

CIA takes revenge with missile strikes in Pakistan

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In an apparent campaign of revenge at least 20 people have died in drone missile attacks in Pakistan since the December 30 suicide bombing that killed seven CIA operatives and a Jordanian intelligence agent.

The most deadly of the strikes by the CIA's Predator drone aircraft took place Wednesday in the Datta Khel region of North Waziristan, near the Afghanistan border.

Citing unnamed intelligence officials, the Associated Press reported that one of the pilotless drones fired two missiles into a house, killing seven people. This was followed more than an hour later by another missile, launched as local villagers struggled to rescue survivors and pull bodies from the rubble. This second strike killed at least another five people. Some Pakistani media put the total death toll from the two missile strikes at 15.

The Islamabad-based International News Network Web site reported that the missile strikes had sown widespread panic in the area. There are growing fears in Pakistan that the response to last week's suicide bomb attack at Forward Operating Base Chapman in Afghanistan's Khost province, just across the border from North Waziristan, will be an intensified and sustained campaign of drone attacks that will claim many more lives.

The Predator strikes have provoked widespread anger in Pakistan, both because of the loss of life and the blatant trampling on the country's sovereignty. Government officials have also routinely condemned the attacks, though it is evident that Islamabad has allowed the strikes, many of which are launched from a covert airfield in the Pakistani province of Baluchistan.

The CIA agents and private contractors killed at the base in Afghanistan were responsible for choosing

targets for the drone attacks.

The bomber who killed them, Humam Khalil Abu-Mulal al-Balawi, was a Jordanian doctor, regarded by the US intelligence agency as one of its most important "assets" in the covert war on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border.

In the wake of the bombing, intelligence officials have confirmed that Balawi lured the operatives, including the second highest ranking CIA officer in Afghanistan, to the base with the promise of intelligence on Ayman al-Zawahiri, an Egyptian doctor widely considered to be the real leader of Al Qaeda.

CBS News reported Wednesday that Balawi had provided the CIA with "actionable intelligence" used to choose targets for missile attacks. Given that Balawi was evidently working for Al Qaeda while pretending to be infiltrating it, it can be assumed that the intelligence he provided was false and missiles were directed at targets that had nothing to do with either Al Qaeda or armed elements fighting US occupation forces in Afghanistan.

The bombing at Base Chapman represents a major setback for the CIA campaign in Pakistan and threatens to undermine the Obama administration's strategy for escalating the US military intervention in the region.

The incident has also raised some troubling questions for the CIA.

Balawi was offered to the CIA by Jordan's General Intelligence Department, the monarchial regime's secret police agency, also known as the Mukhabarat. One of its operatives, Ali bin Zaid, was also killed in the December 30 bombing. Bin Zaid was reportedly Balawi's "handler."

The Jordanian doctor was arrested by the Mukhabarat in early 2009 after he volunteered to join a medical mission to Gaza following the Israeli invasion of the

Palestinian territory. He was supposedly recruited to infiltrate Al Qaeda while in prison and then dispatched to Pakistan.

The incident has brought into focus the continuing intimate relationship between the CIA and the Jordanian Mukhabarat. The *Washington Post* quoted former CIA agent Jamie Smith as saying that the Jordanian secret police are “particularly prized for their skill in both interrogating captives and cultivating informants.”

Indeed, Jordan was a central hub in the practice of “extraordinary rendition” in which the CIA abducted people from a number of countries, detained them without charges and sent them to third countries—among the most prominent, Jordan—to be interrogated under torture.

Human rights groups have repeatedly pointed to the “expertise” of the Mukhabarat, which routinely tortures Jordanian political dissidents.

As the *Post* reported, the “special relationship” between the CIA and the Mukhabarat is so close that “the CIA liaison officer in Amman enjoys full, unescorted access to the GID’s fortress-like headquarters.”

For the Jordanian regime, these reports are extremely unwelcome. It has attempted to hide its role as Washington’s proxy because of the overwhelming opposition to US policies within Jordan and throughout the Middle East.

As for the CIA’s role, the continuation and deepening of these ties raises the question of whether the Obama administration is still utilizing the “special expertise” of the Jordanian secret police.

The other fallout from the bombing is the identification of two of its victims as employees of Xe, formerly known as Blackwater, the most prominent supplier of mercenaries for the US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. They were apparently employed as CIA contractors.

CIA Director Leon Panetta announced last month that the agency had severed a previously secret contract under which Blackwater-Xe contractors were employed loading missiles and servicing Predator drones in Pakistan. Previously, Panetta had revealed to the US Congress the existence of a secret assassination program that was to employ Blackwater mercenaries. He claimed that it had never gone beyond the planning

stages.

It would appear that the company continues to operate as a surrogate for the CIA under another, previously undisclosed contract.

The firm changed its name from Blackwater to Xe in an attempt to shed its infamous reputation, which included the slaughter of 17 Iraqi civilians in Baghdad in September 2007.



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