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### CIA Secrecy on Drone Attacks Data Hides Abuses

by Gareth Porter, June 13, 2009

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The U.S. Central Intelligence Agency's refusal to share with other agencies even the most basic data on the bombing attacks by remote-controlled unmanned predator drones in Pakistan's northwestern tribal region, combined with recent revelations that CIA operatives have been paying Pakistanis to identify the targets, suggests that managers of the drone attacks programs have been using the total secrecy surrounding the program to hide abuses and high civilian casualties.

Intelligence analysts have been unable to obtain either the list of military targets of the drone strikes or the actual results in terms of al-Qaeda or civilians killed, according to a Washington source familiar with internal discussion of the drone strike program. The source insisted on not being identified because of the extreme sensitivity of the issue.

"They can't find out anything about the program," the source told IPS. That has made it impossible for other government agencies to judge its real consequences, according to the source.

Since early 2009, Barack Obama administration officials have been claiming that the predator attacks in Pakistan have killed nine of 20 top al-Qaeda officials, but they have refused to disclose how many civilians have been killed in the strikes.

In April, *The News*, a newspaper in Lahore, Pakistan, published figures provided by Pakistani officials indicating that 687 civilians have been killed along with 14 al-Qaeda leaders in some 60 drone strikes since January 2008 – just over 50 civilians killed for every al-Qaeda leader.

A paper published this week by the influential pro-military Center for a New American Security (CNAS) criticizing the Obama administration's use of drone attacks in Pakistan says U.S. officials "vehemently dispute" the Pakistani figures but offers no further data on the program.

In an interview with IPS, Nathaniel C. Fick, the chief operating officer of CNAS, who coauthored the paper, said Pentagon officials claim privately that 300 al-Qaeda fighters have been killed in the drone attacks. However, those officials refuse to stipulate further just who they have included under that rubric, according to Fick, and have not offered any figure on civilian deaths.

What is needed is "a strict definition of the target set – a definition of who is al-Qaeda," said Fick.

Press reports that the CIA is paying Pakistani agents for identifying al-Qaeda targets by placing electronic chips at farmhouses supposedly inhabited by al-Qaeda officials, so they can be bombed by predator planes, has raised new questions about whether the CIA and the Obama administration have simply redefined al-Qaeda in order to cover up an abusive system and justify the program.

The initial story on the CIA payments for placing the chips by Carol Grisanti and Mushtaq Yusufzai of NBC News Apr. 17 was based on a confession by a 19-year-old in North Waziristan on a video released by the Taliban. In his confession, the young man says, "I was given 122 dollars to drop chips wrapped in a cigarette paper at al-Qaeda and Taliban houses. If I was successful, I was told, I would be given thousands of dollars."

He goes on to say, "I thought this was a very easy job. The money was so good so I started throwing the chips all over. I knew people were dying because of what I was doing, but I needed the money."

The video shows the man being shot as a spy for the United States.

A U.S. official told NBC news that the video was "extremist propaganda," but a story in *The Guardian* May 31 said residents of Waziristan, including one student identified as Taj Muhammad Wazir, had confirmed that tribesmen have been paid to lay the electronic devices to target drone strikes.

The knowledgeable Washington source told IPS the *Guardian* article is consistent with past CIA intelligence-gathering methods in Afghanistan and elsewhere. "We buy data," he said. "Everything is paid for."

The implication of the system of purchasing targeting information for drone strikes is that there is "no guarantee" that the people being targeted are officials of al-Qaeda or allied organizations, he said.

Fick, who is a veteran of the post-9/11 military operations in Afghanistan and the early phase of the Iraq war, said that kind of intelligence for targeting is "intrinsicly problematic."

Although the CNAS paper by Fick, Andrew Exum and David Kilcullen does not explicitly call for ending drone attacks, it is highly critical of the program, charging that the use of drones represents a "tactic... substituting for a strategy."

It concedes that, by "killing key leaders and hampering operations," the drone attacks against al-Qaeda and some other militants in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) "create a sense of insecurity among militants and constrain their interactions with suspected informers."

But it argues that the drone attacks have also "created a siege mentality among the Pashtun population in northwest Pakistan," and likened them to similar strikes against Islamic militants in Somalia in 2005-2006. The net result of those earlier strikes, the authors assert, was to anger the population and make the Islamic insurgents more popular.

The drone strikes in Pakistan are having a similar impact, not only in the tribal areas but in other provinces as well, the paper said. In a panel discussing the paper at the think tank's annual meeting Thursday, Exum, a former officer in Afghanistan, said, "We are not saying that the drone strikes are not part of a solution, but right now they are part of the problem."

The new CNAS criticism of drone strikes is of particular interest because of the close relationship between the think tank and CENTCOM commander Gen. David Petraeus, who was the keynote speaker at Thursday's conference. The new president of CNAS, John Nagl, is a former adviser to Petraeus and co-author of the Army's counterinsurgency manual. CNAS is widely regarded as reflecting the perspective of the Petraeus wing of the U.S. military.

Another co-author and former Petraeus aide, Australian David Kilcullen, who was also a senior fellow at CNAS last year, had already come out strongly against drone strikes as politically self-defeating.

However, Nagl himself told IPS that he disagrees with the CNAS paper's position on drone strikes. He said he believes the benefits of the strikes are greater than have been publicly communicated by the administration, and suggested the failure to release any more figures on the results could be attributed to a "culture of secrecy."



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mention of the issue in his presentation to the CNAS conference on Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan. The *Washington Post* reported s wrote in a secret May 27 assessment, "Anti-U.S. sentiment has already been increasing in Pakistan... especially in regard to reported drone strikes, which Pakistanis perceive to cause unacceptable civilian casualties."

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