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Foreign Policy in Focus

CIA's Selective Secrecy

Posted By Hannah Gurman

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From the coups that ousted Mohammed Mossadegh, Jacobo Arbenz, and Salvador Allende in the Cold War to the waterboarding of suspected terrorists in the Global War on Terror, the CIA has built a solid reputation as an extralegal agent of international sabotage and murder. Since the agency's creation in 1947, successive U.S. presidents and their national security advisers have furthered this reputation, using the CIA for dirty work and then denying any wrongdoing in public, while the truth waits for decades until files are declassified. The agency did not declassify the documentary proof of its involvement in the 1973 assassination of Allende until 2003, and its internal analysis of the failed Bay of Pigs invasion was not released until Aug. 2, 2011, more than 50 years after the event. There is an age-old tradition of push and pull between the national security establishment, which insists on secrecy, and transparency advocates and the public, which have a right to hold leaders accountable for their use and abuse of executive power in matters of foreign policy.

In recent months, the Obama administration appears to be tinkering with the established script, although not fundamentally departing from it. Since the killing of Osama bin Laden in May, it has increasingly put the CIA into the public spotlight, underscoring the agency's central role in the administration's evolving counterterror strategy. Killing a member of al-Qaeda is far more palatable to most Americans than killing a democratically elected leader of a country that posed no threat to U.S. security. Thus, recent news of the CIA's unmanned "precision strikes" against top al-Qaeda operatives might appeal to the sizable segment of the U.S. public that no longer supports the idea of a large-scale ground war but still believes in a militarized approach to the Global War on Terror.

At the same time, however, the CIA continues to engage in its established tradition of suppressing information that would damage it or the administration's reputation. This information deserves public attention, precisely because it points to a link between the agency's activities and the proliferation of al-Qaeda, directly undermining the argument being advanced by the Obama administration.

In the Spotlight

Obama is not the first president to enlist the CIA in attempts to justify his policies in the War on Terror. In January 2003, George W. Bush gave his now infamous State of the Union address in which he claimed that British intelligence had found evidence that Iraq had attempted to obtain uranium from Africa. We all know how that story turned out. By 2004, the Valerie Plame scandal had become engrained in the public imagination, and Bush could no longer use the CIA to gain public support for his policies in Iraq or, for that matter, in Afghanistan. As the years went by and bin Laden remained at large, interviews with former CIA agents, including Michael Scheuer, who headed intelligence operations aimed at capturing the al-Qaeda leader, lambasted the administration's systematic failure to heed the advice of intelligence experts. Bush's brief attempt to publicly exploit the CIA collapsed under the weight of mutual distrust and the realities of the CIA's marginalization.

Obama's emphasis on the central role of the CIA in his counterterror strategy is intended in part to underscore the difference between his approach and that of his predecessor. The president's May 1 speech announcing the death of bin Laden linked the success of the mission to the centrality of the CIA, suggesting a direct contrast with the Bush administration: "Shortly after taking office, I directed Leon Panetta, the director of the CIA to make the killing or capture of bin Laden the top priority of our war against al-Qaeda." Obama made a point of crediting the intelligence community, along with the Special Forces that carried out the operation: "Tonight, we give thanks to the countless intelligence and counterterrorism professionals who've worked tirelessly to achieve this outcome. The American people do not see their work, nor know their names. But tonight, they feel the satisfaction of their work and the result of their pursuit of justice."

While the CIA does not officially acknowledge its drone campaign in Pakistan, the Obama administration has continued to credit the agency in successful operations against al-Qaeda's top leadership, including the Aug. 22 killing of its second-in-command, Atiyah Abd al-Rahman. Without referring directly to the CIA, Obama's remarks about the upcoming tenth anniversary of 9/11 suggest a counterterror strategy that is low on ground troops and heavy on CIA drone and Special Forces operations. "We're taking the fight to al-Qaeda, ending the war in Iraq and starting to bring our troops home from Afghanistan."

Continued CIA Censorship

These efforts to publicize the CIA's recent accomplishments should not be confused with a broader effort to achieve transparency. When it comes to withholding and censoring information about its tactics, it's still business as usual at the CIA. On Aug. 25, *The New York Times* reported that the agency censored large portions of a forthcoming book by former FBI agent, Ali

H. Soufan. Soufan claims that the CIA withheld information from the FBI about the presence of two known terrorists in the United States who later participated in the 9/11 hijackings. The book also details the CIA's adoption of increasingly brutal interrogation tactics after 9/11.

Although much of this information has already been published in congressional hearings and reports, as well as the memoirs of other officials, the agency has long attempted to keep as much of it as possible under wraps. In 2005, it destroyed at least two videotapes documenting such interrogations, including that of Abu Zubaydah, the first detainee in CIA custody after 9/11. Such activities in the months immediately before and after 9/11 might be dismissed as ancient history. But the CIA-controlled drone war on al-Qaeda is currently in full swing in Pakistan. The administration has been quick to publicize the success of these efforts. But because the drone campaign remains officially secret, the CIA does not release the full data on casualties.

In June, Obama's chief counterterrorism adviser, John Brennan, told the press that strikes against al-Qaeda operatives in the Af-Pak region are "exceptionally precise and surgical" and bragged that "there hasn't been a single collateral death" in the last year. Brennan's laughable claim is contradicted by the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, which recently released the conclusions of its in-depth investigation of civilian casualties in the drone campaign in Pakistan. The Bureau reported that there have been 295 drone strikes in Pakistan since 2004 (243 of them during the Obama administration) with the total number of people killed between 2,309 and 2,880, including 392-783 civilians — 82 in 2010 and 47 in 2011.

Instead of owning up to these figures, which come from respected news outlets, NGOs, and eyewitness accounts, the CIA has attempted to discredit the study, accusing its sources of having links to the Pakistani intelligence service (ISI) and making vague accusations about the study's methodology. On its website, the Bureau provides a comprehensive explanation of its approach, which itself contrasts with the CIA's refusal to detail the source and logic of its arguments. As this example suggests, Obama's counterterrorism advisers would like to have it both ways: they want to highlight the achievements of the CIA in order to gain public support for the administration's strategy but at the same time deny the public the information it would need in order to assess that strategy.

The Obama administration will likely follow a similar tack with respect to the drone campaigns targeting al-Qaeda leaders outside of the Af-Pak region — in North and West Africa, as well as the Middle East. In June, outgoing CIA Director Leon Panetta publicly confirmed reports that the agency's drone campaign had extended into Yemen, Somalia, and North Africa, framing these developments as a critical part of the progress being made against al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). But as evidence of civilian casualties in these campaigns emerges, the agency will continue to resort to its established code of secrecy.

Blowback

As long as the CIA exists, it will never be a transparent organization. But as with WikiLeaks and other debates about transparency, the issue ultimately is not about secrecy itself. Rather, it is about the substance of the secrets being kept and how they compare to the official line about the progress being made in the war against al-Qaeda.

According to the official narrative of the Obama administration, drone strikes, night raids, and other targeted attacks carried out by the CIA and Special Forces are the solution to winning the war against al-Qaeda, which will in turn curb the broader threat of radical anti-American/anti-Western Islamist movements. This narrative only makes a modicum of sense if you leave out precisely the kind of information that the CIA is keeping secret.

During the Bush administration, critics of the CIA's interrogation tactics, including John McCain, argued that any short-term "gains" produced by the torture of terrorism suspects would in the long run be far outweighed by the damage to America's reputation, only benefiting organizations like al-Qaeda.

The same argument could and is being made about the current CIA drone strikes in Pakistan, where most studies show the local populace has an overwhelmingly negative perception of the campaign. The lawsuit of Pakistani journalist Kahrim Khan against the CIA for the deaths of his relatives in a drone attack is just the most visible example of the anti-American animus fueled by the drone campaign.

Some of the staunchest criticism of the official narrative comes from former members of the U.S. intelligence community who question the increasing obsession with killing al-Qaeda officials and with the drone campaigns used to do the job. In an Aug. 14 op-ed in *The New York Times*, former Director of National Intelligence Dennis Blair wrote, "Qaeda officials who are killed by drones will be replaced. The group's structure will survive and it will still be able to inspire, finance, and train individuals and teams to kill Americans." Meanwhile, "As the drone campaign wears on, hatred of America is increasing in Pakistan."

Because such arguments do not disclose official secrets, but rather common sense, the CIA has no power to censor them. Thus, in a devastating piece in *The National Interest,* Michael Scheuer, who knows more about al-Qaeda than just about anyone in the West, rails against the Obama administration's triumphalism over the death of bin Laden. "Al-Qaeda's indispensable, long-term, and utterly reliable ally," he writes, is "Washington's interventionist foreign policy," which "remains the group's true center of gravity. It is a galvanizing force which cannot be harmed, let alone destroyed, until U.S. leaders in politics, the media, religion (especially evangelical Protestants), the military, and the academy begin to accept the truth; that is, the United States government is hated by most Muslims for what it does in the Islamic world, and not for how Americans think and behave at home."

Scheuer's analysis is what the intelligence community refers to as "blowback." Former intelligence analyst Chalmers Johnson, in a 2000 book of that title, warned against the "unanticipated consequences of unacknowledged acts in other people's countries." According to this logic, the CIA's ramped-up role in the war against al-Qaeda may ultimately do more to sustain than defeat the enemy.

The CIA goes to any length to ensure that its shady dealings remain in the dark. But there's nothing its selective censors can do to erase the human cost of blowback.