

# Obama administration uses Blackwater in drone killings

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In the wake of Thursday's revelations that the Bush administration hired Blackwater USA to carry out assassinations of alleged Al Qaeda operatives, more information has come to light regarding the intimate and ongoing relationship between the shadowy paramilitary security contractor and the American state.

In spite of Blackwater's well-established record of indiscriminate killings of Iraqi civilians, the Obama administration has retained its services in Afghanistan, where a new report reveals that Blackwater has been contracted to work with the unmanned Predator drones that carry out assassinations and terrorize villages in eastern and southern Afghanistan and the border regions of Pakistan.

Under Obama, the close links between the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and Blackwater have continued. These relationships reveal not only the corruption and conflicts-of-interest that are ubiquitous in the multi-trillion dollar world of military contracting. It raises the question of where the US military—ostensibly controlled by the elected representatives of the American people—ends, and Blackwater, a for-profit entity accountable to no one, comprised largely of former US military special operations personnel, begins.

It is clear, moreover, that what has so far been revealed regarding Washington's relationship to Blackwater—pacts concluded behind the backs of the American people—is only the tip of the iceberg. The military-intelligence community, a state-within-a-state that is connected with Blackwater through numerous personal and money ties, is mounting a campaign to prevent further information from coming to light.

The Obama administration has carried over from the Bush administration Blackwater's critical role in the use of the remote-controlled Predator drones that have killed many civilians in Afghanistan and Pakistan, a Friday report by the *New York Times* reveals. The drones' purported purpose is to assassinate Al Qaeda leaders. Their deployment in Pakistan is in clear violation of international law, as the US has never declared war on the South Asian state.

There exists no substantive distinction between the Bush administration's hiring of Blackwater to carry out "targeted assassinations" in Iraq with snipers and ambushes, and the Obama administration's farming out to the military security firm its drone assassination program in the "Af-Pak theater," whose victims have consisted predominantly of civilians.

Blackwater, which has since renamed itself Xe Services LLC ("Xe" is pronounced "Zee"), provides security to "hidden bases in Pakistan and Afghanistan" that carry out the drone attacks which have dramatically increased since Obama took office, the *Times* reported. Blackwater personnel also "assemble and load Hellfire missiles and 500-pound laser-guided bombs," work formerly carried out by the CIA.

For years the CIA has launched its Predator attacks from a base in Shamsi, Pakistan, but has recently added a second, secret base in Jalalabad, Afghanistan, anonymous sources have told the *Times*. Most drone missions are now launched from Jalalabad, with CIA agents operating the attacks, and launching the missiles, from agency headquarters in Langley, Virginia.

Blackwater began assisting the CIA in Afghanistan after gaining a contract to protect a new intelligence station in Kabul in 2002. Company employees who work on the Predator missions are trained by the US Air Force at a base in Nevada.

The Defense Department and the CIA are not the only agencies working with Blackwater in the Obama administration. Since the Obama took office, the State Department has contracted out more than \$174 million in security work to the company in Iraq and Afghanistan, a recent analysis by *The Nation* reveals.

In its most infamous episode, in September 2007 Blackwater agents killed 17 unarmed Iraqi civilians in Baghdad's Nisour Square. The agents, who investigators have determined were unprovoked, opened fire with machine guns and rocket launchers without warning on motorists and pedestrians, and continued to kill civilians as they attempted to surrender and flee. Five Blackwater guards were ultimately indicted for murder.

In a lawsuit initiated by survivors of Iraqis killed in the Nisour Square massacre, two former Blackwater agents testified that Blackwater owner Erik Prince "and his employees murdered, or had murdered, one or more persons who have provided information, or who were planning to provide information, to the federal authorities about the ongoing criminal conduct" of the company.

A report issued by Giovanni Claudio Fava, the European Parliament's *rapporteur* on the CIA secret prisons and "extraordinary renditions", concluded that Blackwater subsidiaries played a critical role in conducting the extraordinary rendition program that abducted "terror suspects" and shipped them via secret flights to a global network of detention and torture centers.

Despite Blackwater's association with extraordinary rendition

and the killing of innocent civilians, Obama has retained its services, a decision doubtlessly based in part on Blackwater's ties to powerful elements within the military-intelligence apparatus.

"Over the years, Blackwater has hired several former top CIA officials," the *Times* notes. Among these is Cofer Black. Black, who headed the CIA's counter-terrorism center from 1999, two years before 9/11, until 2004, was one of the architects of the CIA's extraordinary rendition program. He left the agency to become vice president of Blackwater in 2005.

The same year, the CIA's associate deputy director of operations, Rob Richer, resigned from the agency to become Blackwater's vice president of intelligence.

Commenting on the propensity for CIA personnel to go to work for Blackwater, former CIA director Porter J. Goss (2004-2006) explained that "there are some folks at retirement age who still feel like they have some horsepower left, so they go off into a consulting business and make themselves available."

Another possible explanation is that the agency encouraged key personnel to join the firm as part of an effort to "outsource" criminal activity, including assassinations, to a private company unaccountable to the Congress or the American people.

Leading figures of Blackwater are also tied to the Republican Party as well as far-right and fascistic organizations. Prince has given liberally to Republican candidates and right-wing causes. His father co-founded with Gary Bauer the right-wing, Christian fundamentalist Family Research Council.

Leon Panetta claims that he only learned of the secret assassination program involving Blackwater six months after he was appointed by Obama to head the CIA. And Congress had been kept in the dark on the program for seven years prior to Panetta's secret Congressional testimony. Evidently, the program was kept secret at the behest of Vice President Dick Cheney. After Panetta's testimony, members of Congress kept the information on Blackwater's role secret from the public until the *Times* report surfaced Thursday.

Leading members of Congress continue to deny the public information on the CIA-Blackwater assassination program, including Senator Diane Feinstein, of California, the Democrat who chairs the Senate Intelligence Committee. Feinstein has refused to comment on the explosive revelations, beyond issuing a generic statement on outsourcing.

"It is too easy to contract out work that you don't want to accept responsibility for," Feinstein said. "I have believed for a long time that the Intelligence Community is over-reliant on contractors to carry out its work. This is especially a problem when contractors are used to carry out activities that are inherently governmental."

In other words, Congressional Democrats are not opposed to the assassination program *per se*; they merely prefer that it be carried out by CIA employees rather than private contractors.

The CIA is legally barred from carrying out assassinations by an executive order issued by President Gerald Ford in 1976, after the agency's numerous assassinations and attempted killings in previous decades earned it the epithet of "Murder Inc." the world over.

Panetta has sought to cover for the CIA. He reputedly told Intelligence Committee members that he brought the matter to

their attention not because he thought it was illegal, but because the program had moved beyond a planning stage and now required legislative review, even though he intended to cancel the program. But officials inside or close to the agency say that Cheney offered a different rationale for keeping it secret. Cheney claimed that Congress had already given the CIA authority to assassinate Al Qaeda leaders.

The notion that the program remained in the planning stages has been dismissed by anonymous sources close to the CIA. "It's wrong to think this counterterrorism program was confined to briefing slides or doodles on a cafeteria napkin," one anonymous official told the *Washington Post*. "It went well beyond that."

This has not stopped the media from repeatedly assuring the public that the assassination program "did not successfully capture or kill any terrorist suspects," as the *Post* put it. The basis for this bald assertion is evidently the CIA's own account of Blackwater's activities.

As is well known, Blackwater killed with impunity in Iraq. There is no reason to believe that it failed to use the *carte blanche* provided by the CIA's assassination program to carry out similar murders elsewhere.

The recent revelations notwithstanding, the full extent of Blackwater's activities in Iraq, Afghanistan, and in the secret flights and torture chambers of the "extraordinary rendition" program remains hidden.

On Monday, declassified sections of an internal CIA report issued in 2004, which reputedly criticized the use of torture at secret prisons, are expected to be released.

The military-intelligence apparatus is digging in its heels against any investigation or hearings, even of a symbolic character, into its illegal activities, with Goss recently warning of "a hurricane coming through Washington that is aimed right at the intelligence community," and another former Bush CIA Director, Michael Hayden, openly defending Blackwater.

Goss and Hayden know that at every juncture, the Obama administration has quickly capitulated to such pressure, and that it is determined to cover up the illegal methods of its predecessor as it continues the "war on terror." In recent months, Obama has promised that there will be no investigations into the abundant evidence that top Bush officials ordered and even oversaw torture, and has moved to suppress the release of photos documenting US intelligence agents and military personnel brutalizing prisoners in Iraq and Afghanistan.



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