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Two Former US Officials Criticize Obama's Counter-Productive Drone War

By John Glaser

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Two former US officials, one military general and another top counter-terrorism advisor for President Obama, have publicly denounced the drone wars in Pakistan and Yemen, saying they disproportionately kill civilians and generate anti-American sentiments that aid al-Qaeda recruitment efforts.

Michael Boyle, who was on Obama's counter-terrorism advisory group in the run-up to the 2008 election, writes in a study for the Chatham House journal International Affairs that Obama abandoned his pledge to restore respect for the rule of law following the Bush administration.

Obama "has been just as ruthless and indifferent to the rule of law as his predecessor...while President Bush issued a call to arms to defend 'civilisation' against the threat of terrorism, President Obama has waged his war on terror in the shadows, using drone strikes, special operations and sophisticated surveillance to fight a brutal covert war against al-Qaida and other Islamist networks," Boyle writes.

The study concludes that the Obama administration has been "successful in spinning the number of civilian casualties" downward by counting all military-age males they kill as combatants. Civilian casualties are likely to be far higher than so far acknowledged, Boyle said, and government claims to the contrary are "based on a highly selective and partial reading of the evidence."

“The result of the ‘guilt by association’ approach has been a gradual loosening of the standards by which the US selects targets for drone strikes,” the study says.

“The consequences can be seen in the targeting of mosques or funeral processions that kill non-combatants and tear at the social fabric of the regions where they occur. No one really knows the number of deaths caused by drones in these distant, sometimes ungoverned, lands.”

Stanley McChrystal, the former military general that Obama fired after he made disparaging remarks about the President to a reporter, is also speaking out against the drone war now.

“What scares me about drone strikes is how they are perceived around the world,” McChrystal said in an interview. “The resentment created by American use of unmanned strikes...is much greater than the average American appreciates. They are hated on a visceral level, even by people who’ve never seen one or seen the effects of one.”

McChrystal added that drones exacerbate a “perception of American arrogance.”

The retired general has a history of bluntness in this respect. McChrystal has also explained matter-of-factly to the *New York Times* how the US military “have shot an amazing number of people [in Afghanistan], but to my knowledge, none has ever proven to be a threat.” He also, rather adroitly, explained the logic of what he called “insurgent math.” That is, “for every innocent person you kill, you create 10 new enemies.”

Boyle says there is an urgent need for greater transparency because most Americans remained “unaware of the scale of the drone programme...and the destruction it has caused in their name”.

He added that drones are having “adverse strategic effects” by causing hatred among the local populations where US bombs fall and also by “encouraging a new arms race that will empower current and future rivals and lay the foundations for an international system that is increasingly violent.”

A report by researchers at the Stanford and NYU schools of law found in September that the drone program is “terrorizing” the people of Pakistan and that it is having “counterproductive” effects.

The US drone war in Pakistan not only kills and injures civilians, the report finds, but it traumatizes the population and has led people to keep their children home from school and to avoid any large grouping of people, however innocent. It also says the drone war has helped recruitment efforts of extremist groups like al-Qaeda.

“A significant rethinking of current US targeted killing and drone strike policies is long overdue. US policy-makers, and the American public, cannot continue to ignore evidence of the civilian harm and counter-productive impacts of US targeted killings and drone strikes in Pakistan,” the report said.