a report on the website LongWarJournal.org announced that Pakistan had gone 33 days without a drone attack — its longest-ever respite from U.S. strikes since Mr. Obama's inauguration.

Pragmatically speaking, drone strikes are simply good politics, Mr. Cameron said. Terror suspects are often in remote areas where arrest by local authorities is next to impossible. Special forces raids are too risky and resource-intensive to be used on a routine basis. "So it's either that you attack them with drones or you leave them in place — and in the post-9/11 context, leaving them in place is simply not a viable option for a U.S. president," Mr. Cameron said, noting that drone attacks have few "domestic political costs."

Israel has embraced targeted killings as an anti-terrorism strategy for years. This year, Israeli agents were believed responsible for the Tehran death of an Iranian nuclear scientist shot at close range by attackers who escaped by motorcycle.

Israeli support for targeted killings is near-universal, yet 40 years of experience has shown the country that the policy can only go so far. During the Second Intifada, which began in 2000, Israel directed more targeted killings than at any other time in its history.

"It is possible that even more Israeli civilians would have been killed if not for the policy of targeted killing, but given the roughly 600 Israelis killed, it is clear that targeted killing has been unable to stop terrorism," wrote Steven R. David, a professor of international relations at Johns Hopkins University, in a 2003 paper.

"There's a strong possibility that the people you target become martyrs and are therefore usable for recruitment," Mr. Cameron said. "In the short term [targeted killings] disrupt the operational and organizational level, but in the long term it's not at all clear what the effects of such a policy might be."

The 1986 bombing of Libya did nothing to dissuade the country from orchestrating the 1988 Lockerbie bombing. In December, Al-Awlaki's father Nassar reacted to his son's death by releasing a video calling on Muslims to follow in his son's footsteps.

Meanwhile, the extra-judicial killings of American citizens continues. Al-Awlaki died next to Samir Khan, also an American citizen and an editor with Inspire, Al Qaeda's English-language online magazine. Weeks after the attack, Al-Awlaki's 16-year-old, Denver-born son Abdulrahman was also killed by a drone.

Other countries, meanwhile, are eager to follow the U.S. lead. The U.K. is reported to be spending \$800-million on lethal drones over the next five years.

In October, the shoot-and-ask-questions-later method made its high-profile entry into the Arab Awakening, when Libyan militants dispatched Muammar Gaddafi with a shot to the head minutes after discovering him hiding in a concrete drainage pipe.

In a mid-December Ipsos Reid poll, 68% of the world's population agreed that Gaddafi's death signalled a new beginning for Libya — but only 34% agreed that the 69-year-old colonel should have been dispatched without a trial. Only hours before Gaddafi's death, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton had urged Libyan crowds not to resort to vigilante justice or revenge attacks. In December, the chief prosecutor of the International Criminal Court said the killing sniffed of "war crimes."

When he heard of the Libyan dictator's death, Mr. Obama mounted a podium and ominously quoted The Beatles; Libya is going to have to follow "a long and winding road towards full democracy."