

By Medea Benjamin

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Counterterrorism adviser John Brennan spoke at the Woodrow Wilson International Center in Washington, D.C., on April 30 to mark the one-year anniversary of the killing of Osama bin Laden. It was the first time a high-level member of the Obama administration [spoke at length about the U.S. drone strikes](#) that the CIA and the Joint Special Operations Command have been carrying out in Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia.

“President Obama has instructed us to be more open with the American people about these efforts,” Brennan explained.

I had just co-organized a [Drone Summit](#) over the weekend, where Pakistani lawyer Shahzad Akbar told us heart-wrenching stories about the hundreds of innocent victims of our drone attacks. We saw horrific photos of people whose bodies were blown apart by Hellfire missiles, with only a hand or a slab of flesh remaining. We saw poor children on the receiving end of our attacks — maimed for life, with no legs, no eyes, no future. And for all these innocents, there was no apology, no compensation, not even an acknowledgement of their losses. Nothing.

The U.S. government refuses to disclose who has been killed, for what reason, and with what collateral consequences. It deems the entire world a war zone, where it can operate at will, beyond the confines of international law.

So there I was at the Wilson Center, listening to Brennan describe our policies as ethical, “wise,” and in compliance with international law. He spoke as if the only people we kill with our drone strikes are militants bent on killing Americans: “It is unfortunate that to save innocent lives

we are sometimes obliged to take lives — the lives of terrorists who seek to murder our fellow citizens.” The only mention of taking innocent lives referred to al-Qaeda. “Al-Qaeda’s killing of innocent civilians, mostly Muslim men, women, and children, has badly tarnished its image and appeal in the eyes of Muslims around the world.” This is true, but the same must be said of U.S. policies that fuel anti-American sentiments in the eyes of Muslims around the world.

[So I stood up and, in a calm voice, spoke out .](#)

“Excuse me, Mr. Brennan, will you speak out about the innocents killed by the United States in our drone strikes? What about the hundreds of innocent people we are killing with drone strikes in the Philippines, in Yemen, in Somalia? I speak out on behalf of those innocent victims. They deserve an apology from you, Mr. Brennan. How many people are you willing to sacrifice? Why are you lying to the American people and not saying how many innocents have been killed?”

[My heart was racing as a female security guard and then a burly Federal Protection Service policeman started pulling me out, but I kept talking .](#)

“I speak out on behalf of Tariq Aziz, a 16-year-old in Pakistan who was killed simply because he wanted to document the drone strikes. I speak out on behalf of Abdulrahman al-Awlaki, a 16-year-old born in Denver, killed in Yemen just because his father was someone we don’t like. I speak out on behalf of the Constitution and the rule of law.” My parting words as they dragged me out the door were “I love the rule of law and I love my country. You are making us less safe by killing so many innocent people. Shame on you, John Brennan.”

I was handcuffed and taken to the basement of the building, where I was questioned about my background and motives. To its credit, it seems the Wilson Center thought it would not be good to have someone arrested for exercising her right to free speech, so I was released.

Brennan’s speech came the day after [another U.S. drone strike in Pakistan](#) , one that killed three alleged militants. After the strike, the Pakistani government voiced its strongest and most public condemnation yet, accusing the United States of violating Pakistani sovereignty, calling the campaign “a total contravention of international law and established norms of interstate relations.” Earlier in April, the Pakistani parliament unanimously condemned drone strikes and established a new set of guidelines for rebuilding the country’s frayed relationship with the

United States, which included the immediate cessation of all drone strikes in Pakistani territory.

The attacks in Pakistan, carried out by the CIA, started in 2004. Since then, there have been over 300 strikes. The areas where the strikes take place have been sealed off by the Pakistani security forces, so it has been difficult to get accurate reports about deaths and damages. John Brennan has denied that innocents have even been killed. Speaking in June 2011 about the preceding year, he said, “There hasn’t been a single collateral death because of the exceptional proficiency, precision of the capabilities we’ve been able to develop.” Mr. Brennan later adjusted his statement somewhat, saying, “Fortunately, for more than a year, due to our discretion and precision, the U.S. government has not found credible evidence of collateral deaths resulting from U.S. counterterrorism operations outside of Afghanistan or Iraq.”

This is just not true. The U.K.-based Bureau of Investigative Journalism is the group that [keeps the best count of casualties from U.S. drone strikes in Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia](#). According to its figures, since 2004, the U.S. has killed between about 2,500–3,000 people in Pakistan. Of those, between 479 and 811 were civilians, 174 of them children.

Shahzad Akbar, a Pakistani lawyer who has been representing drone victims and who started the group Foundation for Fundamental Rights, disputes even these figures and claims that the vast majority of those killed are ordinary civilians. “I have a problem with this word ‘militant.’ Most of the victims who are labeled militants might be Taliban sympathizers but they are not involved in any criminal or terrorist acts, and certainly not against the United States,” he claimed. He said the Americans often assumes that if someone wears a turban, has a beard, and carries a weapon, he is a combatant. “That is a description of all the men in that region of Pakistan. It is part of their culture.” Shahzad believes that only those people whom the Americans label “high-value targets,” which would be fewer than 200, should be considered militants; all others should be considered civilian victims.

While President Obama is gearing up for an election campaign and using his drone-strike killing spree as a sign of his tough stance on national security, people from across the United States and around the world are organizing to rein in the drones.

Gathering in Washington, D.C., on April 28 and 29, they came up with a [new campaign](#) to educate the American public about civilian deaths in Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, and elsewhere as a result of the use of drones for illegal killing and to pressure members of Congress, President Obama, federal agencies, and state and local governments to restrict the use of

drones for illegal killing and surveillance. The tactics include court challenges, sending delegations to the affected regions, direct action at U.S. bases from where the drones are operated, student campaigns to divest from companies involved in the production of killer drones, and outreach to faith-based communities.