



# GLENN GREENWALD

ON SECURITY AND LIBERTY



## UK detention of Reprieve activist consistent with NSA's view of drone opponents as 'threats' and 'adversaries'

A top secret NSA document provides context for yesterday's abusive detention of Baraa Shiban

- [Read the excerpts of the drone document here](#)

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Page Discussion

### (U//FOUO) Threats to unmanned aerial vehicle

**TOP SECRET//SI**

(C) Employment of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV) has increased in recent years. Threat anti-aircraft artillery, surface-to-air missiles, and fighter aircraft. However, additional thre

A well-known and highly respected Yemeni anti-drone activist was detained yesterday by UK officials under that country's "anti-terrorism" law at Gatwick Airport, where he had traveled to speak at an

event. Baraa Shiban, the project co-ordinator for the London-based legal charity Reprieve, was held for an hour and a half and repeatedly questioned about his anti-drone work and political views regarding human rights abuses in Yemen.

When he objected that his political views had no relevance to security concerns, UK law enforcement officials threatened to detain him for the full nine hours allowed by the Terrorism Act of 2000, the same statute that was abused by UK officials last month to detain my partner, David Miranda, for nine hours.

Shiban tells his story today, [here](#), in the Guardian, and recounts how the UK official told him "he had detained me not merely because I was from Yemen, but also because of Reprieve's work investigating and criticising the efficacy of US drone strikes in my country."

The notion that Shiban posed some sort of security threat was absurd on its face. As the Guardian reported Tuesday, "he visited the UK without incident earlier this summer and testified in May to a US congressional hearing on the impact of the covert drone programme in Yemen."

Viewing anti-drone activism as indicative of a terrorism threat is noxious. As Reprieve's Cory Crider put it yesterday, "if there were any doubt the UK was abusing its counter-terrorism powers to silence critics, this ends it."

But perceiving drone opponents as "threats" or even "adversaries" is hardly new. Top secret US government documents obtained by the Guardian from NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden characterize even the most basic political and legal opposition to drone attacks as part of "propaganda campaigns" from America's "adversaries".

The entry is part of a top secret internal US government website, similar in appearance to the online Wikipedia site. According to a June interview with Snowden in Hong Kong, the only individuals empowered to write these entries are those "with top secret clearance and public key infrastructure certificates", special access cards enabling unique access to certain parts of NSA systems. He added that the entries are "peer reviewed" and that every edit made is recorded by user.

One specific entry discusses "threats to unmanned aerial vehicles". It lists various dangers to American drones, including "air defense threats", "jamming of UAV sensor systems", "terrestrial weather", and "electronic warfare employed against the command and control system".

But alongside those more obvious, conventional threats are what the entry describes as "propaganda campaigns that target UAV use".

Under the title "adversary propaganda themes", the document lists what it calls "examples of potential propaganda themes that could be employed against UAV operations".

One such example is entitled "Nationality of Target vs. Due Process". It states:

Attacks against American and European persons who have become violent extremists are often criticized by propagandists, arguing that lethal action against these individuals deprives them of due process."

In the eyes of the US government, "due process" – the idea that the US government should not deprive people of life away from a battlefield without presenting evidence of guilt – is no longer a basic staple of the American political system, but rather a malicious weapon of "propagandists". The ACLU and Center for Constitutional Rights, among many other groups, have made exactly that argument against the US drone targeting program ("the US government's killings of US citizens Anwar Al-Awlaki, Samir Khan, and 16-year-old Abdulrahman Al-Awlaki in Yemen in 2011 violated the Constitution's fundamental guarantee against the deprivation of life without due process of law").

Another paragraph from the NSA entry complains that the phrase "drone strike" is a "loaded term", as it "connote[s] mindless automatons with no capability for independent thought" and thus "may invoke an emotional reaction". This, the document asserts, "is what propaganda intends to do".

Although the document at one points suggests that some drone opposition may come from "citizens with legitimate social agendas", the section on "adversary propaganda themes" includes virtually every one of the arguments most frequently made in the US against the US drone policy, including that the threat of terrorism is small when compared to other threats, that drone strikes intensify rather than curb the risk of terrorism by fueling anti-American animus, and that drones kill too many civilians.

The NSA entry further claims that "manipulation of statistics" over civilian deaths is a frequent propaganda tool of "adversaries", citing one study that concluded that roughly 9 out of 10 victims from drone strikes are civilians. To contrast such propaganda studies, the NSA entry cites a New America Foundation study concluding that "civilians make up about one-third of those killed".

Also included in the broader section on "threats" to drones are various lawsuits brought by the ACLU and Center for Constitutional Rights, reports of human rights groups such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, and UN investigations into the legality of drone attacks.

The US has previously denounced drone opponents as US adversaries and even terrorist sympathizers. In 2011, the Bureau of Investigative Journalists published a study documenting numerous civilian deaths in Pakistan during the same time period for when John Brennan, then the chief White House counterterrorism adviser and now CIA Director, had falsely asserted there were no such deaths. Subsequent reports further proved the clear falsity of Brennan's statements.

Nonetheless, a New York Times article on that Bureau report granted anonymity to a "senior American

counterterrorism official" to say: "one must wonder why an effort that has so carefully gone after terrorists who plot to kill civilians has been subjected to so much misinformation." The anonymous official added: "Let's be under no illusions – there are a number of elements who would like nothing more than to malign these efforts and help Al-Qaeda succeed."

About those anonymous accusations aired by the New York Times, former Washington Post reporter John Hanrahan criticized the NYT for granting anonymity to enable such toxic innuendo and wrote that the Bureau reporters documenting civilian deaths from US drones were "being smeared by anonymous US government officials, who have even accused them of being sympathetic to al Qaeda."

These latest documents suggest that such themes are pervasive in national security agencies of the US government, where at least some officials view drone opponents as propagandists and adversaries of the United States. That someone like Baraa Shiban is detained under a "terrorism" law by UK officials and threatened with prolonged detention if he refuses interrogation about his political views and drone activist reflects the same pathology.

Also yesterday, the Obama administration yesterday once again denied a visa to a Pakistani lawyer working with Reprieve, Shahzad Akbar, who represents family members of victims killed by US drones and is suing the US government, alleging that the drone kills are illegal.

As Reprieve put it, by denying Akbar a visa, the Obama administration succeeded in "preventing him from speaking in congress on the CIA drone programme next week", to which he had been invited by House members to testify. Reprieve added: "Before 2010 Mr Akbar travelled regularly to the US. It was not until 2011, when he began representing victims of CIA drone strikes, that Mr Akbar began having significant difficulty getting a US visa."

The US government has a long history of treating drone opponents as national security threats. In 2012, it denied a visa to filmmaker Muhammad Danish Qasim, a Pakistani student at Iqra University's Media Science. He had released a short film entitled The Other Side, a 20-minute narrative that "revolves around the idea of assessing social, psychological and economical effects of drones on the people in tribal areas of Pakistan." The film highlighted the pain and havoc wreaked on surviving children and other relatives of drone victims. The visa denial meant he was barred from receiving the Audience Award for Best International Film at the 2012 National Film Festival For Talented Youth, held annually in Seattle, Washington.

To most of the world, opposition to drones is the norm, with a 2012 Pew poll finding overwhelming opposition in virtually every country surveyed. But for the US and its loyal servants called "UK officials", such views are evidently reflective of national security threats or even, in London now, suggestive of "terrorism".

## Related stories

Also yesterday, the Libyan-American rapper Khaled Ahmed, better known by his stage name "Khaled M", was removed from an airplane in the US without any explanation. During the civil war in Libya, he was [hailed in US media circles](#) for using his music to protest against the Ghadaffi regime. As [his Twitter feed makes clear](#), this was part of ongoing harassment he experiences when flying at the hands of his own government.

Finally, Sarah Abdurrahman, an American Muslim and producer of the NPR program "On the Media", was detained for 6 hours at the US border in Niagra Falls when returning from a vacation in Canada with her family (all US citizens). She then reported on her own experiences as well as the systemic border harassment of US Muslims by their own government; the 20-minute segment (which includes the plight of Khaled M, among many others) is [truly infuriating and really worth hearing](#).

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