

Public “traces” of drone strikes are reshaping what it means to witness warfare

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President Trump has largely abandoned his predecessor's policies in most areas, though at least one has remained unchanged – the use of drones to attack suspected terrorist targets. [Oliver Kearns](#) takes a close look at how the media covers such drone strikes, writing that while little information is made public about them, the “traces” that do appear in the media alters the way in which they are perceived by the public.

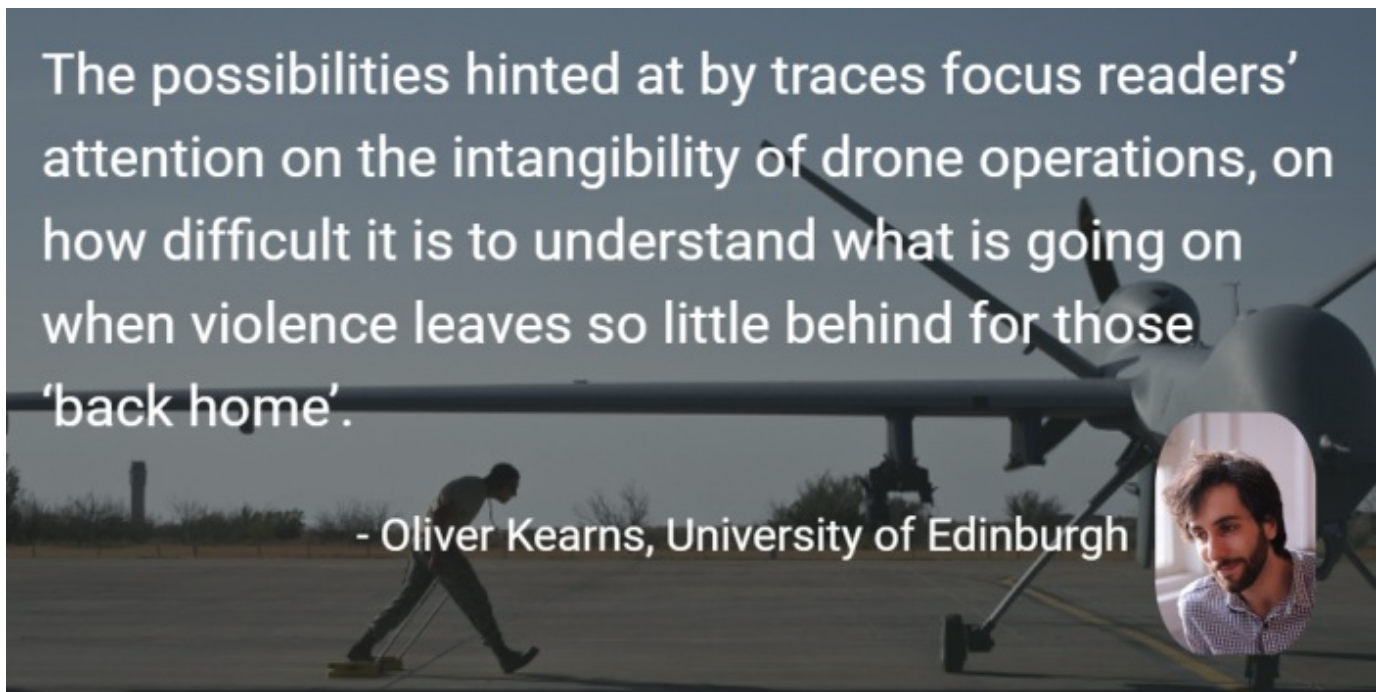


The first drone strikes of the Trump Administration continued a long-standing pattern, begun under President Obama, where US use of force is shrouded in a secrecy that then unravels itself. Once again, these were strikes justified as an attack on members of an al Qaeda affiliate. Five fighters were killed in a series of strikes in al-Bayda, Yemen, from January 20 to 22, [according to a Pentagon spokesperson](#). And once again, very little was officially revealed beyond this curt justification. “AQAP [al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula] remains a significant threat to the region and the United States... we remain committed to defeating [it]”, the spokesperson added by way of elaboration. US strikes would “diminish AQAP’s presence in the region”.

If the US certainly intends to reduce the presence of al Qaeda, it is also eager to reduce the public information on its covert drone operations to an absolute minimum: the enemies killed, to be sure, and the righteous rationale for their killing. But as with covert strikes conducted throughout Obama’s terms in office, these al-Bayda attacks left behind other traces which were not covered up, and which changed the way these events and their secrecy would appear in public.

News reports quoted [both local officials](#), who claimed that one strike targeted a vehicle, killing two men inside, and ‘[security sources](#)’ who had stated that another strike killed “three suspected jihadists” riding a motorcycle. Just as importantly, those officials “spoke on condition of anonymity”, while a security official “ask[ed] not to be identified”. These speculative details reveal more than the possible circumstances of the strikes; the wariness of the sources emphasises the state secrecy surrounding these events, that their circumstances are not intended for the public eye.

And then there were the things left unsaid and unseen. For all the talk of these being the first strikes conducted by the new administration, [the Washington Post reported](#) that these attacks “did not require approval by recently appointed Defense Secretary James Mattis or Trump”, leaving the reader to guess that they had been pre-approved in some way by the previous administration. The same article goes on to note only that the Pentagon “did not say” whether any civilians had been killed, before abruptly turning to a discussion of the wider geopolitical context of US policy in Yemen. And the photo accompanying the article is also telling – a stock image of a drone decidedly *not* in action, parked on an anonymous airfield; *AFP*’s report quoted above similarly uses a stock close-up of a drone in flight.



All these attempts to report on covert events have an important effect. When presented in a report on state action, these statements and images say more than is meant of them. They say that you as a reader cannot actually see what really happened, and cannot know for certain if these events happened in the way claimed.

Traces and conspicuous absences – like the sparse confirmations, rumours and uneventful imagery described above – dominate the public reporting of covert US strikes. And when this same news coverage hints at state secrecy, that secrecy implicitly paints those innocuous and arbitrary traces as significant: as public evidence of something otherwise conducted out of view, and as therefore potentially revealing. Framed by secrecy, the brief detail of how the al-Bayda strikes were ordered becomes suggestive, hinting to readers that the rules governing the identification of targets remain unscrutinised, their efficacy unknown. The slightness of the above news reports, combined with the unrevealing stock images, alludes to the possibility that material evidence confirming the details of what happened is not available in these events' aftermaths.

I am not asserting that these unspoken possibilities are actually the case. My point is that without any US state explanation of its use of covertness or of these stray details and loose ends, secrecy undoes itself, by focusing readers' attention on unverifiable ideas emanating from those traces, which potentially subvert official justifications for violence.

The most dramatic example of traces' suggestiveness comes from [Twitter feeds](#) which reprint reported photographs of strike locations, including those accompanying news reports. The recurrent images of twisted metal and rubble in remote spaces are framed as significant in being public evidence of otherwise secret actions. As a result, the images invite viewers to consider that the terrorist identities of those killed *cannot* be confirmed from this wreckage; framed as a public trace of secret events, this debris is implicitly portrayed as significant in its being inscrutable. The lack of material confirmation leaves the identities of those killed as an open question.

Witnessing war through the media

This dynamic, whereby rumours and debris of drone strikes allude to what is possible but unverifiable, has consequences for what it means to witness war through the media, and in particular to witness Western state violence in an ethical way. In the past, it was thought that the moral danger around war reporting was the risk of [echoing state justifications for its wars](#), and of [obscuring the real suffering](#) of those at the receiving end of state violence. An ethical witnessing of war meant 'bearing witness' to the lives of those who suffer, and through this,

[refusing state attempts](#) to dehumanise its victims.

But now we have a covert war where incongruent details and absences can inadvertently undermine state narratives for violence that is only sometimes acknowledged and justified. Not that these public traces therefore encourage newsreaders to bear witness: the possibilities hinted at by traces focus readers' attention on the intangibility of drone operations, on how difficult it is to understand what is going on when violence leaves so little behind for those 'back home'.

The real problem with witnessing war today is this perception of, and focus on, distance, which becomes moral as well as physical. Attempts to document the lives of those '[living under drones](#)' are undoubtedly valuable, especially at a time when narratives of the barbarism and existential threat of those targeted, despite [contrary evidence](#), remain ubiquitous. But the question of ethically witnessing the snatched details and wreckage left by strikes cannot be reduced to trying to 'give voice' to suffering, to 'filling in' absences in coverage. Not only is this often difficult, but those absences are *already* shaping the public portrayal of strikes, encouraging newsreaders' concern at how apparently fleeting and insubstantial these events are, at the expense of considering the ethics of the violence itself. Casualties are not being dehumanised here, or even removed; rather, their ethical significance is being restricted to the issue of comprehending intangible violence.

It appears likely that President Trump will continue and even drastically expand the covert drone warfare of President Obama. On March 2, the US carried out [twenty drone and air strikes](#) across three Yemeni provinces. While critics of the policy will rightly increase calls for greater transparency, it is vital to also consider how the secrecy around this policy exists and circulates in the public sphere, how it is suggestively undermined even as it is enacted – and how this may affect our ideas of why wars abroad do or do not matter to us.

Featured image credit: US Air Force (CC-BY-NC-2.0)

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About the author

Oliver Kearns – *University of Edinburgh*

Oliver Kearns recently completed his PhD at the University of Edinburgh. He researches the role of state secrecy in the public sphere, and the rumours and debris left behind by covert violence. His work has been published in *Political Geography* and *Critical Studies on Security*.

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