Drones: Sanitizing the “War on Terror” in Yemen

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Abstract

In a public Congressional Hearing in 2013, Farea al-Muslimi, a Yemeni activist, testified to the horrors of the drone strikes conducted by the US in Yemen. Yet the story of death and destruction that he presented was vastly different from the sterilized images created by the Obama administration's officials. By analysing the rhetoric of drones in political speeches and the reasons for choosing drones as the "weapon of choice", this thesis identifies how the rhetoric and use of drone warfare has sanitized the "War on Terror" in Yemen looks at the effects and implications of this.

Table of Contents

Introduction

"…when they think of America, they think of the terror they feel from the drones that hover over their heads, ready to fire missiles at any time. What the violent militants had previously failed to achieve, one drone strike accomplished in an instant."

– Farea al-Muslimi, (United States. Cong. Senate).

The striking quote above was made at the Senate Hearing that took place on April 23, 2013. It marked the first, and only as of yet, opportunity whereby a Yemeni has been publically able to testify to the negative experiences of the US drone strikes in his country. In his testimony, al-Muslimi discusses the deaths of children, pregnant women and civilians and "bodies [that] were so decimated", as a result of the drone strikes which rendered him "helpless" (United States. Cong. Senate). He brings up the horrors and terror caused by the drone strikes being conducted in Yemen in the "War on Terror".

This war, waged after the collapse of the Twin Towers on September 11th 2001, has taken the US to military operations in Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan and Yemen, amongst other places. Shortly after 9/11, the Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF) was signed, allowed the President to, "use all necessary and appropriate force against those nations, organizations, or persons he determines planned, authorized, committed, or aided the terrorist attacks that occurred on September 11, 2001" ("Authorization for Use of Military Force").

Therefore, when I speak of the “War on Terror”, I refer to the military actions taken, under the legal sanction of the AUMF. I include military operations outside of the arena of violence, such as Yemen where drone strikes are conducted despite not being in conflict with the US. Thus, the “War on Terror” in Yemen refers to the counterterrorism efforts by the US against al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).

For the Obama Administration, drones have been the “appropriate force” and have become the “weapon of choice”. The first drone strike in Yemen against AQAP, took place in 2002, after which there were no known strikes reported until 2009. Since then, there have been between 95 and 115 confirmed drone strikes in Yemen (Bureau of Investigative Journalism). The weapon was chosen because it poses a zero-risk for US personnel, offers precise targeting, does not require resources and personnel in a foreign country and enables better surveillance (Byman 32-37).

From this description, there is a discrepancy between al-Muslimi and the United States’ experience of drone strikes. While al-Muslimi is an eye-witness to the negative impact of drone strikes and describes the ensuing destruction and deaths, the American officials describe an economically and politically viable tactic which acts with precision and minimizes the grievances of war. In other words, the bureaucrats describe a sanitized war- a war washed clean of the blood of victims, sterilized by the use of unmanned aerial vehicles and disinfected from the horrors of previous wars. Through their rhetoric as well as the use of drone strikes, the “War on Terror” in Yemen, according to their Administration, has become purified and consequently, justified.

This thesis argues that the political rhetoric concerning drones attempts to make the “War on Terror” appear sanitary, in order to minimize scrutiny for military operations. Moreover, the technological nature of drones also contributes to the cleansing process. However, due to the unequal power relations between the technologically advanced America and the less technologically advanced Yemen, this sterilizing process is one sided. Not only does the US have the technological capacity to wage a war over Yemeni skies without threat of retaliation, but they do so without considering the voices of Yemenis, who are being targeted by drones. Thus, while the US experiences a conflict refined of the damaging consequences of war, Yemen continues to face war’s tragedies. Al-Muslimi’s speech tries to reason with the US authorities that the horrors and atrocities of war still exist with the use of drones.

This thesis will study the rhetoric and use of drone strikes in order to understand how they have sanitized the “War on Terror” in Yemen. This topic was considered in the broader context of the question of deconstruction and intervention in the Middle East. The term deconstruction was coined by Jacques Derrida, and is a form of literary criticism which seeks to identify the how the “internal logic of the text subverts itself” (Bell, 7). The second term, intervention, refers to the state of involving oneself to attain certain goals. The Middle East has historically been subject to military, cultural, financial and humanitarian interventions, which have had major affects on the stability of the region.

This thesis will look at the drone strikes as a military intervention by the US in Yemen. My research will contribute to the discourse on drone strikes, by discussing the sanitizing

process in Yemen, a topic which has received little attention. It will analyse and deconstruct six speeches concerning drones by American officials.

Despite the lack of coverage on this topic, it is still relevant. With the increasingly interconnected nature of today's world, the events in Yemen will have regional and global repercussions. For example, as one of the few states to use drone strikes in conflict, the manner how the US conducts drone strikes will set standards for the future use of drones in conflict, as more countries seek to acquire them. The current conduct surrounding the US drone strikes in Yemen is worrisome for Rosa Brooks, the law professor and member of the New America Foundation. Brooks argues that the ability to kill an unknown person in a different country, for unknown reasons with consent from an unknown person is a danger to everyone if no international legal perimeters are built (United States. Cong. Senate). Clearly, how drones are used in Yemen today will have future implications for the use of drones elsewhere by other actors.

In this thesis, I discuss the current literature concerning sanitization and the controversies of drone strikes for a better understanding of the topic. In what follows, I analyze the official rhetoric on drones in six key speeches. By deconstructing the speeches, I show how the rhetoric discussing drones attempts to cleanse the "War on Terror", by using sanitized lexicon, morally excluding drone targets, and emphasizing the strengths and legality of drones. The next chapter considers how the use of drones contributes to the sterilizing process on the "War on Terror" in Yemen. It discusses the strategic value drones provide, the similarities with war video games and the process of dehumanization and how these make the war in Yemen sanitary. Finally, this thesis discusses the effects and implications of the US attempting to sanitize the "War on Terror" in Yemen. This will provide an answer to the question: How does the rhetoric and use of drone

warfare attempt to sanitize the “War on Terror” in Yemen, and what are its effects and implications?

Chapter 1: Literature Review

Sanitizing War

Human history is stained with the blood of wars. Regardless of the incentive for fighting, the resulting horrors have been the same – death and destruction. But it was during the Battle on Telegraph Hill that Robert E. Lee, the commander of the Confederate Army in the American Civil War, allegedly whispered, “it is well that war is so terrible – lest we should grow too fond of it” (Levin). His intention was to say that the realities of war – the death, grief, trauma and destruction, make war something to be avoided and ended. And yet there is a pattern in history, whereby wars have been portrayed as less terrible, justifiable, heroic and even ideal (Blaire, Balthrop and Michel 6). They have been washed clean to conceal the horrors of war. This is what, in a study of war memorials, Carole Blair, William Balthrop and Neil Michel describe as sanitizing war, which involves, “denying war’s violence and/or camouflaging its consequences” (14).

The Vietnam War veteran, Raymond Scurfield fears that, just as in previous wars, future wars will be laundered their horrors (510). This implies that there is an existing history of sanitization of conflicts which continues.

The reason wars are persistently disinfected is because it legitimizes military action (Blaire, Balthrop and Michel 15). The Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, Chris Hedges, corroborates this argument and takes it a step further, arguing that it not only legitimizes military force, but that it is responsible for waging new wars (Hedges), implying that wars may be intentionally depurated to justify military action. Sue Tait, a lecturer of Communication,

Journalism and Media Studies, also argues that concealing the violence of war "serves the interests of those who make war" (97). These ideas differ from the foreign affairs journalist, Bob Deans, and Scurfield's accounts of sanitization, which suggest that wars are sterilized either unintentionally or unconsciously. Yet, the sociologist, Charles Gattone, who researches media and public opinion, describes how the mainstream media was employed to keep favourable images of the United States' foreign policies on display for the public to influence public opinion (194). By using "favourable images," the media glamourized the policies, so as to keep public support for the policies. Thus the media was intentionally used to sanitize and justify political actions, corroborating that wars are sterilized intentionally.

Types of Sanitization

But how is war sanitized? In his dissertation for a Ph. D in philosophy, Brian Zindel discusses the use of technologically advanced weapons in American postmodern war. He asserts that although the main purpose of weapons in war is to kill, there is a continued persistence to distract people from the killing aspect (Zindel 6). He describes this distraction as a, "culturally produced set of "invisibilities" in war" which, "render the act of killing unseen, unreal, unaddressed: invisible" (Zindel 6-7). In other words, the blood and death in war is concealed to hide the consequences of conflict. Zindel identifies six ways that war is rendered "invisible."

The first step towards the "invisibilities" of war is through the normalization of violence in society (Zindel 7). Zindel says video games desensitize people to violence, making it more socially acceptable (7). Ian Shaw, who studies the political geographies of drone warfare, discusses how the line between videogames and real wars is being blurred (790). This is another

form of sanitization as it renders the realities of war as unreal, and makes people desensitized to it, as Deans argued (11). Likewise, blogger Joseph Young connects drone warfare to war video games and argues that it sanitizes war.

The next step Zindel mentions is the replacement of human participation and decision-making in war with technology (7). William Marra and Sonia McNeil, of Harvard Law School, discuss the potential of drones to become autonomous, which will pull humans out of decision-making on the battlefield (Marra and McNeil 2). Although humans are still involved with drones for interpreting data, performing risk assessments and making decisions, improvements in drone technology will enable drones to operate without human intervention (Marra and McNeil 4). But because technology is not capable of understanding emotions or morality, killing will become easier. Moreover, because humans will not be involved in the killing process, they will be removed from the gruesome deaths, making technological warfare seem cleaner.

Thirdly, the travesties of war are made invisible by the political rhetoric which replaces the graphic realities of battle with “user friendly” words, in order to minimize the depiction of violence for the public (Zindel 7). Zindel, sociologist Edward Tiryakian and Deans mention disinfected phrases, such as “collateral damage,” “friendly fire,” “smart bombs,” and “neutralized targets,” which cover-up and conceal violence, and make war seem pleasant rather than traumatic (Zindel 7, Tiryakian 415, Deans 10). Dean argues that this clean language in war reporting led to a “desensitization process” (11), where people were unaffected by the horrors of the war and regarded the war coverage as mere entertainment (12).

The fourth step of sanitizing war is through overlooking an individual’s experience of killing (Zindel 7). Scurfield discusses how after the first Gulf War, the horrors of the operation

were continually silenced (506). Veterans downplayed the seriousness of war, giving the appearance that the horrors experienced never happened (506).

Following this, Zindel discusses how the technological successes of weaponry overshadow their utility to kill, thus removing the killing aspect from conflict (7). Scurfield's opinion slightly differs from Zindel in this aspect. Rather than discussing the success of weaponry and ignoring their utility to kill, Scurfield argues that modern weapons are discussed as though they were more humane killers (508). This makes the weapons used sound friendlier, even though they still kill.

Lastly, Zindel argues that the "virtual representation of death," through technological weapons, conceals the reality that the deaths on a screen are real lives (8). Keith Shurtleff, an army chaplain, is concerned that technology enables people to, "see the enemy not as humans but as blips on a screen" (qtd. in "What are Drones?"). Zindel calls this the "vanishing human subject" (8). This transforms the reality of killing as unreal and less significant.

Zindel's six points are limited to the scope of technology in war. Sarah Maltby, a professor for Media and Communications, identifies censorship as another method of sanitizing. She discusses the codes for broadcasting graphic images of violence in the media. The code of "taste and decency" censors offensive images in the media, while trying to avoid sanitizing the realities of the violence (Maltby 292-93). Tait argues this the code protects the public from graphic images but also, "conceal the carnage of war from public view" (92). Thus, the codes of censorship hide the horrors of war. Maltby believes that it is important to inform the viewers of the realities of war and its violence, so as not to glamorize war (293), which is dangerous (297).

Controversies over the "Weapon of Choice"

According the Daniel Byman, a professor of Security Studies who worked with the 9/11 Commission, drones are, "the centerpiece of US counterterrorism strategy" (32). Because having "boots on the ground has become a politically toxic" (Cronin 44), drones can be used to exercise military operations without having resources in foreign countries. Drones are therefore the weapon of choice for the Obama Administration in the "War on Terror" in Yemen.

Although drone warfare offers many advantages over other types of warfare, they also raise many criticisms (Bergen and Rothenberg 1). Most of the criticisms of drones are regarding the legality, moral legitimacy and strategic effectiveness of drone strikes (Vasko, "Solemn Geographies of Human Limits" 84). The following section will discuss the controversies of drone strikes present in drone discourse, looking at the legal, ethical and strategic effectiveness arguments.

There is much debate concerning the legality of drone strikes amongst politicians and legal experts. Tara McKelvey, a journalist who reports on national-security issues, discusses how the US Department of State's legal advisor, Harold Koh, publicly discusses the legal basis for drone strikes (187). Speeches by key American officials also argue that drone strikes are legal (see Koh, Johnson, Holder and Obama). Chris Downes opposes their stance, arguing that targeted killings by drone strikes have no legal basis (292). Signature strikes in particular have also raised questions. Clinton Watts, a Senior Fellow with the Program on National Security, and Frank Cilluffo, the director of the Homeland Security Policy Institute, who normally take a

pro-drone stance, admit that the legality of signature strikes is questionable (7). However, the former US airman, Charles Blanchard, disagrees, arguing that signature strikes abide by the Principles of Distinction and Proportionality in International Humanitarian Law, and are therefore legal (123). But his supporting evidence is weak – mentioning that Obama claimed to abide by these principles. Michael Boyle, an adviser on the Obama Administration's counterterrorism expert group, disagrees that drones act under the principle of distinction, as the US has defined "militants" as any military-aged male in a strike zone, making any male a potential target, and not a civilian (7). Thus civilian military-aged males are not distinguished from militants and the principle of distinction is not followed.

But regardless of the debate on the legality of drone strikes, both advocates and opponents of drone strikes call for more transparency. Byman and the associate professor of law, Markus Wagner, argue that a legal framework for using drone strikes should be created (Byman 41, Wagner 1412), and Watts and Cilluffo believe that there should be more transparency and accountability for drone operations, with a panel to review strikes (9-10). Boyle also calls for an increase the transparency of drone strikes, the development of internationally accepted rules for drone usage (28).

Drone strikes have also raised ethical questions. The most predominant criticism is regarding civilian casualties in drone attacks. Byman, Watts and Cilluffo argue that drone warfare has fewer civilian casualties compared to alternative measures such as a military intervention (Byman 32, Watts and Cilluffo 5-7). Watts and Cilluffo argue that drones can target with "surgical" precision, and avoid civilian casualties (5). Alternatively, Kevin Watkins, Rebecca Winthrop and Akbar Ahmed, Senior Fellows at the Brookings Institution, and Boyle,

focus on civilian casualties as a key disincentive for drone warfare. Boyle believes that the argument that drone strikes minimize civilian casualties is a myth (3). He argues that the US classifies casualty information, concealing the true civilian casualty numbers (Boyle 5). While Boyle says that the US underestimates the number of casualties (6), Byman believes that the reported casualty rates are overestimated (37).

Ahmed and Boyle go further and discuss the human cost, beyond loss of life, for those living under the threat of drone strikes. Ahmed discusses the trauma from the buzzing noise made by drones ("How the 'War on Terror' Became a War on 'Tribal Islam'") and the t terror it causes (*The Thistle and the Drone* 2). Boyle argues that drones have spread fear and anxiety and have disrupted economic and social activity such as education (19).

Another ethical criticism is that drones dehumanize people by objectifying them and making them indistinguishable (Wall and Monahan 246-247). Dehumanization refers to the denial of humanness to others (Haslam 252, Kelman 48, Ames and Mason 32, Sanford and Comstock 5, Duster 27), and is linked to the changing nature of modern warfare (Bernard, Ottenberg and Redl 104). Drones turn people into coordinates on a map, dehumanizing them to mere data figures (Wall and Monahan 247).

There are also disagreements over the strategic effectiveness of drones as a weapon. Watkins and Winthrop and Boyle argue that drones create new enemies, generating enmity against America (Watkins and Winthrop 1, Boyle 3). Byman opposes this, arguing that the aforementioned anger is disproportionately represented by anti-drone organizations who select certain victims for their stories (39).

There are also some scholars who, although not necessarily against drone warfare, argue that it is not enough as the sole strategy in counterterrorism (Watkins and Winthrop 3, Lin 28, Ahmed “How the ‘War on Terror’ Became a War on ‘Tribal Islam’”). Kanhong Lin, from the American Red Cross in New York, believes that for every drone strike in Yemen, schools should be built and that the US policy in Yemen should be a comprehensive initiative which contributes to developing civil society and infrastructure in order to combat some of their broader issues faced (28). Watkins and Winthrop support the need for a comprehensive counterterrorism strategy to improve the Yemeni economy and education system (4).

This review of the current discourse on sanitization and drones sets the stage for my research and equips me with tools to better understand the sanitization process, which this thesis can utilize.

Based on Blaire, Balthrop and Michel, Hedges and Tait’s argument that wars are washed clean intentionally in order to legitimize military action, this thesis will consider that the “War on Terror” in Yemen is intentionally cleaned. Furthermore, Zindel’s methods of sanitization give incite to how the “War on Terror” is made sanitary. His points on political rhetoric and the virtual representation of death are particularly useful. Additionally, the legal, ethical and strategic controversy of drone strikes sets the context on drones, which will be referred to when discussing how the rhetoric and use of drones make war sanitary.

Chapter 2: The Rhetoric of Drones

Despite having a stronger, larger and more technologically advanced military, the US discovered in Vietnam that this was not enough to win the war. American public opinion played decisive role in the outcome of the war. Even today, Brennan recognizes that American counterterrorism operations are, “stronger and more sustainable when the American people understand and support them,” and vice versa (“The Ethics and Efficacy of the President’s Counterterrorism Strategy”).

As highlighted in the previous chapter, wars are purified through political jargon (Zindel 7). The American political rhetoric concerning drones is constructed and purposed to sanitize and justify drone warfare and maintain public support. It is evident, looking at key drone policy speeches made by US officials, that the rhetoric used attempts to cleanse the “War on Terror”.

In what follows, I consider six major speeches made by US officials in the Obama Administration. The first speech, made by the US Department of State’s legal adviser, Harold Koh, discussed US drone policy in relation to international law. He argues that the drone strikes’ legal basis is the AUMF, and that they comply with the principles of distinction and proportionality (Koh). Next, John Brennan, the Chief advisor for counterterrorism, discussed the guiding principles of America’s counterterrorism framework, for keeping the US secure from al-Qaeda. The third speech, by Attorney General Eric Holder in March 2012, discussed targeted killings and the successes of counterterrorism efforts. Fourthly, in April 2012 Brennan made another speech regarding the successes of the American counterterrorism strategy and why drones are a “wise choice” of weapons (“The Ethics and Efficacy of the President’s

Counterterrorism Strategy"). The response of Senator Lindsey Graham at the Senate Judiciary Committee Hearing in May 2012 is also considered. He discusses the necessity of pre-emption. And lastly, President Obama's speech on US counterterrorism policy on 23 May 2013, made after he signed the Presidential Policy Guidelines is considered.

By analyzing these speeches, this thesis shows how the Obama Administration's rhetoric concerning drones tries to justify and sanitize the drone warfare. The rhetoric is contrasted to the Yemeni experiences of drone strikes to show that war has not actually been sanitized.

Sanitized Lexicon

Deans discusses the "sanitized lexicon" used in reporting news on the first Gulf War. He argues that certain vocabulary was used in "substitute for the brutal facts of combat" (Deans 11). But using these "soft words… [to describe] hard combat" created a delusionary image of the Gulf War, ignoring the human suffering (Deans 11). The jargon created "air-brushed images of the conflict" and thus tidied the war (Dean 12).

Likewise, throughout the speeches, the language is softened in order to disinfect any graphic images triggered by certain words. For example, rather than using the word "drone," which has received much scrutiny and is associated with destruction and airstrikes, the speeches prefer to call it other names. Koh mentions the "unmanned aerial vehicle" and Obama and Brennan speak of a "remotely piloted aircraft", which are less associated with drone strikes (Koh, Obama, and Brennan, "The Ethics and Efficacy of the President's Counterterrorism Strategy"). Brennan mentions "technologically advanced weapons", suggesting a progressive and modern weapon ("The Ethics and Efficacy of the President's Counterterrorism Strategy").

These weapons, they describe, are used to “dismantle networks” (Obama), with “surgical precision” (Brennan, “The Ethics and Efficacy of the President’s Counterterrorism Strategy”). This creates a neat picture of the fight against al-Qaeda, and avoids describing the messy destruction caused by strikes.

Yet, in al-Muslimi’s account, he describes the strike which targeted al-Ma’jalah, a village in the South of Yemen, which killed over 40 civilians. According to al-Muslimi, the remains of the bodies were “decimated” to the extent that it was impossible to distinguish between humans and animals killed (United States. Cong. Senate). This description does not display the “surgical precision” that Brennan described, but rather a bloody and careless strike that killed many lives.

Moreover, when discussing the deaths of drone strike victims, Koh says the “loss of civilian life” (Koh), rather than using the word “death”, which invokes disconcerting sentiments. Moreover, “loss of civilian life”, suggests unintentionally losing something, as though it were out of their control. However, the civilian deaths from strikes, while possibly unintentional, were in the control of those authorizing the strike. By phrasing their sentence in this way, they remove responsibility of the civilian deaths from themselves.

Brennan also mentions conducting “targeted strikes” rather than, “targeted killings” (“The Ethics and Efficacy of the President’s Counterterrorism Strategy”). This avoids the word “killing” and the imagery of murder and assassination associated with it.

Additionally, while discussing victims of drone strikes, the officials refer to “militant” or “civilian” casualties. But when discussing al-Qaeda’s victims, Brennan calls them “innocents – […] men, women and children” (“The Ethics and Efficacy of the President’s Counterterrorism Strategy”). While victims of American drones are de-socialized, AQAP’s victims are given gender and social identities. This makes the drone victims’ deaths less tragic than the “innocent” women and children killed by AQAP, making America’s victims less serious than AQAP’s.

But the “civilian” victims of drone strikes in Yemen have social identities too. Al-Muslimi mentions the mother whose 18 year old son was killed, and the father, who’s four and six year old children died. By placing these casualties back in their social context, their deaths become more fully appreciated. These are just two examples of the many “civilians,” who had social value and importance too.

Moral Excluding the Enemy

Another way in which the rhetoric used by officials sanitizes the “War on Terror” is through morally excluding the enemy. Moral exclusion theory is defined as the situation, “when individuals or groups are perceived as outside the boundary in which moral values, rules and considerations of fairness apply” (qtd. in Martı´n-Pen˜a and Opotow 134). Opotow, the founder of moral exclusion theory, along with Janet Gerson and Sarah Woodside, argue that those who lie within the moral boundaries of fairness are morally included and deserve fair treatment, but those outside of the boundary are excluded and are suited for “deprivation and exploitation” (305).

These speeches create a security narrative, which allows the officials to justify creating an enemy. They create the enemy by contrasting them with the US, and using the simplified

narrative of ‘good vs. evil’. This then allows AQAP to be morally excluded, so that their deaths are devaluated and are not a tragedy but a good thing. This disinfects their deaths and helps justify the “War on Terror”.

Certain words and ideas continue to appear in these policy speeches, which help create a security narrative. The idea of al-Qaeda and its affiliates being an “imminent threat” arises (Holder). Even Koh discusses the “imminence of the threat” posed. This justifies the call for action. This imminent threat creates an issue of “grave national security threats” (Holder), whereby al-Qaeda is “plotting to murder Americans” (Holder), and are a “threat to the American people” (Obama). In the light of this “hour of danger” (Holder) and the “ongoing and evolving threat” (Brennan, “Strengthening our Security by Adhering to our Values and Laws”), the President has the responsibility to protect American citizens (Obama, Holder, Brennan, “Strengthening our Security by Adhering to our Values and Laws”) and keep the US “safe” (Brennan, “The Ethics and Efficacy of the President’s Counterterrorism Strategy”). There is a continual reference to a security issue that the US is facing and must respond to.

To respond to this imminent threat, pre-emption is argued to be the best tactic. Holder argues that the US will not wait for al-Qaeda’s plans to unfold (Holder). Senator Graham also argues that, “it’s better to hit them before they hit you” (United States. Cong. Senate). Even President Obama says that al-Qaeda would try to, “kill as many Americans as they could if we did not stop them first” (Obama). This brings forward the idea that as part of a defense, the US must strike first to prevent any attacks.

Between these notions of an imminent security threat and the necessity of pre-emptive self-defense, a story is created. This story places the US in a position where it must respond to

al-Qaeda's threat. The narrative therefore justifies the necessity to wage war on al-Qaeda and its affiliates.

But Al-Muslimi believes that Hammad al-Radmi, the target of the drone strike in Wassab, was not an imminent threat and could have been captured instead (United States. Cong. Senate). Such cases suggest the "imminent threat" may not be fully sincere. It appears that the speeches inflate the threat in the security narrative.

In this context of a security threat, AQAP is made into the enemy. The rhetoric in the speeches differentiates the "terrorists," who "offer injustice, disorder and destruction," from the US, who fight for "freedom, fairness, equality, hope and opportunity" (Brennan, "Strengthening our Security by Adhering to our Values and Laws"). This binary moral opposition bares resemblance to the 'Axis of Evil' Speech made by President Bush, which constructs a binary image of 'good vs. evil'.

Al-Qaeda is described as "violent extremists" (Obama) with a "murderous cause" (Brennan, "The Ethics and Efficacy of the President's Counterterrorism Strategy"). They are called a "cancerous tumor" (Brennan, "The Ethics and Efficacy of the President's Counterterrorism Strategy"), creating an image of a deadly threat which, if not removed, will spread, and justifies any action against it. The US, on the other hand, is said to maintain their "cherished values" and "sacred principles" (Holder). Because of these values, Obama claims that there must be "near-certainty that no civilians will be killed or injured – the highest standard we can set", suggesting that they are concerned with the safety of civilians (Obama). But he does not say there needs to be full-certainty, implying that there does *not* need to be any certainty. This makes the US sound more responsible than they are acting.

These speeches make al-Qaeda the ‘evil’ enemy. Interestingly, Senator Graham says, “don’t become the enemy” (United States. Cong. Senate), implying that one should not act in a way that displeases the US. However, it appears that the US is also able to make someone an enemy through their rhetoric. Nonetheless, by emphasizing who is the enemy, it justifies actions against them.

But perhaps this ‘good vs. evil’ binary opposition is not as black and white as it is portrayed to be in the sanitized version of the “War on Terror”. In a striking statement, al-Muslimi says, “What the violent militants had previously failed to achieve, one drone strike accomplished in an instant” (United States. Cong. Senate). His statement implies that the drone operations by the ‘good’ US caused more terror than the actions of the ‘evil’ AQAP. This questions the black and white image painted of the “War on Terror”, and shows that the story is not as simple as it is being portrayed to be by the officials.

Moreover, on 24 October 2011, the father and of the teenage Mohammed Tuaiman al-Jahmi, was killed in a drone strike (Bureau of Investigative Journalism “Yemen: Reported US Cover actions 2015”), leaving his family without a bread winner (Madlena, Patchett and Shamsan). Al-Jahmi was later killed in a drone strike on 26 January 2015 (Bureau of Investigative Journalism “Yemen: Reported US Cover actions 2015”, Greenwald). According to the reports, no compensation or explanation was given for their deaths (Madlena, Patchett and Shamsan). While the US, who stands for “fairness” according to Brennan, took away the provider of al-Jahmi’s family, AQAP supported the family (Madlena, Patchett and Shamsan).

This Yemeni experience of a drone strikes questions the ‘good vs. evil’ narrative that is used to justify drone strikes. Are AQAP “violent extremists” and do they actually pose an

“imminent threat”? – Clearly from the Charlie Hebdo attack in France in January 2015, which AQAP claimed responsibility for, AQAP does intend to attack the liberal West. But they also have shown compassion to this family and perhaps are not only the murderers that the American rhetoric portrayed them to be.

The rhetoric creates the enemy in the context of a security narrative, making the deaths of AQAP members “necessary” and, “acceptable,” because they are morally excluded and no longer require fair and moral treatment. AQAP members are also striped of their humaneness, for example, by ignoring their compassion towards the al-Jahmi family and describing them as “murderous” with violent aspirations. Therefore their deaths need not be lamented, and the “War on Terror” is justified. But every death should be a tragedy – whether soldier, militant or civilian. Kelman believes that, “to perceive others as fully human means to be saddened by the death of every single person” (49). But by making AQAP the “evil” other, their AQAP deaths become tolerable, and even something that must actively be sought out and destroyed. In other words, the death of a militant becomes not just tolerable, but good. Thus, killing is turned into something good and is washed clean of its blood.

Selling the Successes

Another way the rhetoric in the speeches conceals the destructiveness of drone strikes is by highlighting the successes of strikes. In doing so, they keep attention on the admirable aspects of drones while distracting from the resulting deaths.

These speeches attempt to justify drone strikes by arguing that drones save lives. President Obama states that, “strikes have saved lives,” meaning that they have protected

American lives (Obama). Holder argues that drones can minimize the number of casualties (Holder), as they are more precise than regular missiles (Obama). This renders drone warfare unblemished, by claiming that drones protect lives and ignoring that they take lives. It contributes to legitimizing drone tactics.

But the drone strikes in Yemen have not saved lives, according to al-Muslimi who describes the “human cost”. Perhaps they have saved American lives from attacks from AQAP, but they have still cost Yemeni lives. According to the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, confirmed drone strikes have taken between 447-665 lives in Yemen (“US Strikes in Yemen, 2002 to Present”). By saying that drones have saved lives, they ignore the Yemeni lives lost.

Stressing the Legality

Furthermore, the “War on Terror” is disinfected of the blood it sows by the persistent argument that drone strikes are legal. By emphasizing that the operations are legal under international law, this makes the ensuing damage seem sanctioned by the international community and bound by legal perimeters. This makes the violence seem regulated and more acceptable.

Koh states that, “the Obama Administration is firmly committed to complying with all applicable law” (Koh). This statement intends to demonstrate United States’ willingness to cooperate with International Law. However, by saying “applicable law,” it suggests that they are only prepared to follow the minimum requirements of laws. This suggests that they are in fact, not as willing to obey the law.

Koh also discusses how the US meets the Principle of Distinction, and that the US distinguishes between military and civilian targets (Koh). However, a military combatant is defined by the US as all military aged males ("Presidential Policy Directive"). Therefore, since this definition of militant includes the most significant portion of the male population, the US does not actually distinguish between militant and civilian males. This makes their actions appear legal and justifies drone strikes.

But al-Muslimi's speech indicates that from his experience, drones are not always capable of differentiating between AQAP militants and civilians (United States. Cong. Senate). Such was the case in the unfortunate strike on a wedding procession in the Bayda Province in Yemen (Bureau of Investigative Journalism, "Yemen: Reported US Covert Actions 2013"). On 12 December 2013, a drone hit a wedding procession of around 50-60 people, killing 12-17 people and injuring between 5-30 people (Bureau of Investigative Journalism, "Yemen: Reported US Covert Actions 2013"). Both Yemeni and American officials claimed that the victims were AQAP militants, while the family members claimed that they were not (Human Rights Watch 14). This shows how the US labels targets as "militants" although they may not be, and do not act in accordance with the Principle of Distinction.

The rhetoric surrounding drones in these speeches suggests that they are intentionally crafted to justify and sanitize the drone strikes against AQAP. But the examples of drone strikes in Yemen show that the rhetoric does not fit reality. The rhetoric in the speeches depurate the "War on Terror" and drone strikes, but the reality in Yemen is bloody and heartbreaking.

Chapter 3: Using Drones

The “War on Terror” has also been sanitized through the use of drones. In what follows, I discuss the main reasons for choosing drones to fight against AQAP in Yemen, and how it has contributed to laundering the war. I then discuss how the similarities between drone aerial footage and war video games contribute to dehumanizing people under the drones gaze, making their deaths less terrible, and therefore sanitizing the victims of drone strikes. These features of drones make it an excellent weapon for disinfecting war.

Choosing the “Weapon of Choice”

According the Byman, a key advocate of the drone programme, drones are “the centerpiece of US counterterrorism strategy” because that they are cost-effective, have no risk to US forces and are strategically advantageous (32). Moreover, drones give more political room to manoeuvre by keeping the world in the dark, and the conflict “out of sight, out of mind” (*Out of Sight, Out of Mind*).

Firstly, while having “boots on the ground has become … politically toxic” (Cronin 44), drones enable military operations to be undertaken without deploying soldiers or investing resources overseas. This has given the US more political room to maneuver by avoiding “the unpleasant imagery of foreign occupation” (Lin 28). Iona Craig believes that this allows the US to continue their unending war while eluding objections from the American public (15). Thus, drones conceal the reality that the US is at war, by keeping the label ‘war’ out of minds, as

though the US were not actually at war. Because the US is not in a conflict with Yemen itself and has not deployed military personnel, the drone programme operates out of sight. Nonetheless, the drone operations enabled the US to wage war in Yemen in secrecy as though it were not even happening, thus sanitizing the situation in Yemen.

Moreover, without having troops stationed in Yemen, or pilots in aircrafts, drones have completely removed the immediate physical risks from the battlefield (Vasko 85, Byman 32). Because they are remotely piloted, the pilot can safely be thousands of miles away. This has created an asymmetrical war, whereby the US cannot be retaliated against on the battlefield (Singh 49). This blunts the sting of war as it removes the risk for American soldiers. But Yemen continues to face the injuries and deaths from strikes.

Furthermore, drones were chosen because of their strategic effectiveness. Vasko argues that drones are cost effective ("Solemn Geographies of Human Limits" 85). Byman claims that they have a relatively low financial cost (32), especially compared to the alternative counterterrorism strategy of endorsing democracy, which he argues would not be financially possible (35). Blanchard argues that the true advantage of drones is that they are able to fly for long periods, and at high altitudes, making surveillance and intelligence gathering much better (119). Wall and Monahan also recognize that the high vantage point that drones provide allows better surveillance (241). These advantageous conditions of drones make war affordable and sustainable, reducing the costs of war, and make it more manageable thus sanitizing war of its burdens.

Another strategic advantage of drones, according to Watts and Cilluffo and Byman, is that they have fewer civilian casualties (Watts and Cilluffo 5, Byman 32), especially compared to alternative counterterrorism measures such as a military intervention (Watts and Cilluffo 7).

Watts and Cilluffo argue that drones can act with “surgical” precision when targeting, and therefore can avoid high civilian casualties (5), and therefore cleanses war. Moreover, by talking about drones as though they killed more humanely (Scurfield 508), this makes the tactic sound more appealing and kinder, albeit still killing people.

The Nature of Drones

The technological nature of drones inherently contributes to purifying war, as it views reality through a screen, quantifying the information collected by camera into numerical data. This has two effects: firstly, the real human lives captured on camera by the drones gaze are dehumanized as they are converted into numbers and stripped of their social identities; secondly, the footage captured by drones, and used by the pilot, resembles war video games, such as Call of Duty, which trivialize killing.

Since drones are unmanned aerial vehicles, they rely on cameras to survey their surroundings, rather than the human eye. Figure 1 shows footage from a US drone over Iraq which is targeting four individuals before a strike (unfortunately, drone footage of Yemen targeting persons is not available as drone operations are ongoing).

The four individuals in Figure 1, as captured by the drone footage, are faceless silhouettes, and as Wall and Monahan argue, look indistinguishable (246-247). Shurtleff is concerned that this enables people to, “see the enemy not as humans but as blips on a screen” (qtd. in “What are Drones?”). They are stripped of their social identity. The individuals in Figure 1 are mistakenly thought to be militants and are killed in a strike. However, one of the

Figure 1: Drone footage made public by WikiLeaks. Footage shows Apache targeting in Baghdad. Source: RT America. “WikiLeaks raw US Apache footage.” Screenshot of online video clip. YouTube. YouTube, 5 Apr. 2010. Web. 18 May 2015.

Figure 2: Screenshot of Call of Duty 4, a war video game. Source: Sanchez-Aviles, Ramon. “Call of Duty 4 Airplane Scene.” Screenshot of online video clip. YouTube. YouTube, 16 Dec. 2007. Web. 18 May 2015.

individuals, Namir Noor-Elden, was a journalist and another was her driver. Without their social identity known by the pilot, they were dehumanized and killed.

Moreover, because the pilot is physically far away from the conflict area, they can also be psychologically removed from the situation. The physical distance from the battle scene removes the sense of responsibility (Webb, Wirebl and Sulzman 37), making targeting easier. Figure 1 shows that the pilot cannot see the “whites of their eyes”, and thus, the pilot does not necessarily have to recognize the humanness of the target, or witness the emotions they experience.

Additionally, the numbers and letters in the drone footage in Figure 1 are geographical coordinates of the target. The drone footage turns these unidentified individuals into mere data and contributes to the dehumanization and subsequent sanitization (Wall and Monahan 247).

Moreover, drone footage bares strong resemblance to war video games. There is a blurring line between video games and real war (Shaw 790), which trivializes war as entertainment which people are desensitized to (Dean 11).

Figure 2 shows a screen shot of the video game, Call of Duty 4, where the player plays as a drone pilot. Comparing Figure 1 and 2, the resemblance is clear. Both are images from high looking down at people, who are targeted with a cross, and data is on the sides of the screen. There is only one difference between a pilot sitting in a military base, observing the drone footage and pressing buttons to strike, and a person playing Call of Duty 4, looking at the screen virtual drone footage and pressing buttons on their computer to strike– one is real and the other is not. One costs lives while the other does not.

Deans argues that that people are becoming desensitized to violence (11), and that society views wars as entertainment (12). It is possible that similarly, as people are desensitized to violence in video games that pilots may become desensitized to violence through drone footage,

as though the killing were a virtual reality. Zindel calls this as the, “virtual representation of death” (8). While Hastings argues that drone footage resembles video games, Zindel argues that video games are created in order to normalize violence in society (7). Shaw and Peter Singer, a specialist in 21st century warfare also take this stance, believing that the military uses entertainment, such as video games, as recruiting tools (Shaw 793, The Guardian). But whether drone footage resembles video game scenes or vice versa, the effect is the same – the reality is skewed, making real life seem unreal, making strikes trivial.

Thus, the “War on Terror” in Yemen has also been sanitized by using drones, the “weapon of choice”.

Chapter 4: The Effects and Implications

There is a clear discrepancy between the way that al-Muslimi speaks of the drone strikes, and the political language used to discuss them. While al-Muslimi brings up the messy results of drone strikes in Yemen, the official rhetoric attempts to tidy the "War on Terror." Therefore, while the US officials have attempted to bleach the war in Yemen clean, the war has not actually been sanitized.

One of the effects of attempting to sanitize the "War on Terror" through political rhetoric is that it creates a pleasant and justified image of war, but ignores the realities on the battlefield. The "weapon of choice" has created an asymmetrical warfare whereby the US is rid of all risk the horrors of war while Yemen is exposed to them. Therefore the American experience of the "War on Terror" as being a risk-free sterilized war is different from the Yemeni experience. Dean notes this problem during the first Gulf War, that the image of the war seen by the American public was very different from how the Iraqi people saw it (12). Because the American public is presented with the sanitized version of the conflict, they are less aware of the socio-economic disruption caused by drones (Boyle 19), which are swept under the rug.

The implication of creating a purified picture of the "War on Terror" in Yemen is that there is less reason for the American public to disapprove of the drone strikes, nor to listen to Yemeni experiences of drone strikes. But by ignoring Yemeni voices, and their experiences of drone strikes which are killing their people, al-Muslimi argues that animosity is breeding against

the US (United States. Cong. Senate). Boyle agrees, saying that AQAP is growing in membership as they recruit more individuals, who join out of anger and resentment towards America (20). Moreover, while the drones continue to interrupt the socio-economic livelihood (Boyle 19), they will contribute to the instability in Yemen. This instability has allowed the AQAP networks to thrive, as they take advantage of the unstable situation in Yemen (Cronin 49). But the continued instability in Yemen will have regional implications. This can be seen today, as Saudi Arabia and Iran become more actively engaged in Yemen (Reardon). Because of the interconnected nature of today's world, regional events will also have global repercussion. Thus the conflict in Yemen will not be confined to Yemen.

Another effect of using the "precise," and, "sanitized" drone weapon is that war becomes more convenient. Without "boots on the ground," the US intervention appears less invasive of Yemen's sovereignty, which gives them more political space to work with less opposition. It also means that resources and personnel do not need to be sent abroad, which keeps the conflict out of sight of the American public, and is less economically burdensome. Furthermore, there is no risk for the American pilots, who can sit thousands of miles away, safely, watching the battle through a screen. This warfare becomes similar to a war game.

The implication of this is that war becomes invisible, economically and politically sustainable and risk free. Because the war in Yemen is not a burden and can be carried out with little resistance, the "War on Terror" can perpetuate. Moreover, because drones can be used with almost no consequences, this may entice aggressive behaviour. This will have global repercussions as drone technology proliferates globally, and governments become seduced to use

these drones in such a manor. But Brooks warns against this, saying that the Executive branch of the American government is acting as though “they have the right to can kill anyone anywhere on Earth, at any time for secret reasons based on secret evidence in a secret process undertaken by unidentified officials” (United States. Cong. Senate). Therefore, the attractiveness of drones, which minimize the costs of war for those using them, could become the modern means of enacting state foreign policy (Boyle 25), unless the legal perimeters and guidelines are adapted to accommodate drones. In other words, killing could become a normalized tool of states.

Yet another effect of sanitizing the “War on Terror” through the use of drones is that drones naturally dehumanize those in their gaze. Individuals captured on the monitor from a drone camera, whether an AQAP militant or a civilian, are converted from human lives into shapes on a screen and data. The drone gaze de-socializes people, and cannot always distinguish between an AQAP militant and a civilian. Moreover, the aforementioned policy speeches regarding drones attempt to distance drone targets and morally exclude them. Although this “othering” is meant towards al-Qaeda militants, because the US defines militants as all “military aged males” (“Presidential Policy Directive”), they essentially dehumanize a majority of the population.

The implication of dehumanizing anyone in Yemen under a drone is that it makes killing more readily acceptable. Drones visualize any person below them as a less-than-human shape, and thus, any person in Yemen becomes devalued as a human, and reduced to numbers. Because they are morally excluded and dehumanized, there is a prejudice on the battlefield which may make the pilot more inclined to strike the individual(s).

Conclusion

The “War on Terror” in Yemen has attempted to be sanitized through the political rhetoric and use of drones. The language used by American officials is fashioned to sanitize the war through a refined lexicon which renders the war cleaner than the reality of the situation in Yemen. By creating a security narrative and placing “terrorists” as the evil other, officials morally exclude AQAP targets, making their deaths something to be celebrated rather than a loss of human life. Their speeches also highlighted the advantages that drones offer, as though drone warfare were a superior warfare. Yet drones accomplish the same task as any kind of warfare – killing. The officials also underscore the legality of their strikes under international law as though laws justify killing.

Moreover, drones were selected as the “weapon of choice” for the Obama Administration because of their ability to wage a war in secrecy. Their cost effectiveness, zero-risk for American pilots and strategic value also made drones an attractive military tactic. By keeping the war in Yemen, out of sight and out of mind through a cheaper alternative than a military intervention, this has made the war economically and politically sustainable. It has removed the political and economic pressures that accompany wars, which will allow the war to perpetuate. This has made war less of a burden for the US, but not so for Yemen.

The technological aspects of drones also make targeting and killing easier, through the process of quantifying reality through a screen. As humans become data, they lose their human

qualities and are de-socialized. Targets are dehumanized, making their deaths less heart-breaking than if a fully-human person were killed. Furthermore, the aerial footage created by drones is extremely similar to video games, which trivialises the reality that drones are striking real lives. The lines between reality and gaming are blurring.

The effect of attempting to sanitize the “War on Terror” in Yemen has unequally affected Americans and Yemenis. While purifying the war has made it more convenient and politically easier to operate for the US, it has made America desensitized to the violence, while creating an unrealistic picture of the conflict. But the image that this war has no risks is delusional and ignores the impact of drones on Yemeni lives. For Yemen, drone strikes have caused destruction, fear and casualties. They have economically and socially disrupted society, rather than improving the already fragile situation. This breeds animosity against American people.

Therefore, while the American officials have tried to sanitize this war, the realities of war remain in check, albeit hidden from the American eye. This is what al-Muslimi was addressing – the notion that one cannot sanitize war. Although the rhetoric and use of drones has made the conflict more digestible for Americans, US officials cannot ignore the real life impact that drone warfare has in Yemen. Perhaps the “weapon of choice”, which was chosen for its ability to disinfect war, is not the right choice of weapon for counterterrorism in Yemen. The only way to truly sanitize the war in Yemen may be to work in strengthening Yemeni society in order to create an environment where AQAP is not supported and cannot thrive. This would combat terrorism without causing destruction in Yemen.

This thesis has argued that the rhetoric and use of drone warfare has attempted to sanitize the “War on Terror” in Yemen. In general, the “War on Terror” in Yemen has not received as much attention as Pakistan or Afghanistan, and deserves more attention in the academic discourse. Further research is needed in order to better understand the social, economic and psychological impacts of drone strikes for people living in Yemen. Understanding these impacts will be paramount, as the Yemeni government and international community will inevitably have to deal with the consequences that drone strikes will reap in the future.

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