

Troops Involved in Boat Strikes Face a 'Moral Injury' Risk, Experts Say

Troops who play a part in deadly missions that they see as wrong or unjustified may suffer deep psychological harm as a result, research has shown.

Each deadly strike involves numerous military personnel who may be at risk of psychological harm. Tierney L. Cross/The New York Times

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The Trump administration's missile strikes against boats that it says are carrying drugs have drawn fierce criticism from legal experts and from some members of Congress, who say that the killing of unarmed civilians in international waters is illegal and amounts to little more than summary execution.

Congress has convened classified hearings, and legal groups have sued to force the administration to release secret memos authorizing the strikes.

But amid all the high-level debate, little public attention has been given to how the strikes affect the low-level people who have to carry them out. For those people, decades of research has shown, the emotional effects of this kind of killing can be devastating.

Participating in killing — even killing seen remotely on a video screen — can leave deep psychological wounds and lead to long-lasting struggles. If the person perceives the killing as morally wrong or unjustified, the effect can be even greater. The Department of Veterans Affairs sees the problem often enough that it has a name: “Moral injury.”

It stems from feelings of intense guilt or shame that can lead to a number of psychological problems, including an increased risk of suicide. It is amplified when the person feels betrayed by an institution or leader that they believed in.

No service members have come out publicly with concerns, and there is no evidence they have gone privately to members of Congress or other authorities.

In the boat strikes, hundreds of military personnel could be affected.

When the Trump administration orders a missile strike on a boat speeding across the Caribbean Sea, executing the order isn't as simple as having an admiral push a red button.

There are intelligence teams using surveillance drones and satellites to track boat traffic. Specialists to intercept radio and cellphone communications, and linguists to translate them. Analysts to sift through intelligence for potential targets, and targeters to call for a strike on a specific boat.

If the strike is carried out by an armed drone, there are sensor operators to aim the drone's targeting laser, and a drone pilot who ultimately launches the missile. High-definition video footage is beamed to big screens in operations centers, where command teams and their staffs watch every move.

President Trump posted video on social media in September showing a missile strike on a boat in the Caribbean Sea.

Agence France-Presse, via Truth Social

All of those troops, experts say, are at risk of psychological harm from participating in killings that they may see as legally dubious or morally appalling.

“Killing someone is the biggest, most consequential moral decision a person can make,” said Peter Kilner, who was an Army infantry officer for 15 years and then taught ethics at West Point. “Even in the best circumstances, it can be a heavy load to carry, and this is far from the best circumstances.”

Mr. Kilner, who has studied moral injury for more than two decades, said participants in the boat strikes might be at increased risk of moral injuries because the remote-control strikes against unarmed people appeared to fall short of what the military has long held to be moral, ethical and legal.

But Mr. Kilner said troops often express few misgivings in the heat of the moment. “It can take hold much later, after everyone else has moved on,” he added. “There is a deep feeling of being tarnished, unworthy. People can really struggle.” Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth, a former infantry platoon leader, seemed to recognize the risk of asking troops to operate beyond ethical and legal boundaries in 2016, when Donald Trump was calling for the use of torture and the killing of terrorists’ families as he ran for office.

“He says, go ahead and kill the families,” Mr. Hegseth said on Fox News in 2016. “Go ahead and torture. Go ahead and go further than waterboarding. What happens when people follow those orders, or don’t follow them?”



President Donald Trump and officials of his administration, including Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth, at right, have defended the boat strikes. Doug Mills/The New York Times

The troops who do this work are trained to execute orders quickly with little discussion. The orders come from “the customer,” military jargon for whichever command authority requests the mission. For at least some of the boat strikes, the customer has been SEAL Team Six, which reports to Adm. Frank Bradley, the head of Special Operations Command, and to Mr. Hegseth.

Military personnel have little if any say over the assignments they get or the orders they receive. Unlike civilians, they cannot simply quit their jobs. And in almost all circumstances, refusing an order is a crime that can lead to prison time.

Military personnel are allowed — and, in fact, are obliged — to refuse illegal orders. But to do so would probably result in swift punishment, while determining the actual legality of the order could drag on in court for months or years, according to Brenner Fissell, a law professor at Villanova University.

When a legally dubious order is given, he said, “the individual is in a horrible bind: If they refuse, they will likely immediately be charged with a crime, maybe put in jail. At some point, maybe, a judge may realize they were right, but at that point they have lost their job and become an outcast.

“There is huge incentive to just obey, even if you deeply, deeply don’t agree with what is happening.”

Mr. Fissell helps run the Orders Project, an organization that connects troops with independent lawyers who can advise them. Such groups say a small number of troops have contacted them with concerns, but none wanted to voice them publicly.

The quick video clips of fiery missile strikes that Mr. Hegseth has posted on social media can make the operations seem like a video game. Military personnel see something much more real.

The teams that manage airstrikes often watch potential targets for days beforehand. They may see a boat crew loading drugs, but they may also see them hug their children before casting off. After a strike, trained analysts view the aftermath — often in high-definition color — to determine how many people were wounded, how many were killed, and how many were civilians. That may mean watching people slowly die.

In the first of the boat strikes, two wounded survivors clung to the wreckage for nearly an hour and signaled for help before a second missile was ordered, killing them.

A sensor operator takes part in a simulated MQ-9 Reaper drone strike mission in 2024. U.S. Air Force photo by Senior Airman Deanna Muir

Because moral injury depends on each person's individual sense of right and wrong, the same experience can hit people in different ways. Some many not be bothered at all.

"You don't know how it's going to affect you until you've actually been in the seat and done the job," said Bennet Miller a former Air Force intelligence analyst who worked on drone strikes in Syria and Iraq during the first Trump administration.

At that time, Mr. Trump had changed the rules governing airstrikes to loosen oversight. Large teams worked for a top secret task force, which was allowed to hit targets more often than before, based on less intelligence. The task force repeatedly ordered strikes, that hit homes and stores, people on the street and throngs of civilians seeking safety.

There was no public outcry at the time from troops working on the missions, but privately, people started to break down. Some wept. Some turned to drugs. Many left the career field as soon as their assignments were over.

In recent years the Air Force has assigned psychologists and chaplains to many drone units, in recognition of the persistent problems. Southern Command, which oversees the boat strikes, did not immediately respond to questions about how it planned to address the risk of moral injury.

Mr. Miller said his work started to haunt him after his team followed an Afghan man who the customer said was a top Taliban financier. They watched him dine with his family and play with his children. Then one morning as he walked out of his house, the customer gave the order to kill him.

A week later, the same name reappeared on the strike list, and Mr. Miller realized his team had been ordered to kill the wrong person. Similar mistakes happened twice more with other targets, he said.

“We could no longer trust that the intelligence was good,” he said.

Mr. Miller said he had felt trapped, unable to refuse work that he believed was wrong. Eventually, he became suicidal and was hospitalized in 2019, and the Air Force medically retired him.

He said in an interview that his thoughts have lately been with the many people who have to carry out the boat strikes.

“I just hope they are getting taken care of,” he said. “And if they do raise concerns about the mission, hopefully someone can pull them off the line to get help, rather than punish them.”

Dave Philipps writes about war, the military and veterans and covers The Pentagon for The Times.