

Obama's Lies About Drone Kills Exposed

by Edward Spannaus

April 15—The claim by President Obama and senior Administration officials, that U.S. drone strikes only target top leaders of al-Qaeda and associated forces who are planning attacks on the United States, has been shown again to be an outright lie—and one that has serious national security implications for the United States.

On April 9, McClatchy newspapers published a report by Jonathan Landay, based on a study of top-secret U.S. intelligence, reporting on CIA drone strikes in the Pakistan tribal areas bordering Afghanistan during the 2006-08 and the 2010-11 time periods, with an emphasis on the latter period during which Obama dramatically escalated the drone campaign.

Landay's evaluation is that very few of those killed by drone strikes were actually al-Qaeda leaders, and that much of the time, drone operators had no idea whom they were killing.

Among the findings of the report:

“At least 265 of up to 482 people who the U.S. intelligence reports estimated the CIA killed during a 12-month period ending in September 2011 were not senior al Qaeda leaders but instead were ‘assessed’ as Afghan, Pakistani and unknown extremists. Drones killed only six top al Qaeda leaders in those months, according to news media accounts.

“Forty-three of 95 drone strikes reviewed for that period hit groups other than al Qaeda, including the Haqqani network, several Pakistani Taliban factions and the unidentified individuals described only as ‘foreign fighters’ and ‘other militants.’

“At other times, the CIA killed people who only were suspected, associated with, or who probably belonged to militant groups.”

The report also notes: “[T]he Obama administration . . . has never acknowledged the use of so-called ‘signature strikes,’ in which unidentified individuals are killed after surveillance shows behavior the U.S. government associates with terrorists, such as visiting compounds linked to al Qaeda leaders or carrying weapons. Nor has it disclosed an explicit list of al Qaeda’s ‘associated forces’ beyond the Afghan Taliban.”

Obama's Lies

The publication of the McClatchy report has elicited unusually strong denunciations of Obama's policy from even establishment figures, such as the Council on Foreign Relations' Micah Zenko, who stated on April 10, that Landay's study “is the most important reporting on U.S. drone strikes to date because Landay, using U.S. government assessments, plainly demonstrates that the claim repeatedly made by President Obama and his senior aides—that targeted killings are limited only to officials, members, and affiliates of al Qaeda who pose an imminent threat of attack on the U.S. homeland—is false.”

Obama has repeatedly stated that he has only authorized CIA drone strikes against “specific senior operational leaders of al Qaeda and associated forces” who were involved in the Sept. 11, 2001, terror attacks, or who are plotting “imminent” violent attacks against Americans. Landay quotes Obama in a Sept. 6, 2012 CNN interview: “It has to be a threat that is serious and not speculative. . . . It has to be a situation in which we can't capture the individual before they move forward on some sort of operational plot against the United States.”

Obama's former counter-terrorism advisor, now-CIA Director, John Brennan, has given the most detailed explanation of the U.S. drone program, Landay notes, citing an April 30, 2012 speech in which he referred to al-Qaeda 73 times, the Afghan Taliban 3 times, and didn't mention any other group. “We only authorize a particular operation against a specific individual if we have a high degree of confidence that the individual being targeted is indeed the terrorist we are pursuing,” Brennan lied. Zenko quotes other Administration officials, such as Attorney General Eric Holder and State Department Legal Advisor Harold Koh, also saying the U.S. targets are senior al-Qaeda leaders who are planning imminent attacks on the United States.

Who Is Being Killed?

The fact is that often the CIA—and the military's Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC), which runs its own, parallel drone program—have no idea whom they are killing. So-called “signature strikes” are based on patterns of behavior, not individual identification. Allegedly suspicious behavior, such as trucks traveling together, or proximity to suspected terrorist strongholds or gathering points, is sufficient to target such individuals. Landay points out that the reports he studied, “reveal a breadth of targeting that is compli-

cated by the culture in the restive region of Pakistan where militants and ordinary tribesmen dress the same, and carrying a weapon is part of the centuries-old tradition of the Pashtun ethnic group.”

Glenn Greenwald, in his review of the McClatchy report, published in the April 11 *Guardian*, recalls that the *New York Times* once reported that the joke around the State Department was that “when the CIA ‘sees three guys doing jumping jacks,’ the agency thinks it is a terrorist training camp,” and that “men loading a truck with fertilizer could be bombmakers—but they might also be farmers.”

The CFR’s Zenko notes the Administration’s claims are belied by the fact that, already in the Summer of 2008, when the Bush Administration first authorized signature strikes in Pakistan, “the vast majority of drone-strike victims were from groups focused on establishing some form of Sharia law, attacking Pakistani security forces, and destabilizing Afghanistan by supporting the Taliban and attacking U.S. service members.” Zenko adds that “The United States essentially replicated the Vietnam War strategy of bombing the Vietcong’s safe haven in Cambodia.” And this also means, as Zenko has pointed out, that the CIA and JSOC are operating “as a counterinsurgency arm of the Pakistani air force.”

The Haqqani network, headed by Jalaluddin Haqqani, an aging former anti-Soviet guerrilla fighter and minister in the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, has been among the groups prominently targeted for U.S. drone strikes in Pakistan, Landay notes, but it was not designated as a terrorist group by the U.S. during the period covered by the reports, nor has it ever been implicated in a plot against the U.S. homeland. In the one-year period ending in September 2011, the Obama Administration launched at least 15 airstrikes against the Haqqani network, or locations associated with it, killing at least 96 people.

The vagueness of intelligence on those killed in air strikes is also shown by Landay, who writes that the reports he reviewed, “estimated that the CIA killed scores of other individuals in 2010 and 2011 in strikes on other non-al Qaeda groups categorized as suspected extremists and unidentified ‘foreign fighters,’ or ‘other militants.’ Some died in what appeared to be signature strikes, their vehicles blown to pieces sometimes only a few days after being monitored visiting the sites of earlier drone attacks, or driving between compounds linked to al Qaeda or other groups.”

Blowback

Obama’s enthusiastic escalation of the drone-kilings, which were begun, on a much more limited scale, by the Bush-Cheney Administration, does not enhance U.S. national security, as he and his backers from both parties claim. Rather, he is putting the nation in peril in at least two crucial respects:

First, the indiscriminate use of air strikes and their high civilian casualties, are creating many more enemies for the United States, than they are eliminating.¹

Second, they are setting a precedent for other countries to justify their own killings of perceived enemies, which will come back to haunt the United States. “Other governments won’t just emulate U.S. practice but (will adopt) America’s justification for targeted killings,” Landay quotes Micah Zenko as saying. “When there is such a disconnect between who the administration says it kills and who it (actually) kills, that hypocrisy itself is a very dangerous precedent that other countries will emulate.”

1. See Edward Spannaus, “Drone Strikes as Strategic Folly: Obama Is al-Qaeda’s No. 1 Recruiter,” *EIR*, Jan. 18, 2013.



The Al-Qaeda Executive

Financed and deployed by the British-Saudi Empire, al-Qaeda has been protected by the Obama Administration to accomplish the Empire’s global war. In this feature [video](#), LaRouchePAC documents President Obama’s use of the al-Qaeda networks to overthrow Qaddafi in Libya, and to carry out bloody regime-change against Assad in Syria, by the same forces who attacked the U.S. consulate in Benghazi.

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