

theguardian

America's murderous drone campaign is fuelling terror

Obama's escalation of a war that's already caused thousands of deaths will only destabilise his own allies and bolster al-Qaida



Seumas Milne
guardian.co.uk, Tuesday 29 May 2012 17:30 EDT



Illustration by Belle Mellor

More than a decade after George W Bush launched it, the "war on terror" was supposed to be winding down. US military occupation of Iraq has ended and Nato is looking for a way out of Afghanistan, even as the carnage continues. But another war – the undeclared drone war that has already killed thousands – is now being relentlessly escalated.

From Pakistan to Somalia, CIA-controlled pilotless aircraft rain down Hellfire missiles on an ever-expanding hit list of terrorist suspects – they have already killed hundreds, perhaps thousands, of civilians in the process.

At least 15 drone strikes have been launched in Yemen this month, as many as in the whole of the past decade, killing dozens; while in Pakistan, a string of US attacks has been launched against supposed "militant" targets in the past week, incinerating up to 35 people and hitting a mosque and a bakery.

The US's decision to step up the drone war again in Pakistan, opposed by both government and parliament in Islamabad as illegal and a violation of sovereignty, reflects its fury at the jailing of a CIA agent involved in the Bin Laden hunt and Pakistan's refusal to reopen supply routes for Nato forces in Afghanistan. Those routes were closed in protest at the US killing of 24 Pakistani soldiers last November, for which Washington still refuses to apologise.

Wajid Shamsul Hasan, Pakistan's high commissioner in London, describes the latest US escalation as "punitive". But then Predators and Reapers are Barack Obama's weapons of choice and coercion, deployed only on the territory of troublesome US allies, such as Pakistan and Yemen – and the drone war is Obama's war.

In his first two years in office, the US president more than tripled the number of attacks in Pakistan alone. For their US champions, drones have the advantage of involving no

American casualties, while targeting the "bad guys" Bush lost sight of in his enthusiasm to subjugate Iraq. Enthusiasts boast of their surgical accuracy and exhaustive surveillance, operated by all-seeing technicians from thousands of miles away in Nevada.

But that's a computer-game fantasy of clinical war. Since 2004, between 2,464 and 3,145 people are reported to have been killed by US drone attacks in Pakistan, of whom up to 828 were civilians (535 under Obama) and 175 children. Some Pakistani estimates put the civilian death toll much higher – plausibly, given the tendency to claim as "militants" victims later demonstrated to be nothing of the sort.

The US president insisted recently that the civilian death toll was not a "huge number". Not on the scale of Iraq, perhaps, where hundreds of thousands were killed; or Afghanistan, where tens of thousands have died. But they gruesomely include dozens killed in follow-up attacks after they had gone to help victims of earlier strikes – as well as teenagers like Tariq Khan, a 16-year-old Pakistani boy decapitated in a strike last November after he had travelled to Islamabad to protest against drones.

These killings are, in reality, summary executions and widely regarded as potential war crimes by international lawyers – including the UN's special rapporteur on extrajudicial killings, Philip Alston. The CIA's now retired counsel, John Rizzo, who authorised drone attacks, himself talked about having been involved in "murder".

A decade ago, the US criticised Israel for such "extrajudicial killings" but now claims self-defence in the war against al-Qaida. These are attacks, however, routinely carried out on the basis of false intelligence, in countries such as Pakistan where no war has been declared and without the consent of the elected government.

Lawyers representing victims' families are now preparing legal action against the British government – which carries out its own drone attacks in Afghanistan – for taking part in war crimes by passing GCHQ intelligence to the CIA for its "targeted killings". Parallel cases are also being brought against the Pakistani government and the drone manufacturer General Electric – whose slogan is "we bring good things to life".

Of course, drone attacks are only one method by which the US and its allies deliver death and destruction in Afghanistan and the wider Middle East, from night raids and air attacks to killing sprees on the ground. The day after last Friday's Houla massacre in Syria, eight members of one family were killed at home by a Nato air attack in eastern Afghanistan – one of many such atrocities barely registered in the western media.

But while support for the war in Afghanistan has fallen to an all-time low in all Nato states, the drone war is popular in the US. That's hardly surprising, as it offers no danger to American forces – the ultimate asymmetric warfare – while supposedly "taking out" terrorists. But these hi-tech death squads are creating a dangerous global precedent, which will do nothing for US security.

A decade ago, critics warned that the "war on terror" would spread terrorism rather than stamp it out. That is exactly what happened. Obama has now renamed the campaign "overseas contingency operations" and is switching the emphasis from boots on the ground to robots.

But, as the destabilisation of Pakistan and growth of al-Qaida in Yemen shows, the impact remains the same. The drone war is a predatory war on the Muslim world, which is feeding hatred of the US – and fuelling terror, not fighting it.

Twitter: @SeumasMilne

Comments

744 comments, displaying

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Rememberthedog

29 May 2012 10:40PM

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kristinekochanski

29 May 2012 10:43PM

Good article the drones are manufacturing jihadists.

[Recommend?](#) (584)

[Responses](#) (4)

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TempleCloud

29 May 2012 10:45PM

America's murderous drone campaign

That wouldn't be the Obama v Romney Drone would it?

[Recommend?](#) (44)

[Responses](#) (0)

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Rememberthedog

29 May 2012 10:47PM

Response to [kristinekochanski](#), 29 May 2012 10:43PM

Maybe. We'll just have to zap 'em all the faster, then.

Sooner or later they'll get the message. Unless, of course, they really are as stupid as you think they are.

[Recommend?](#) (361)

[Responses](#) (7)

[Report](#)

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Koolio

29 May 2012 10:48PM

These attacks feel cowardly but at the same time statements by Milne like "*The drone war is a predatory war on the Muslim world*" is shameful nonsense. The US is not launching war on Muslims, it is simply displaying extreme violence towards the slightest risk in Yemen, Afghanistan and Pakistan which is quite distinct to the lives of Muslims from Bradford to Bangladesh, Indonesia to Indiana.

[Recommend?](#) (474)

[Responses](#) (5)

[Report](#)

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PeaGreenMonster

29 May 2012 10:50PM

The invasion of Afghanistan, they really should have looked at what happened when Communist Russia invaded. Yes Communist Russia, they invaded people. Did I mention they were Communists?

[Recommend?](#) (71)

[Responses](#) (1)

[Report](#)

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Back to the article, yes, the US could have learned a lot from watching "The Battle of Algiers". Then again maybe the end result is exactly why George Bush's NWO paymasters decided to invade.



RichJames

29 May 2012 10:51PM

Obama has now renamed the campaign "overseas contingency operations"

Language is always the first casualty in war - people stop calling things what they really are: 'collateral damage', 'rendition', and now 'contingency operations'.

A cowardly operation; and one which has cost many civilians their lives, while increasing the allure of extremism.

That said, what is the viable alternative? There isn't one outlined in the article; but presumably, it would require deploying more soldiers on the ground. If not that, then what?

[Recommend?](#) (92)

[Responses](#) (4)

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TempleCloud

29 May 2012 10:52PM

Response to [kristinekochanski](#), 29 May 2012 10:43PM

Good article the drones are manufacturing jihadists

Yeah kristine. You're right it is a good article. The Drones and most of our other interventions manufacture jihadists. Why is that so technical that some commentators refuse to see the connection. It goes like this- drone strike kills family, a brother survives his dead family- mother and sisters and brother and father, he thinks "what was that?" Then he thinks "I want me some revenge." It ain't drones that make terrorists it is revenge that makes terrorists- Go Figure.

We just need to get arms manufacturers to sell the drones without the added extras like revenge and collateral damage and then we'd really be grooving- right Rememberthedog???

[Recommend?](#) (110)

[Responses](#) (3)

[Report](#)

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RichJames

29 May 2012 10:53PM

Response to [Koolio](#), 29 May 2012 10:48PM

The US is not launching war on Muslims

True. But how do people in the countries of Yemen and Pakistan see America's drone attacks? Surely, if they are only ever on the receiving end, they will perceive it as a war on themselves.

[Recommend?](#) (231)

[Responses](#) (3)

[Report](#)

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Accelerator

29 May 2012 10:54PM

"...the drone war is Obama's war"

[Recommend?](#) (111)

[Responses](#) (0)

[Report](#)

[Clip](#) | [Link](#)

Now that's change we can believe in !



Koolio

29 May 2012 10:56PM

[Recommend?](#) (146)

[Responses](#) (3)

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Response to [RichJames, 29 May 2012 10:53PM](#)

The "people" of Yemen and Pakistan can carry on their lives. Certainly some face the risks of cowardly US attacks but I'd venture they are still far more likely to die from disease, road accidents or extremist violence within their own country than from foreign military force.



TempleCloud

29 May 2012 10:56PM

[Recommend?](#) (210)

[Responses](#) (1)

[Report](#)

[Clip](#) | [Link](#)

Response to [Koolio, 29 May 2012 10:48PM](#)

These attacks feel cowardly but at the same time statements by Milne like "The drone war is a predatory war on the Muslim world" is shameful nonsense. The US is not launching war on Muslims, it is simply displaying extreme violence towards the slightest risk in Yemen, Afghanistan and Pakistan which is quite distinct to the lives of Muslims from Bradford to Bangladesh, Indonesia to Indiana.

Ok try this- The island nation of Mauritius feels a large risk of vanishing under the sea due to global warming. Identifying the major greenhouse gas emitters it sets about using drones to target their power generators and automobile manufacturers. In the process a lot of factory workers get killed. Is it ok to say they aren't really threatening americans, chinese or indians but just

displaying extreme violence towards the slightest risk of global warming??



CongestionCharge

29 May 2012 10:58PM

[Recommend?](#)

(230)

[Responses](#) (12)

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The drones are like something out of a Philip K. Dick novel; but if they allow the US to target terrorists, then they are a price worth paying . Seumas quite rightly compares them to the Israeli tactic of selective assassination, but fails to acknowledge that this strategy has worked very well. The whole point of terrorism is that you can live submerged in the civilian population while plotting and carrying out attacks on innocent men and women, at a time and place of your choosing. The drones rewrite the rules, and I wish they had been available in South Armagh twenty years ago.



kristinekochanski

29 May 2012 10:58PM

[Recommend?](#) (333)

[Responses](#) (1)

[Report](#)

[Clip](#) | [Link](#)

Response to [Rememberthedog, 29 May 2012 10:47PM](#)

For every one being zapped two will rise up because the drones are zapping innocent women & children as well.

I take it by zapping you mean killing?



jatrius

29 May 2012 10:58PM

Any justification for their use is lost in the indiscriminate killing they exhibit. If they were as clinical and forensic as when they were initially 'marketed' then there'd be less of a problem but these are a modern day Agent Orange that will come back and haunt successive generations of Americans should they ever return to their senses. The hatred that they create with their 'collateral damage' cannot be underestimated. People do not choose to have a terrorist living amongst them clandestinely.

[Recommend?](#) (122)

[Responses](#) (0)

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kristinekochanski

29 May 2012 11:01PM

Response to [CongestionCharge](#), 29 May 2012 10:58PM

"The drones rewrite the rules, and I wish they had been available in South Armagh twenty years ago."

Dear God you cannot be serious?

[Recommend?](#) (491)

[Responses](#) (1)

[Report](#)

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Koolio

29 May 2012 11:02PM

Response to [TempleCloud](#), 29 May 2012 10:56PM

We could swap metaphors and analogies all night. But I've merely expressed grave concern over Milne's silly "war on Muslims" phrase. This appears to be desperate hyperbole because the last time I checked Muslims in almost every country in the world except three are safe from drone attacks.

[Recommend?](#) (173)

[Responses](#) (2)

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Maurryan

29 May 2012 11:03PM

Drone war or not, those in Af-pak are already getting ready to celebrate America's defeat in its war against the Taliban and Al Qaeda.

[Recommend?](#) (49)

[Responses](#) (0)

[Report](#)

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kristinekochanski

29 May 2012 11:08PM

Response to [Koolio](#), 29 May 2012 11:02PM

Look at it from the point of view of a muslim who may be on the point of radicalisation - wherever in the world they live. What do all the victims of the drones have in common?

This is the point that Seamas is making. Regardless of the genuine questions about the legality of these extra-judicial killings, the moral case behind them, & the effects upon civilians

[Recommend?](#) (367)

[Responses](#) (4)

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- the use of them will not work in preventing violent attacks on the west arising.

It will increase it.



Error403

29 May 2012 11:12PM

Response to [Rememberthedog, 29 May 2012 10:47PM](#)

Sooner or later they'll get the message. Unless, of course, they really are as stupid as you think they are.

Unfortunately though, the "message" is falling on the ears of people who aren't so much stupid, as utterly regardless of their own lives in the pursuit of killing Americans. So no - they don't "get" the message; they get EVEN. And will, I would hazard a guess, continue to do so.

[Recommend?](#) (75)

[Responses](#) (0)

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CongestionCharge

29 May 2012 11:12PM

Response to [kristinekochanski, 29 May 2012 11:01PM](#)

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peacefulmilitant

29 May 2012 11:12PM

Seumas Milne

Hi-tech drone death squads are creating a dangerous global precedent, which will do nothing for US security

I read the entire piece but apart from the author's (predicable) fury I don't see even an attempt to articulate alternative strategy (for US security). Until a credible alternative emerges articles like the one above are little more than grandstanding. And one has to remember that Obama's (drone) strategy was once "*the alternative*".

[Recommend?](#) (165)

[Responses](#) (0)

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Orthus

29 May 2012 11:13PM

Who's in the lead, President Assad or President Obama? Who has killed more civilians?

[Recommend?](#) (170)

[Responses](#) (0)

[Report](#)

[Clip](#) | [Link](#)



Koolio

29 May 2012 11:18PM

Response to [kristinekochanski, 29 May 2012 11:08PM](#)

I agree with you in some respects. But if your argument holds Milne is playing into the same brainwashing nonsense used by

[Recommend?](#) (119)

[Responses](#) (2)

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those who try to recruit the vulnerable for their own violent means. A "predatory war on the Muslim world" is nonsense.



SmilingKnight

29 May 2012 11:19PM

[Recommend?](#) (69)

[Responses](#) (1)

[Report](#)

Response to [kristinekochanski, 29 May 2012 11:08PM](#)

the use of them will not work in preventing violent attacks on the west arising.

[Clip](#) | [Link](#)

How do you support this statement? It seems to have worked so far.

(Note that this is different from the legality and the ethical aspects of drone strikes, which should indeed be of great concern.)



peacefulmilitant

29 May 2012 11:21PM

[Recommend?](#)

(202)

[Responses](#) (1)

[Report](#)

Response to [RichJames, 29 May 2012 10:53PM](#)

But how do people in the countries of Yemen and Pakistan see America's drone attacks? Surely, if they are only ever on the receiving end, they will perceive it as a war on themselves.

[Clip](#) | [Link](#)

If the people of Pakistan are far more concerned with punishing a man how tried to help Americans track and kill OBL than the people who allowed (through complicity or incompetence) OBL to establish a domicile and base of operation just a few miles from the Pakistani capital then perhaps the war is to no small extent "on them".



Rouge77

29 May 2012 11:22PM

[Recommend?](#) (154)

[Responses](#) (1)

[Report](#)

US is not declaring war on Muslims? Remember the Pentagon officer who for years run officially sanctioned lecture series for US army officers where he, among others, declared that US needs to commit a "Hiroshima" against Islam and destroy Mecca and Medina with nuclear weapons.

[Clip](#) | [Link](#)



LabourStoleMyCash

29 May 2012 11:24PM

[Recommend?](#) (310)

[Responses](#) (4)

[Report](#)

The drone war is a predatory war on the Muslim world, which is feeding hatred of the US – and fuelling terror, not fighting it.

[Clip](#) | [Link](#)

Its a predatory war on a very small part of the Muslim world, the lunatic terrorist part. They've nothing else to do but fight for their nebulous cause. The US has little alternative, but to wipe out lunatics.



Rouge77

[Recommend?](#) (119)



29 May 2012 11:24PM

Responses (0)

Response to [Koolio](#), 29 May 2012 11:18PM

[Report](#)

Tell that Lt. Col. Matthew Dooley, who for years lectured a course at Joint Forces Staff College in Norfolk, Virginia, where he advocated just that and longed after a "Muslim Hiroshima".

[Clip](#) | [Link](#)



[Rouge77](#)

29 May 2012 11:25PM

[Recommend?](#) (186)

Responses (2)

Response to [LabourStoleMyCash](#), 29 May 2012 11:24PM

[Report](#)

US can stop interfering the business of other nations and stop supporting despots.

[Clip](#) | [Link](#)



[kristinekochanski](#)

29 May 2012 11:29PM

[Recommend?](#) (108)

Responses (0)

Response to [Koolio](#), 29 May 2012 11:18PM

[Report](#)

Understand what you are saying. You feel that the article could back up the arguments which are used by those who would use anything to turn muslim youth against the west.

[Clip](#) | [Link](#)

I see what you mean, but I can't deplore the article although I agree the language is florid.

You see I think he is spot on in what he says. In using drones to combat terrorism they are just pouring fuel onto the fire.



[Rememberthedog](#)

29 May 2012 11:30PM

Response to [TempleCloud](#), 29 May 2012 10:52PM

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[RichJames](#)

29 May 2012 11:32PM

[Recommend?](#) (110)

Responses (0)

Response to [peacefulmilitant](#), 29 May 2012 11:21PM

[Report](#)

Not sure what you're trying to say there. The populace of Pakistan are culpable for the crimes of a few individuals?

[Clip](#) | [Link](#)



[smallactsofdefiance](#)

29 May 2012 11:33PM

[Recommend?](#) (1)

Responses (0)

Sorry, hadn't seen the previous comments on that issue.

[Report](#)

[Clip](#) | [Link](#)



[Rememberthedog](#)

29 May 2012 11:34PM

[Recommend?](#) (88)

Responses (2)

Response to [kristinekochanski](#), 29 May 2012 10:58PM

[Report](#)

[Clip](#) | [Link](#)

I take it by zapping you mean killing?

You got it. They'll get the message sooner or later.



RichJames

29 May 2012 11:34PM

[Recommend?](#) (135)

[Responses](#) (0)

Response to [LabourStoleMyCash](#), 29 May 2012 11:24PM

[Report](#)

If you read the article again, I'm sure you will notice the section which details the hundreds of fatalities among civilians.

[Clip](#) | [Link](#)

Presumably their lives are of no consequence?



jiggerred

29 May 2012 11:35PM

Response to [CongestionCharge](#), 29 May 2012 10:58PM

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Theskysgoneout

29 May 2012 11:36PM

[Recommend?](#) (432)

[Responses](#) (0)

It's actually worse than that Seumas.

[Report](#)

Have a read of this -

[Clip](#) | [Link](#)

[U.S. drones targeting rescuers and mourners](#)

A three month investigation including eye witness reports has found evidence that at least 50 civilians were killed in follow-up strikes when they had gone to help victims. More than 20 civilians have also been attacked in deliberate strikes on funerals and mourners.

These are war crimes by any legal definition.



kristinekochanski

29 May 2012 11:37PM

[Recommend?](#) (178)

[Responses](#) (1)

Response to [Fainche](#), 29 May 2012 11:30PM

[Report](#)

Hi Fainche

[Clip](#) | [Link](#)

I don't understand the legality of it - if the US was sending soldiers in to a country which was nominally an ally to kill terrorists but blow up mosques & bakeries & kill little boys at the same time there would be hell to pay.

But using drones no one seems to be responsible. It's Alice in Wonderland stuff & I hope the legal actions Seamas refers to brings in some kind of framework over their use.



kristinekochanski

29 May 2012 11:39PM

[Recommend?](#) (58)

[Responses](#) (0)

Response to [Rememberthedog](#), 29 May 2012 11:34PM

[Report](#)

So will we.

[Clip](#) | [Link](#)



stilt

29 May 2012 11:40PM

The trouble with the US drones is that they do not only kill terrorists but also innocent civilians. There is linkage here with the rightful condemnation of the killing of children in Syria. The first line of Assad's defence it was 'the terrorists' that did it, or on other occasions 'collateral damage', the same argument that the West's uses in the Middle East. This is not equating the West's policies with that of the Hereditary Republic of Syria, and also we should not forget that there are possibly/probably Islamic fanatics fighting with the divided Syrian Opposition. The West's representatives, including Foreign Secretary Hague and Sec. of State Clinton, should be much more aware in public of the death of civilians in fighting terrorism if they are to be successful in counteracting charges of hypocrisy, particularly in the Islamic world.

[Recommend?](#) (60)

[Responses](#) (2)

[Report](#)

[Clip](#) | [Link](#)



CanYouFlyBobby

29 May 2012 11:40PM

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Fainche

29 May 2012 11:42PM

Response to [kristinekochanski](#), 29 May 2012 11:37PM

kristinekochanski

29 May 2012 11:37PM

Response to Fainche, 29 May 2012 11:30PM

Hi Fainche

I don't understand the legality of it - if the US was sending soldiers in to a country which was nominally an ally to kill terrorists but blow up mosques & bakeries & kill little boys at the same time there would be hell to pay.

But using drones no one seems to be responsible. It's Alice in Wonderland stuff & I hope the legal actions Seamas refers to brings in some kind of framework over their use.

Hullo and long time no see

I don't believe that the US are remotely concerned with legality, they continue to wage war without impunity trotting out the tired argument of 'security' as an excuse. It's a sanitised form of murder, makes it easier for those who champion their use to promote them, and, as you say, accept no responsibility for the damage incurred.

[Recommend?](#) (150)

[Responses](#) (1)

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**SeumasMilne**

29 May 2012 11:44PM



No, Koolio, I didn't say that the US is launching a "war on Muslims". I said the drone war is a "predatory war on the Muslim world" - which is a very different thing, and as good as unanswerable.

The drone war is being or has been waged in Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia and Libya. What do all those countries have in common? And that it's a predatory war is surely hard to contest.

But I've never believed or said that the US has bombed and invaded Muslim countries because they are Muslim - however much it might have looked like that, especially under Bush.

The US conflict with the Arab and Muslim world developed because of western determination to control the Middle East first of all - yes, because of oil primarily - by military intervention and supporting client dictatorships.

Al-Qaida-style terror was one response to that (fuelled by western support for the anti-Soviet war in Afghanistan), which in turn triggered the war on terror, and invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan. Islam has been a mobilising force in the resistance to that onslaught - but it isn't the cause or target of it.

Richjames asks what the alternative to the drone war or the earlier occupation phase of the war on terror might be.

As opponents of the invasion of Afghanistan argued a decade ago, address those causes of conflict (end military intervention and stop propping up tyranny and occupations across the region, including Israel's) -and respond to genuine terrorist acts with police action, rather than military aggression and occupation. As I said in the article, the war on terror only generates more of it.

[Recommend?](#)

(504)

[Responses \(10\)](#)[Report](#)[Clip](#) | [Link](#)**Generian**

29 May 2012 11:44PM

Response to [Rouge77, 29 May 2012 11:22PM](#)

@Rouge77

destroy Mecca and Medina with nuclear weapons.

They would not need to use nuclear weapons, a few Daisy Cutters would do the job quite effectively.

[Recommend?](#) (60)[Responses \(1\)](#)[Report](#)[Clip](#) | [Link](#)**kristinekochanski**

29 May 2012 11:49PM

Response to [Fainche, 29 May 2012 11:42PM](#)

What is disappointing is that it is Obama who is behind all this. I never had any great expectations of him but sending out mechanised soldiers to commit extra judicial killings of civilians was not really what I anticipated.

[Recommend?](#) (140)[Responses \(0\)](#)[Report](#)[Clip](#) | [Link](#)

The extremism of America is going to keep the war on terror alive for them because there is going to be a lot more terror.

I assume that is useful to them. They are all bonkers & I want no part of it.



PeaGreenMonster

29 May 2012 11:55PM

Response to [SeumasMilne, 29 May 2012 11:44PM](#)

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bigOther

29 May 2012 11:55PM

3-4 targets for each civilian. Sounds pretty good to me by most war standards.

3-4 targets for 0-5 civilians: excellent

3-4 targets for 6-10 civilians: very good

3-4 targets for 11-15 civilians: average

3-2 targets for 16-20 civilians: poor...

...the banality of life of the moral cretins who descend upon these threads.

[Recommend?](#)

(230)

[Responses \(0\)](#)

[Report](#)

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CaveBloke

30 May 2012 12:00AM

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horacemanoor

30 May 2012 12:01AM

Obama's glib but he's as shallow as Bush -- he has no idea that he's laying the groundwork for disaster. Americans in general are living in a dreamworld: they fail to grasp that in being citizens of the biggest debtor nation on earth they have nowhere to go but down the drain.

[Recommend?](#) (45)

[Responses \(0\)](#)

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