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Four former service members – including three sensor operators – issue plea to rethink current airstrike strategy that has ‘fueled feelings of hatred’ toward US

Four former US air force service members, with more than 20 years of experience between them operating military drones, have written an open letter to Barack Obama warning that the program of targeted killings by unmanned aircraft has become a major driving force for Isis and other terrorist groups.

The group of servicemen have issued an impassioned plea to the [Obama administration](#), calling for a rethink of a military tactic that they say has “fueled the feelings of hatred that ignited terrorism and groups like Isis, while also serving as a fundamental recruitment tool similar to Guantánamo Bay”.

In particular, they argue, the killing of innocent civilians in drone airstrikes has acted as one of the most “devastating driving forces for terrorism and destabilization around the world”.

[The letter](#), addressed to Obama, defense secretary Ashton Carter and CIA chief John Brennan, links the signatories’ anxieties directly to last Friday’s [terror attacks in Paris](#). They imply that the abuse of the drone program is causally connected to the outrages.

“We cannot sit silently by and witness tragedies like the attacks in Paris, knowing the devastating effects the drone program has overseas and at home,” they wrote.

The joint statement – from the group who have experience of operating drones over Afghanistan, Iraq and other conflict zones – represents a public outcry from what is understood to be the largest collection of drone whistleblowers in the history of the program. Three of the letter writers were sensor operators who controlled the powerful visual equipment on US Predator drones that guide Hellfire missiles to their targets.

They are Brandon Bryant, 30, who served in the 15th Reconnaissance Squadron and 3rd Special Operations Squadron from 2005 to 2011; Michael Haas, 29, who served in the same squadrons during the same period; and Stephen Lewis, 29, who was with the 3rd Special Operations Squadron between 2005 and 2010.

The fourth whistleblower, Cian Westmoreland, 28, was a technician responsible for the communications infrastructure of the drone program. He served with the 606 Air Control Squadron in Germany and the 73rd Expeditionary Air Control Squadron in Kandahar, Afghanistan.

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The four are represented legally by Jesselyn Radack, director of national security and human rights at the nonprofit ExposeFacts. “This is the first time we’ve had so many people speaking out together about the drone program,” she said, pointing out that the men were fully aware that they faced possible prosecution for speaking out.

In the wake of the Paris attacks, Obama has [stuck firm to his determination](#) to avoid sending large numbers of US troops to Syria, beyond the limited engagement of [special forces](#)

. The natural, though unspoken, consequence of such a strategy is a deepening reliance on aerial attacks in which unmanned drones increasingly play a leading part.

The number of lethal airstrikes has [ballooned under Obama's watch](#) . The Pentagon has plans [further to increase the number of daily drone flights](#) by 50% by 2019.

From its inception, the drone program has been troubled by reports of mistaken targeting. Classified government documents leaked to [the Intercept](#) revealed that up to 90% of the people killed in drone strikes may be unintended, with the disparity glossed over by the recording of unknown victims as “enemies killed in action”.

In one of the most widely publicised errors, the US government was accused by one of its own officials of making an “outrageous mistake” in October 2011 when it [killed the US citizen Abdulrahman al-Awlaki](#) , the 16-year-old son of Anwar al-Awlaki, an al-Qaida leader who was also a US citizen and was killed by a CIA drone two weeks previously.