

Obama's covert wars

Peter Symonds
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A lengthy article in the *New York Times* on Sunday entitled “A Secret Assault on Terrorism Widens on Two Continents” has provided a glimpse into the extent of the Obama administration’s covert wars. Obama has not only continued, he has expanded the murderous operations that were waged under the banner of the “war on terror” by the CIA and Pentagon during the Bush administration.

As the authors explain: “In roughly a dozen countries—from the deserts of North Africa, to the mountains of Pakistan, to former Soviet republics [in Central Asia] crippled by ethnic and religious strife—the United States has significantly increased military and intelligence operations, pursuing the enemy using robotic drones and commando teams, paying contractors to spy and training local operatives to chase terrorists.”

Obama has dramatically intensified the CIA’s drone missile attacks against alleged insurgents inside areas of Pakistan bordering Afghanistan. The White House has “approved raids inside Somalia,” it has “carried out clandestine operations from Kenya,” and it has collaborated with European allies in covert operations in North Africa, including a recent French strike in Algeria.

The most detailed information concerns the Obama administration’s expanding covert war inside Yemen, where the US military has carried out four air strikes since last December, killing dozens of civilians, including the deputy governor of Marib Province, Jabir al Shabwani, in May. The article incidentally confirms what has not previously been acknowledged: that all of the air strikes were carried out by the United States.

These attacks are just one aspect of American operations inside Yemen. “The Pentagon and the CIA have quietly bulked up the number of their operatives at the embassy in Sanaa, the Yemeni capital, over the past year,” the *Times* explains. The US is also training elite

Yemeni units, providing equipment and sharing intelligence to support Yemeni operations against Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula.

While the *Times* article acknowledges some political risks are involved, it is uncritical, even laudatory in tone. Under the banner of the “war on terror,” the US is aggressively prosecuting its ambitions for strategic and economic dominance throughout the energy-rich regions of the Middle East and Central Asia. The neo-colonial occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan have been extended into a series of covert wars aimed at consolidating the American presence and expanding Washington’s political influence.

In Yemen, the Obama administration is helping to prop up the dictatorial regime of President Ali Abdullah Saleh, who is notorious for his suppression of political opposition. He came to power in what was North Yemen in 1978 and now runs a unified Yemen as a family fiefdom. The Yemeni military and security apparatus, which Washington is training and equipping, is firmly under the control of Saleh’s family members, who will undoubtedly use its improved capacities against political opponents and critics.

Obama’s secret wars are proceeding with little or no congressional oversight and scant regard for international or American law. As the *Times* pointed out, the White House is benefitting from “a unique political landscape,” with support from Republicans and Democrats alike.

Earlier this year, the Pakistani newspaper, the *Dawn*, reported that at least 700 Pakistani civilians were killed in the CIA’s drone missile attacks during 2009. According to Amnesty International, the first US strike on Yemen last December was a cruise missile loaded with cluster bombs that killed more than 40 civilians over several days. None of these crimes has raised a murmur of opposition in the US political or media establishment.

Speaking to the *Times*, former top CIA officer Jack Devine raised concerns that the limited congressional oversight put in place after the notorious Iran-Contra affair in the 1980s—involving the illegal funneling of money from secret arms sales to Iran to right-wing Contra rebels in Nicaragua—had been weakened. For the current covert operations, he said, “there are not clear rules.”

Under the Obama administration, the *Times* explained, the Pentagon has expanded its covert missions, which “typically operate with even less transparency and congressional oversight than traditional covert operations by the CIA.” The article reported: “Across the Middle East and elsewhere, Special Operations troops under secret ‘Execute Orders’ have conducted spying missions that were once the preserve of civilian intelligence agencies.”

Not surprisingly, the CIA and military operatives involved in US imperialism’s past crimes are directing or intimately involved in the present operations. Former CIA agent Duane Clarridge, who was indicted in 1991 in connection with the Iran-Contra affair, reemerged in Pakistan, helping to run one of several Pentagon-funded contractors providing intelligence to the US military.

Assistant Secretary of Defense Michael Vickers, who oversees the Pentagon’s expanding Special Operation Command, was a senior CIA agent who helped direct its huge covert war to oust the Soviet-backed regime in Afghanistan in the 1980s. The CIA helped arm and train not only the Afghan mujahedin, but also assisted the thousands of Islamist militants from the Middle East, North Africa and Asia who passed through Al Qaeda (the Base) to fight in Afghanistan. Vickers, along with Defense Secretary (and former CIA head) Robert Gates, was one of several top officials appointed by Bush and kept in place by Obama.

In a sign of things to come, Obama last month appointed John Bennett to head the CIA’s National Clandestine Service, formerly known as the Directorate of Operations. Among his previous assignments, Bennett headed the CIA’s Special Activities Division, which handles highly sensitive spying and paramilitary missions. According to *Newsweek*, his last posting was as CIA station chief in Islamabad, where he was intimately involved in supervising drone missile strikes inside Pakistan.

Obama’s expansion of covert operations into some of the world’s most unstable countries and regions is reckless and inflammatory. His extension of the Afghan war into neighboring Pakistan, for instance, has not only undermined the government in Islamabad and triggered a dangerous civil war, but is destabilising relations with India and throughout the Indian subcontinent. As the US aggressively pursues its interests through military means—overt and covert—its actions cut directly across the strategic interests of other major powers such as China, and threaten to provoke broader conflicts.

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