High-Tech Death from Above: U.S. Drone Wars Fuel War Crimes

By Tom Burghardt
Global Research, May 03, 2010
Antifascist Calling... 2 May 2010

As America continues its uncontrolled flight towards disaster, Israeli-style "targeted killings" (assassinations) of alleged militants and unarmed civilians in the "Afpak theatre" are on the rise.

With indiscriminate attacks by armed drones soaring since President Obama was sworn into office, the Pentagon's mad dash to achieve what it describes as "full-spectrum dominance" in this regional "battlespace," has sought to leverage its dominant position as the world leader in robotized forms of state killing and obtain a decisive technological edge over their adversaries.

Judging by proverbial "facts on the ground," they'll need it. TheWorld Socialist Web Site disclosed May 1, that a "semi-annual report released by the Pentagon on the Afghanistan war recorded a sharp increase in attacks on occupation troops and scarce support for the corrupt US-backed puppet regime of President Hamid Karzai."

Despite Obama's dispatch of 35,000 troops since his inauguration as imperial Consul, socialist critic Bill Van Auken writes that the congressionally-mandated progress report "presented a grim picture of the state of the nearly nine-year-old, US-led war," and that "the country's so-called insurgents considered 2009 their 'most successful year'."

That the drone wars will escalate is underscored by a piece inAir Force Times. Writing May 1, an anonymous correspondent reports that Marine Corps Brig. Gen. Glenn Walters, the deputy director for resources and acquisition for the Pentagon's Joint Staff, said "the U.S. military has sent so many of its 6,500 UAVs to the Middle East that other operating theaters are going without."

Speaking April 28 at an Institute for Defense and Government Advancement (IDGA) conference in northern Virginia, Walters said that Obama's Afghanistan "surge" has stripped other Pentagon commands of drones and that it "will likely be a year before U.S. planners have a better handle on how many UAVs will be needed there and how many can be spared for use outside of the Middle East."

"By 2012," Walters told the killer robot conclave, "we'll have 8,000 UAVs that will have to fit into" the Defense Department's global maintenance and basing structure.

All the more reason then, in keeping with the Pentagon's twisted logic, to escalate attacks on Pakistan, raining high-tech death from above!

Remote-Controlled War Crimes

Since its inception under the criminal Bush regime, the administration's robot assassination policy has been called into question by legal scholars and civil liberties' advocates who charge that CIA, but also military pilots, waging America's undeclared drone war on Pakistan may be liable for war crimes.

During [hearings](#) last week before the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform's National Security and Foreign Affairs panel, Mary Ellen O'Connell, a law professor at the University of Notre Dame, [told](#) the committee that "Combat drones are battlefield weapons. They fire missiles or drop bombs capable of inflicting very serious damage. Drones are not lawful for use outside combat zones. Outside such zones, police are the proper law enforcement agents, and police are generally required to warn before using lethal force."

The one caveat I would add to the professor's statement are that "police" would be "proper law enforcement agents" outside combat zones were America a "normal" country that abides by the rule of law, including laws governing armed conflict. Clearly, a nation that squanders nearly $800B of it's treasure in a single year on death and destruction is anything but normal.

O'Connell went on to say that "restricting drones to the battlefield is the most important single rule governing their use. Yet, the United States is failing to follow it more often than not." The Notre Dame law prof continued: "At the very time we are trying to win hearts and minds to respect the rule of law, we are ourselves failing to respect a very basic rule: remote weapons systems belong on the battlefield."

In a sharply worded [letter](#) to President Obama, submitted as a statement for the record to the House panel, ACLU Executive Director Anthony D. Romero wrote, "I am writing to express our profound concern about recent reports indicating that you have authorized a program that contemplates the killing of suspected terrorists–including U.S. citizens–located far away from zones of actual armed conflict. If accurately described, this program violates international law and, at least insofar as it affects U.S. citizens, it is also unconstitutional."

Romero stated that the "U.S. is engaged in non-international armed conflict in Afghanistan and Iraq and the lawfulness of its actions must be judged in that context. ... The entire world is not a war zone, and wartime tactics that may be permitted on the battlefields in Afghanistan and Iraq cannot be deployed anywhere in the world where a terrorism suspect happens to be located."

But as the imperial project goes to ground, we can expect that the administration's policy of targeting its enemies for liquidation on the streets of Sana'a, Mogadishu or perhaps, even New York or Washington, will continue along on its merry way.

Last October, investigative journalist Jane Mayer reported in [The New Yorker](#) that the Air Force UAV fleet "has grown from some fifty drones in 2001 to nearly two hundred; the C.I.A. will not divulge how many drones it operates. The government plans to commission hundreds more, including new generations of tiny 'nano' drones, which can fly after their prey like a killer bee through an open window."

And given the classified rules governing the CIA's "geographically unbounded use of state-sanctioned lethal force," the highly-compartmented program affords the President another plausibly deniable weapon in the Executive Branch arsenal. Because of this, Mayer writes, "there is no visible system of accountability in place, despite the fact that the agency has

killed many civilians inside a politically fragile, nuclear-armed country with which the U.S. is not at war."

"Should something go wrong in the C.I.A.'s program," Mayer reports, "it's unclear what the consequences would be."

Judging however, by the response of our "forward looking" President and his "liberal" acolytes in Congress, academia and the media to widespread constitutional abuses (warrantless wiretapping), the waging of preemptive, aggressive wars (Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan), and illegal detention and torture by the previous, and current, U.S. regimes, it's pretty obvious what those "consequences" will be.

"The Predators in the C.I.A. program," Mayer observes, "are 'flown' by civilians, both intelligence officers and private contractors." Described as "seasoned professionals" by Mayer's counterterrorism source, the CIA has outsourced "a significant portion of its work." And "from their suburban redoubt," we're informed, "they can turn the plane, zoom in on the landscape below, and decide whether to lock onto a target."

But therein lies the rub for the CIA.

During last week's congressional hearings, Loyola Law School professor David Glazier, told the House panel that the CIA's crew of killer drone pilots could, in theory at least, be prosecuted because they aren't combatants in a legal sense.

"It is my opinion, as well as that of most other law-of-war scholars I know, that those who participate in hostilities without the combatant's privilege do not violate the law of war by doing so, they simply gain no immunity from domestic laws," Glazier said.

"Under this view" Glazier continued, "CIA drone pilots are liable to prosecution under the law of any jurisdiction where attacks occur for any injuries, deaths or property damage they cause." Here's where things get interesting. "But under the legal theories adopted by our government in prosecuting Guantánamo detainees, these CIA officers as well as any higher-level government officials who have authorized or directed their attacks are committing war crimes." (emphasis added)

There it is, plug-and-play state killing; but fear not.

As a top Bush administration aide told investigative journalist Ron Suskind in 2004: "We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality–judiciously, as you will–we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors … and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do."

While the swagger and imperial hubris of the Bush regime may have been swapped for the vastly superior Obama (PR) product, the results are inevitably the same: death and destruction on a planetary scale and to hell with the law and human rights.

Drone Wars Escalate

As The Long War Journal noted in January, the American drone campaign "in Pakistan's tribal areas remains the cornerstone of the effort to root out and decapitate the senior leadership

of al Qaeda, the Taliban, and other allied terror groups, and to disrupt both al Qaeda's global and local operations in Afghanistan and Pakistan."

CNN reported that CIA Director, Leon Panetta, told the Pacific Council on International Policy in Los Angeles last May that the American drone war is "the only game in town in terms of confronting or trying to disrupt" the leadership of the Afghan-Arab database of disposable Western intelligence assets known as al-Qaeda.

But with civilian deaths spiking, the robot reign of terror has sparked widespread opposition across all political sectors in Pakistan, from far-right Islamist factions to the socialist left. While Pentagon and CIA officials claim that civilian deaths are "regrettable," an unintended consequence of America's global imperial project, facts on the ground tell a different tale.

Last year, investigative journalist Amir Mir reported in Lahore's English-language newspaper, The News, that of 60 "cross-border predator strikes carried out by the Afghanistan-based American drones in Pakistan between January 14, 2006 and April 8, 2009, only 10 were able to hit their actual targets, killing 14 wanted al-Qaeda leaders, besides perishing 687 innocent Pakistani civilians. The success percentage of the US predator strikes thus comes to not more than six per cent."

According to Mir, the "drone attacks went wrong due to faulty intelligence information, killing hundreds of innocent civilians, including women and children." The Pentagon and CIA dispute these figures.

In February however, Mir disclosed that Afghanistan-based Predator drones "carried out a record number of 12 deadly missile strikes in the tribal areas of Pakistan in January 2010, of which 10 went wrong and failed to hit their targets, killing 123 innocent Pakistanis. The remaining two successful drone strikes killed three al-Qaeda leaders, wanted by the Americans."

According to the journalist, the spike in drone assaults indicated that "revenge is the major motive for these attacks," and can be "attributed to December 30, 2009 suicide bombing in the Khost area of Afghanistan bordering North Waziristan, which killed seven CIA agents. US officials later identified the bomber as Humam Khalil Abu Mulal al-Balawi, a Jordanian national linked to both al-Qaeda and the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)."

In other words, the slaughter of 123 civilians was viewed by the CIA and Pentagon as a splendid means "to avenge the loss of the seven CIA agents and to raise morale of its forces in Afghanistan."

Sensitive as always to the suffering of others, The Washington Post reported April 26, that "CIA is using new, smaller missiles and advanced surveillance techniques to minimize civilian casualties in its targeted killings of suspected insurgents in Pakistan's tribal areas, according to current and former officials in the United States and Pakistan."

According to the Post, "technological improvements" in recent months "have resulted in more accurate operations that have provoked relatively little public outrage," the unnamed officials said.

Stung by the growing furor over civilian deaths, the Agency defensively claims their assassination program delivers "precision unsurpassed in the history of warfare."

Chief among the "improvements" cited by the Post, CIA Predators are now fielding a Lockheed Martin-designed "Small Smart Weapon" called the Scorpion. Clocking-in at 21 inches, weighing 35 pounds and having the diameter of a "small coffee cup," the Post reports that it causes far less damage than a Hellfire "and it can be fitted with four different guidance systems that allow it to home in on targets as small as a single person, in complete darkness."

According to [Lockheed Martin](), the Scorpion "provides the warfighter with low cost lethality against a broad target set" and "ensures accuracy to less than one meter and dramatically reduces the possibility of collateral damage."

I'm sure this comes as a comforting reassurance of America's pure intentions, especially for "Afpak" women and children who've been turned into smoldering body parts scattered across the landscape of our latest "good war."

An Evolving Marketplace...for High-Tech Death

As the United States continues its drive to dominate resource-rich, but politically unstable regions of the world, the Pentagon, in a throw-back to the "Camelot" era of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations' have embraced the counterinsurgency doctrine of fighting multiple "brushfire" wars in inhospitable global hot-spots.

Increasingly, as the "battlespace" morphs from fighting in jungles, deserts or that former Cold War set-piece, the European plain, directly into large urban areas, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) takes center stage. While "situational awareness" of the hot zone has always been a preoccupation of Pentagon planners, the nature of urban combat places a premium on complex technological systems that gather intelligence–from low earth orbit to right outside your door.

Such preoccupations have been a boon for America's defense and security grifters.

During 2010's first quarter, [Washington Technology]() reported, that "contracts announced during January, February and March had values that ranged from $266 million to $2.8 billion."

According to reporter Nick Wakeman, General Atomics Aeronautical Systems Inc., "secured" a $266 million contract from the Air Force for "program and technical support for the MQ-1 Predator and MQ-9 Reaper unmanned aerial systems."

Work will include "program and configuration management, logistics, technical services, flight and operations, software maintenance and data collection."

As investigative journalist Nick Turse reported for [TomDispatch]()in January, the Pentagon "cut two sizeable checks to ensure that unmanned operations involving the MQ-1 Predator and the MQ-9 Reaper will continue full-speed ahead in 2010." In addition to the General Atomics deal, Turse reported that the Air Force inked a "$38 million contract with defense giant Raytheon for logistics support for the targeting systems of both drones."

As combat operations across the "Afpak theatre" escalate, the use of drones by both the CIA and Air Force have sharply increased; indeed, the Pentagon is on a veritable shopping spree.

This is borne-out by the flight hours logged by unmanned systems. "In 2004" Turse writes,

"Reapers, just beginning to soar, flew 71 hours in total, according to Air Force documents; in 2006, that number had risen to 3,123 hours; and last year, 25,391 hours."

According to Air Force estimates Turse avers, "the combined flight hours of all its drones–Predators, Reapers, and unarmed RQ-4 Global Hawks–will exceed 250,000 hours, about the total number of hours flown by all Air Force drones from 1995-2007. In 2011, the 300,000 hour-a-year barrier is expected to be crossed for the first time, and after that the sky's the limit."

Such estimates can only be music to the ears of General Atomics' shareholders.

While these systems are powerful reminders that being an Empire means never having to say you're sorry to the victims, it seems they're not quite good enough.

Air Force Times reported last May that the Air Force "is already looking at a third generation of armed remote-control planes even as it continues to build up its fleet of MQ-1 Predators and MQ-9 Reapers."

Although General Atomics has the lock on providing the CIA and Pentagon with MQ-1 and MQ-9s, the "service has started an analysis" for a next gen killer drone, the MQ-X, "with the goal of choosing a plane in 2012, Lt. Gen. Mark Shackelford told reporters."

According to Air Force Times, "General Atomics has already unveiled a jet-powered UAV called the Avenger, able to fly at 460 mph–about twice as fast as the Reaper–and carry 3,000 pounds of weapons and sensors."

Last week, Defense Systems reported that the Defense Department "is reassessing its view of unmanned aerial vehicles–a key component of modern combat operations–and deciding what the military needs from UAVs beyond their traditional use as a platform to gather intelligence and fire weapons."

Defense Systems' reporter Amber Corrin wrote that "next-generation UAVs will need to take on additional duties including cargo transport, refueling and possible medical applications, and they will need to be interoperable with different platforms, users and military services."

One wag, Col. Dale Fridley, the Director of the Air Force Unmanned Aerial Systems Task Force, said that the Air Force is looking for a "plug-and-play" approach and that "interoperable command and control, multi-access controls and enhanced human-system interfaces are among the most important short-term enablers in developing next-generation UAVs."

Fridley described the proposed MQ-X as the "embodiment of the flight plan."

According to General Atomics, the firm's next-gen, jet-powered Predator C drone, the Avenger, can attain air speeds far greater than the lumbering systems currently operating. With a 41-foot long fuselage and 66-foot wingspan, the system can "can carry the same mix of weapons as Predator B," the MQ-9 Reaper. The company envisages the manufacture of both armed and unarmed reconnaissance models for the Defense Department and other willing customers.

And with Predators clocking more than 30,000 hours of flight time per month, and with more than 40 UAVs aloft "every second of every day," as GA boosters put it, and with the Air

Force and the CIA seeking the capability to fly anywhere from 50-75 daily "missions" above Afghanistan, Pakistan and who knows where else, the always-open wallet's of the American people will continue feeding, and accelerating, the imperialist "kill chain."

The original source of this article is [Antifascist Calling...](#)
Copyright © [Tom Burghardt](#), [Antifascist Calling...](#), 2010

[Comment on Global Research Articles on our Facebook page](#)

[Become a Member of Global Research](#)

Articles by: Tom Burghardt
[http://antifascist-calling.blogspot.com/](#)