

Obama widens drone attacks in Pakistan

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The Obama administration has granted secret permission to the CIA to carry out more indiscriminate drone missile strikes in Pakistan, even as protests over civilian casualties caused by the attacks continue to grow.

Officials revealed this week that the US intelligence agency is operating under rules that allow it to target suspected “militants” in Pakistan based upon “pattern of life” analyses, without even ascertaining their identity. For the most part, they acknowledge, the names of those assassinated with Hellfire missiles fired from Predator and the larger Reaper drones are never known.

This description of the drone program flies in the face of official propaganda, which has presented the missile attacks as part of a carefully prepared exercise in “targeted killings” aimed against high-ranking leaders of Al Qaeda and the Taliban.

But according to the *Los Angeles Times*, which cited current and former intelligence officials, “The CIA received secret permission to attack a wider range of targets, including militants whose names are not known, as part of a dramatic expansion of drone strikes in Pakistan’s border region.”

The newspaper reported that the initial permission to broaden the drone campaign came during the last year of the Bush administration, but has been continued and even widened under the presidency of Barack Obama.

“Instead of just a few dozen attacks per year, CIA operated unmanned aircraft now carry out multiple missile strikes each week against safe houses, training camps and other hiding places used by militants in the tribal belt bordering Afghanistan,” the *LA Times* notes.

There have been 34 missile strikes so far this year, at least two every week, according to figures compiled by the New America Foundation. This compares to 53 for all of last year and 30 during the last year of the Bush administration.

Intelligence officials report that the size of the drone fleet being deployed over Pakistan has doubled since Obama took office in January 2009.

The *LA Times* report states that “some analysts said that

permitting the CIA to kill individuals whose names are unknown creates a serious risk of killing innocent people. Civilian deaths caused by Western arms are a source of deep anger in Pakistan and Afghanistan.”

Indeed, while claiming that only a handful of civilians have been slain in the missile attacks, US officials acknowledge that the CIA does not know the names of the more than 500 people it admits to having killed.

According to the New America Foundation, of the up to 247 people reported killed in attacks carried out so far in 2010 only seven have been publicly identified as “militants.”

Pakistani officials have charged that the overwhelming majority of the victims of the CIA missile attacks are civilians, most of them women and children. They have placed the number of civilians killed at over 700 last year alone.

Given this scale of carnage, the deaths of civilians cannot be viewed as a matter of unfortunate accidents, but rather constitute a deliberate reign of terror that is being imposed upon what Washington views as a hostile population inhabiting the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region.

These assassinations by remote-controlled pilotless aircraft have provoked mounting anger throughout Pakistan itself. Investigators have reported that Pakistani-American Faisal Shahzad, the suspect in last weekend’s abortive Times Square car bombing attempt in New York City, has stated that he decided to attempt the terrorist attack after a return to his native country, where he saw the bloodshed caused by the missile strikes.

The public statements signaling a further widening of the drone campaign and a loosening of the restrictions on who may be targeted come just a week after legal experts testified before Congress, warning that both those who order these attacks and those who actually execute them could be prosecuted for war crimes.

“Only a combatant—a lawful combatant—may carry out the use of killing with combat drones,” Mary Ellen O’Connell, a professor from the University of Notre

Dame law school, testified at the April 28 hearing held by the National Security and Foreign Affairs Subcommittee of the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform.

“The CIA and civilian contractors have no right to do so,” she continued. “They do not wear uniforms, and they are not in the chain of command. And most importantly, they are not trained in the law of armed conflict.”

David Glazier, a professor from Loyola law school in Los Angeles, California, concurred with this opinion, stating that CIA personnel are “clearly not lawful combatants, [and] if you are not a privileged combatant, you simply don’t have immunity from domestic law for participating in hostilities.”

He went on to warn that “any CIA personnel who participate in this armed conflict run the risk of being prosecuted under the national laws of the places where [the combat actions] take place.” CIA operatives involved in the drone program, he said, could be found guilty of war crimes.

The American Civil Liberties Union issued a letter to President Obama in conjunction with the congressional hearing, noting recent reports that this administration had targeted a US citizen living in Yemen—the American-born Muslim cleric Anwar al-Awlaki—for assassination by means of a drone attack.

The letter expressed “profound concern about recent reports indicating that you have authorized a program that contemplates the killing of suspected terrorists—including US citizens—located far away from zones of actual armed conflict. If accurately described, this program violates international law and, at least insofar as it affects US citizens, it is also unconstitutional.”



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