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PM: Following the Clues

by Polly Mann

The unauthorized killing of an individual is considered a crime in the United States and the responsible party, if found guilty, is punished. But there is an important caveat to this—if the perpetrator is a member of the U.S. military and is ordered to kill someone in a foreign country, that is O.K. It's called war—or a euphemism for war: “a military action.” Similarly, within the United States, people conspiring to kill in a foreign country are considered to have committed a serious crime. However, the U.S. has evidently worked out an arrangement with the UK, whereby collaborating in the assassination of individuals is perfectly legal.

Recently revealing how: On September 6, 2016, the online news site *The Intercept* reported new information gathered from documents that had been supplied by Edward Snowden, the American whistleblower. The documents expand on and corroborate evidence that the U.S. National Security Agency (NSA) operates a secret United Kingdom military/security base to aid in “a significant number of capture-kill operations” across the Middle East and North Africa.

The installation was used during the Cold War to spy on Soviet bloc countries. Today it has expanded to become the largest surveillance operation in the world. At the British Royal Air Force base RAF Menwith Hill, the NSA collects massive amounts of intelligence. NSA and British authorities will not discuss Menwith Hill, but, according to *The Intercept* reporter Ryan Gallagher, leaked documents showing that in 2011, in one 12-hour period alone, the Menwith Hill surveillance system “logged more than 335 million metadata records which reveal information such as sender and recipient of an email, or phone numbers someone called and at what time.” [*Editor's Note:* To understand the ability of surveillance to capture specific conversations, it's only necessary to recall the widely reported scandal that erupted when the NSA was caught listening in on the personal cell phone calls of German Chancellor Angela Merkel in 2013. Curiously, institutional memories become foggy in recalling that in 2013, it was also revealed that communications of former Russian President Dmitry Medvedev were intercepted by the NSA when he visited the UK for the G20 Summit meeting in 2009.]

Aside from spying on world leaders, the Menwith Hill programs are able to capture information through satellites, and to identify the location of the specific cellphones and internet connections used by individuals the U.S. deems to be suspected terrorists. This information is “actionable intelligence” to aid in killing these individuals in Iraq and Afghanistan, and in countries that neither the U.S. nor the UK have declared war on: Pakistan, Somalia, and Yemen. According to *The Intercept*: “NSA employees at Menwith Hill have collaborated on a project to ‘eliminate’ terrorism targets in Yemen, for example, where the U.S. has waged a controversial drone bombing that resulted in dozens of civilian deaths.”

The American Civil Liberties Union filed a lawsuit to uncover information related to the so-called Presidential Kill List, the Administration's use of drones to eliminate terrorists. The drone-strike “playbook” says that strikes may be used against terrorist targets where there is “near

certainty that an unlawful target is present, near certainty that noncombatants will not be injured or killed and when the target poses a continuing, imminent threat to U.S. persons.” “Near certainty” has resulted in the killing of thousands of people, including many noncombatants, but then who is counting? White House figures were only a small percentage of those estimated by human rights organizations and investigative reporters. And, aside from deaths recognized as civilians, terrorist “suspects” have never been tried in a court of law and found guilty.

The American public was mostly unaware of the role drones played during the Obama administration, and the use of them continued unabated. It remains to be seen what will happen under the Trump administration.

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Some sources for information in this column: *The Intercept*, *Der Spiegel*, *The Guardian*, the American Civil Liberties Union

Polly Mann is a co-founder of Women Against Military Madness, writes a regular column, and is a frequent contributor to the WAMM newsletter.

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The WAMM Ground All Drones Committee studies, educates, and acts against drone warfare. For further information, presentations to schools and community groups, other actions, and how to participate: see womenagainstmilitarymadness.org