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CIA Drone Operators Oppose Strikes as Helping al-Qaeda

Posted By Gareth Porter

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Some CIA officers involved in the agency's drone strikes program in Pakistan and elsewhere are privately expressing their opposition to the program within the agency, because it is helping al-Qaeda and its allies recruit, according to a retired military officer in contact with them.

"Some of the CIA operators are concerned that, because of its blowback effect, it is doing more harm than good," said Jeffrey Addicott, former legal adviser to U.S. Special Forces and director of the Center for Terrorism Law at St Mary's University in San Antonio, Texas, in an interview with IPS.

Addicott said the CIA operatives he knows have told him the drone strikes are being used effectively by al-Qaeda and Taliban leaders to recruit more militants.

CIA officers "are very upset" with the drone strike policy, Addicott said. "They'll do what the boss says, but they view it as a harmful exercise."

"They say we're largely killing rank and file Pakistani Taliban, and they are the ones who are agitated by the campaign," he added.

Because the drone strikes kill innocent civilians and bystanders along with leaders from far away, they "infuriate the Muslim male," said Addicott, thus making them more

willing to join the movement. The men in Pakistan's tribal region "view Americans as cowards and weasels," he added.

Addicott retired from the U.S. Army as a lieutenant colonel in 2000 after serving for six years as senior legal adviser to the Special Operations Forces but is still a consultant for the U.S. military on issues of terrorism and law.

Addicott said the CIA officers expressing concern about the blowback effects of the drone policy are "mid-grade and below."

They learned about the impact of drone strikes on recruiting by extremist leaders in Pakistan from intelligence gathered by CIA and the National Security Agency, which intercepts electronic communications, according to Addicott.

They have informed high-level CIA officials about their concerns that the program is backfiring, Addicott told IPS.

"The people at the top are not believers," said Addicott, referring to the CIA. "They know that the objective is not going to be achieved."

The complaints by CIA operatives about the drone strikes' blowback effect reported by Addicott are identical to warnings by military and intelligence officials reported in April 2009 by Jonathan Landay of McClatchy newspapers. Landay quoted an intelligence official with deep involvement in both Afghanistan and Pakistan as saying al-Qaeda and the Taliban had used the strikes in propaganda to "portray Americans as cowards who are afraid to face their enemies and risk death."

The official called the operations "a major catalyst" for the jihadi movement in Pakistan.

A military official involved in counterterrorism operations told Landay the drone strikes were a "recruiting windfall for the Pakistani Taliban."

The CIA operatives' opposition to the drone strikes program extends to Afghanistan, Yemen, Somalia and Sudan, all of which now have confirmed deaths from drone strikes, according to Addicott.

The official goal of the geographical expansion of drone strikes is to destroy or disrupt al-Qaeda. But al-Qaeda is less a major organization than "a mentality" in most Middle Eastern countries, Addicott said, and the CIA officers fear that the strikes will only reinforce that way of thinking.

Addicott said the drone program has been driven by President Barack Obama, rather than by the CIA. "Obama's trying to show people that we're winning," he added.

The program was originally authorized by President George W. Bush against a relatively short list of high-level al-Qaeda officials, and with highly restrictive conditions on

approval of each strike. The strike could not be approved unless the target was identified with high confidence, and a complete assessment of "collateral damage" had to ensure against significant civilian casualties.

In early 2008, however, Bush approved the removal of previous restraints. As recounted by David Sanger in his 2009 book, "The Inheritance," Bush authorized strikes against targets merely based on visual evidence of a "typical" al-Qaeda motorcade or a group entering a house that had been linked to al-Qaeda or its Pakistani Taliban allies.

As a top national security aide to Bush acknowledged to Sanger, the shift was "risky" because, "you can hit the wrong house or mistakenly misidentify the motorcade."

It also meant that anyone who could be linked in some way to al-Qaeda, the Taliban or "associated forces" could now be targeted for drone attacks.

The Obama administration has continued to justify the program as aimed at high-value targets, suggesting that it can degrade al-Qaeda as an organization by a "decapitation" strategy, according to Addicott. However administration officials now privately admit that the objective of the program is to "demoralize the rank and file," he said.

That won't work, according to Addicott, because, "These are tribal people. They don't view life and death the way we expect them to."

In effect, the drone strikes program has become an "attrition" strategy for Pakistan, Addicott said.

Such a strategy in Pakistan's tribal region appears to be futile. Madrassas in the region have churned out tens of thousands of young men with militant views, and their activities are spread across hundreds of sites in the region. A U.S. military intelligence official told Bill Roggio of The Long War Journal in 2009 that there were 157 training camps and "more than 400 support locations" in the tribal northwest.

Within the administration, it appears that the logic behind the program is that it has to be seen to be doing something about al-Qaeda. "The argument I get from people associated with the program," said Micah Zenko, a fellow in Conflict Prevention at the Council on Foreign Relations, "is the same as the one [CIA Director Leon] Panetta gave last year."

"Very frankly," Panetta declared May 18, 2009, "it's the only game in town in terms of confronting or trying to disrupt the al-Qaeda leadership."

Zenko, who has studied the bureaucratic in-fighting surrounding such limited uses of military force, told IPS drone strikes have appealed to the Obama administration because they offer "clear results that are obtained quickly and are easily measured."

All the other tools that might be used to try to reduce al-Qaeda influence in Pakistan and elsewhere take a long time, require cooperation among multiple actors and have no powerful political constituency behind them, Zenko observed.

Dissent from those who are involved in the program itself has little effect when it is up against what is perceived as political pressure to show progress against al-Qaeda — no matter how illusory.