

Death from Above: An Afghan Perspective on the US Drone War; An Interview with Emran Feroz

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SR: *At the outset, please introduce yourself and describe your work.*

EF: I'm a freelance journalist, mainly covering Afghanistan and the wider region. I have reported on the War on Terror primarily, although I also write about Islamophobia and the rise of right-wing nationalist movements in Germany, Austria, and elsewhere. Most of my career has been dedicated to reporting on and from Afghanistan, a country that has faced decades and decades of chaos and carnage. The American war in Afghanistan has lasted more than eighteen years, and a crucial part of this is the US drone war.

In 2012, I founded the Drone Memorial, where I collected the names of civilian victims of drone strikes. This was not limited to Afghanistan—I also included Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, and other countries. What motivated me to do this is the fact that there are so many memorials for victims of war or victims of terrorism, but nothing that marked the lives of those who perished to drones.

This interview was conducted in German and English in December 2019 by phone and email. The German was translated into English by Sina Rahmani.

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It's obvious to me that the US drone is a form of terrorism. If you don't believe me, you can consult the true experts—the victims of these strikes. These people have been the primary sources of my research toward my book, *Tod per Knopfdruck (Death at the Push of a Button)*. They will tell you the same thing: drones are a form of terror. I strongly believe that people, especially in the West, need to know what is going on not just in Afghanistan but in all the countries haunted by drone warfare.

SR: *Your interest in Afghanistan is connected in part to your autobiography. Could you please explain a little bit about your background?*

EF: I was born in Austria. Growing up in an Afghani household in the 1990s was quite something. My parents came to Europe relatively early: my father left Afghanistan in the 1970s, before the war. Having already sent his son to a German-language school in Kabul, my grandfather wanted my father to continue his studies in Germany. From Germany, my father moved to Austria to attend more school. Around this time, the Afghan communists led a coup d'état known either as the "April Coup" or the "Suar Revolution," which was shortly followed by the arrival of Soviet troops and the beginning of the Soviet-Afghan War.

So, all of a sudden, my father became a stateless person. He had no choice but to stay in Austria as a refugee, and, in time, his siblings began coming to Europe. My mother and her family were forced to scatter, too—some went to Pakistan, others went to the US. Later on, my mother would make her way to Europe to marry my father and start a family in the city of Innsbruck in the Austrian Alps. I was born here and during most of my childhood, we were the only Afghans around. There were some other migrants from the former Yugoslavia, Turkey, Arab countries—but there was nobody from Afghanistan.

I remember when, during one of his scandals, Bill Clinton attacked Afghanistan with some missiles. While the Taliban was a brutal regime, this attack was totally unjustified. Afterward, we found out that this supposed attack on global terrorism also included the bombing of the Al-Shifa pharmaceutical factory in Sudan. That was the late 1990s, a time when the only pictures of Afghanistan we got to see were of a war-torn and bombed-out nation.

SR: *But we would soon start to see a lot more Afghanistan in the news shortly after this period.*

EF: And then we had 9/11. I was nine years old, and it was terrible because I was the only Afghan, and suddenly everyone became an expert. My teachers and friends would ask me, "Hey, you are from Afghanistan. Isn't that the terrorist country that attacked the United States?" I had to hear that a lot. My teacher even asked me, "Why'd they do it? Why did these guys attack the World Trade Center?" Why would an adult ask a nine-year-old child this? And that was not the worst of it. I was personally mocked a lot. "Osama bin Laden is your uncle," and I answered "No, he's not even Afghan. He's from Saudi Arabia." Imagine a nine-year-old trying to reason with these racists?

It was pretty rough. I barely knew anything about my country, and all I could think about was the United States wiping Afghanistan off the map. I remember saying to myself, "They will drop a nuclear bomb on the country, and then all my people will die." Of course, it didn't turn out like that, but the United States still bombed a lot, killed a lot of civilians. Even then, the leading figures of the Taliban all survived, including the founder, Mullah Omar.

The crimes of the Taliban are now widely recognized, but they are a recent development in a longer history. The Taliban grew from the seed of hard-core Islamist fighters known as the Mujahideen fighters. Even though they killed a lot of innocent people, the Mujahideen warlords were celebrated in the 1980s by a lot of Afghans because they fought against the Soviet Red Army and the Afghan Communist Army. Speaking of which, we shouldn't let the Afghan communists off the hook. They also killed a lot of people, but nobody bothers to mention them because they wore suits. The result of all these wars is the Taliban.

It's a myth that the Taliban was involved in 9/11. This is false. After the attacks, they communicated to the US that they would hand bin Laden over, if provided with evidence that the Saudi financier was responsible for the attacks. Bush refused to give proof and went ahead with his attack. You can believe what you want, but the Taliban was not responsible for the deaths of those people in New York.

I've gotten away from the original topic of your question, about my personal history.

I have vivid memories of the days after 9/11, the US invasion, and the beginning of the War on Terror. Afghanistan was now on every channel. My parents stared at the TV all day long. My mother was crying. My father was deeply depressed. Even in those early days, you could already see that the Americans were bombing innocent people, torturing, raping, and

stealing the country's resources. I remember learning from a documentary about an elderly Afghan man who had been sexually assaulted by American soldiers. You could see the shame in his eyes. He could barely speak. This was something I will never forget. I think that somewhere deep in my mind, I had already made this decision back then, that I want to cover these stories of crimes, to write about them.

SR: *This has been one of the central tasks that has shaped your career as a journalist.*

EF: When I began my career, I focused on a couple of things. First, I wanted to simply report on the attacks factually. I wanted to visit the places where this new and invisible war was taking place and talk to people who experienced it directly. Second, I wanted to document the human toll of this violence and to make sure there was someone tracking it. A group that has done good work on drone warfare is the Bureau of Investigative Journalism in London. They identified a lot of the victims of drone strikes in all the different countries.

Although I have written on other topics, including Islamophobia in Europe, it is still very important to keep talking about the incredible violence of drones. Anyone who is an honest and fair observer will recognize the savage and brutal nature of killing people from far away and watching it in real time. This fact has been obvious since the first drone strike in history took place in October 2001. The target was Taliban leader and founder, Mullah Mohammed Omar, who at the time was in Kandahar, a city in the south of Afghanistan. He survived the attack, but he was lucky. There are many different accounts of what happened that day. According to American journalist Anand Gopal, one of the victims of this attack was Mullah Omar's young son. There were several others who died that day, but we don't know their names.

This is one of the general problems with drone warfare. Almost twenty years—that's how long Afghanistan has been suffering under this new kind of military conflict. And yet, we know nothing about the identities of the vast majority of those who have been killed.

SR: *It is not easy to talk about drones, let alone their significance to modern warfare. There is very little reporting that explains how they are operated. An army of lethal flying planes operated from a remote base in the US seems like something out of science fiction.*

EF: I have found in my lectures and interviews that it is more effective to use human examples to show people the reality. For instance, in September 2013, an American Reaper drone attacked a pickup truck in the eastern Afghanistan province of Kunar. The remote-operated drone was armed with Hellfire rockets and had been hovering roughly four miles above, tracking their every movement as they were being driven to Gambar, a nearby village. Kunar is notorious among US military personnel. Since the invasion in late 2001, countless American soldiers have died in this part of the country. Here, the Taliban continues to maintain a powerful grip.

So the drone pilots were probably excited to see a truck loaded with so many “militants,” “terrorists,” and/or “extremists.” The operation was under the control of the Special Operations Command (SOCOM). This is one of the US military’s shadier divisions. SOCOM is responsible for secret operations around the world and is largely responsible for making drone attacks part of everyday life in Afghanistan. There was a group of people who took part in the operation in Kunar. The pilot navigates the machine remotely, and the sensor operator is responsible for both the camera and weapons system. A mission intelligence coordinator and two other colleagues follow the proceedings on several monitors in another room. There is also an intelligence tactical coordinator, who oversees the mission, as well as the screeners, who observe the attack on the ground.

The people responsible for the operation were nowhere near Kunar or Afghanistan or even the continent. They were thousands of kilometers away at Creech Air Force Base in the Nevada desert. What do these people see? Can they really tell the difference between men, women, and children? No, they can’t. It falls to the drone pilot to identify moving vehicles like this pickup. The transcript of the communications between pilots, sensor operators, and coordinators makes clear that cameras can only rarely differentiate women and children from others. I think about it this way and my blood boils: a group of people in a desert in Nevada ended the lives of fifteen Afghans. These people were unlucky and had bad timing, and they were punished by being murdered by someone clicking a mouse. All but one was exterminated from the face of the earth. The sole survivor, four-year-old Aisha, lost not just her entire family but also her face. It was torn to shreds.

SR: *I’ve learned from your work how the responsibility of these drone strikes goes quite literally to the top of the chain of command. Can you elaborate?*

EF: The president must personally approve any attempted strike on anyone on the list. Drone terror at the stroke of a pen is one of the distinguishing marks of the Obama administration. Every Tuesday, the commander in chief was provided with an inventory. So you cannot really say that he is not directly culpable in the massacres. These days came to be known as “Terror Tuesday.”

Indeed, this is the same Barack Obama who is a Nobel Peace Prize laureate, who studied the law, who took a stand against the invasion of Iraq, and the use of torture in Guantanamo. If you know anything about Obama’s biography, you know that he is an advocate of constitutional rights. But for most people who think of him as a poster or a meme, it’s impossible to imagine him being responsible for the Kill List.

Obama, the family man, determined whether or not purported terrorists and their families were unworthy of life. Under his watch, the US adopted the position that any person fit for military duty in the vicinity of a drone attack was hostile. The charismatic Obama, whose absence is being mourned by many because of his bizarre successor, was in reality someone who stood at the pinnacle of the US drone killing complex.

The list was handed over to Donald Trump at the beginning of 2017. During his campaign, Trump made more than clear that he had no reservations about killing “the families of terrorists.” The first few months of Trump’s presidency confirmed that he was going to make good on his campaign threats. He very quickly proved to be even less compromising than his predecessor. The amount of drone attacks under Trump per month has quadrupled. And virtually everywhere the US military is actively bombing, the civilian death toll has increased accordingly. He is fully aware that the bombs kill civilians, and this is totally meaningless to him—his worldview sees this as just. Because the Kill List is currently in the possession of such a man, the people living in the targeted regions must prepare themselves for the worst.

When the US started its first drone war, it triggered the so-called dronification of the world. More and more countries are using drones to do most of their fighting. Many of these are close allies of the US, like Saudi Arabia. The kingdom is the ideal client of the US military contractors and has been an enthusiastic buyer of drones. But militant groups are now employing drones in their tactics. For example, ISIS used drones in Syria—I believe they used grenades on the drones or something like that. They also attacked Kurdish militias and even killed at least one person with one

of their drones, if I recall correctly. Of course, you cannot compare what ISIS used to the American Predator drone. There is no comparison whatsoever. It just shows that everybody fighting any kind of war wants to have drones in their arsenal. People think they are good weapons that are precise and very effective against the enemy.

I think we will see more US allies using drones. The Turks are using them currently along the Syrian border and are very proud of the fact that they designed and built their own. They used the same narrative of anti-terrorism that the Americans do. This is something shared by all countries that use drones: "We are simply attacking militants and terrorists."

SR: *You have studied this issue more than most have. What do you think can be done to fight drones?*

EF: Well, that's a pretty difficult question to answer. First, people in the affected areas have been standing up against these drone strikes. We have seen large demonstrations against drone strikes in Afghanistan and in Pakistan. People have organized rallies in the aftermath of particularly large strikes that kill dozens of people. It goes without saying you don't hear anything about these protests in the Western media. If you do, it's usually just reduced to a story about a bunch of brown people walking around and shouting "anti-American slogans" or "Death to America," et cetera. Media outlets in the West have a responsibility to cover this. It doesn't matter if they take place in rural Afghanistan or Pakistan—they need to be there to tell these stories.

For those in the Western countries, they can do a lot. For example, I am in Stuttgart, Germany—close to the headquarters of AFRICOM (United States Africa Command). This means that all operations conducted by the US military are planned, arranged, and coordinated from Stuttgart. This includes deadly drone strikes in Somalia—strikes that have increased dramatically in the last year, killing a lot of civilians. People in this part of the world bear a lot of responsibility to stand up and organize demonstrations expressing their rage for these practices. In my case, this means that the Germans I am living alongside need to show the Americans they are hosting that they do not accept this. So much of the American global military operation depends on Germany. There is Ramstein Air Base, the largest US base outside of the US. Several whistleblowers have shown that the entire drone war would not be able to function without Ramstein. This is the heart of the drone war. Without Ramstein, drone operators in the US

would not be able to communicate with their drones in Afghanistan, Yemen, Somalia, et cetera.

I find it maddening how little German people care about the significance of this. It is their responsibility to stand up and say something against it. Obviously, the same thing goes for the US. This means doing a better job of reporting. There is so much garbage out there that gets sold to you as news. This needs to change.

Personally, I believe that the ultimate goal should be the complete and permanent ban of drones by the United Nations. It's pretty unrealistic at the moment, but I think we need more initiatives, more critical reporting, and more discussion. If we can do this effectively, and do it across the world, then maybe it can happen one day.