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Spies and Missiles: CIA at War With America

By Matein Khalid

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Intelligence agencies, like French generals of the old school, often persist in fighting the last war. This is particularly true for the CIA, whose twilight wars, vassals, agents, proxies and proconsuls have played a critical role in the secret history of the Middle East.

In 1953, the CIA engineered a coup d'état that overthrew the government of Mohammed Mossadegh and restored the Shah of Iran to his Peacock Throne. In Lebanon, the CIA played a crucial role in the political dominance of Lebanon's Maronite Christian Phalagist warlords in the civil war that pitted them against the PLO, the Syrians, the Druze and Shia militias. The CIA aided Saddam Hussein in the Iraqi Baath's annihilation of its Communist rivals and provided aerial battlefield intelligence during his war with Ayatollah Khomeini in the 1980's. The CIA's greatest strategic triumph was to provide weapons, finance and logistical support to the Afghan mujahedeen who vanquished the Red Army in Soviet occupied Afghanistan.

Even though America's enemies claim the CIA is omnipotent, its track record in the Middle East is replete with spectacular failures. The CIA's secret channel to the Palestinians in wartime West Beirut was Ali Hassan Salameh, the mastermind of the Black September commandos who massacred the Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympics and led an abortive revolt against the armed forces of Hashemite Jordan. The CIA's top Levant operatives were slaughtered by a Hezbollah suicide bomber as they met in the fortified US Embassy on the Beirut seafont. The CIA was unable to save the Shah of Iran during the Iranian revolution even though Langley trained his ruthless SAVAK's secret police.

The CIA was unable to prevent Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait, the mass slaughter in New York and Washington on 9/11, the emergence of Hamas in Gaza and Hezbollah in

Lebanon, the meteoric rise of power by the virulently anti-American Moqtada Al Sadr's Jaish Mehdi militia in post Saddam Iraq and Iran's nuclear weapons programme. Even though CIA emissaries to General Dostum and Hamid Karzai helped the Northern Alliance – Pashtun coalition who seized power in Kabul after the overthrow of Mullah Omar's Taleban regime in November 2001, the Agency could not prevent the resurgence of the Taleban as a potent political and military challenge to NATO in Afghanistan.

Even though contacts between the CIA and Pakistani military intelligence were forged in the prism of the Cold War Afghan jihad three decades ago, the Agency's Predator drone attacks against suspected jihadi leaders have enraged the Pakistani population and alienated even senior generals of the ISI and GHQ, who view the Afghan Taleban as their insurance policy against Indian influence in Kabul.

The suicide bombing by a Jordanian Al Qaeda double agent that killed seven CIA agents at a forward post in Khost, Afghanistan on December 30, 2008 was a strategic disaster for an intelligence agency famed for its sophisticated tradecraft and its obsession with the security of its case officers.

The fact that Abu Mulal Balawi had been turned by the Pakistani Taleban, then sent on a suicide mission against his own CIA and Jordanian intelligence handlers was a global publicity coup for Al Qaeda.

The CIA, humiliated by its sworn blood foes, has escalated its Predator unmanned drone strikes against suspected terrorist mud fortresses in North Waziristan and the Bajaur Agency. While the CIA's missiles kill Taleban commanders, they also butcher innocent civilians and add to the anti-American demonology in the tribal regions that is eerily reminiscent of past Pashtun revolts against the British Empire and the Soviet Union. The Predator and Reaper drone strikes have demonstrated that the CIA can hit back at its enemies but remote control assassins alone cannot extricate the United States from its worst counter-insurgency quagmire since Vietnam or salvage the NATO project in Afghanistan.

The Obama White House is deluded if it believes that CIA aerial hit squads will arrest Afghanistan's descent into political and military collapse. Like the Mossad hit teams who went after Black September's chieftains to avenge Munich but failed to deliver peace with the PLO, the use of the CIA's Hellfire missiles to avenge Khost will hardly tilt the strategic balance of power in Afghanistan in favour of the US. Attacks carried out from secret bases in Pakistan and controlled by satellite links from the Nevada desert can hardly win the CIA new friends in the Islamic world, even though the Afghan Taleban are widely viewed as odious fanatics with medieval, violent mindsets in the region.

It is no surprise that the White House, the Senate and the Pentagon all lean on the CIA to escalate its drone attacks on the Afpak badlands. The strikes send a bloody, powerful message to the Taleban and put no American lives at risk. Yet surely international law does not permit the CIA to target and kill civilians in Pakistan, a country against which Washington is not officially at war (for now). Collateral damage, a Pentagon euphemism for the murder of innocent civilians, does not seem terribly important in the strategic calculus of the Obama White House, as long as

the civilians are Pashtun tribesmen beyond the reach of the ACLU. The CIA's obsession with the Shah cost America Iran, a generation ago. Could the CIA's myopia in Waziristan cost Uncle Sam Pakistan?