President Obama:
The drones don't work, they just make it worse

As the Obama Administration looks to reform its drone program, it should focus on assessing its actual success rate

By Rafia Zakaria, from Al Jazeera, 3/26/13

Less than two weeks after Senator Rand Paul's filibuster of CIA Chief John Brennan's confirmation in the US Senate, it seems that the controversy over the legality and transparency of drone attacks has finally provoked a response from the Obama Administration. On March 19, 2013, reports published in the Daily Beast and the Wall Street Journal indicated that the controversial drone program may be shifted from the CIA to the Department of Defense.

The reports were based on statements by US officials and a yet unreleased draft document indicating that the Obama White House would like the program to be institutionalized and reformed, moving it into the command structure of the US military instead of within its spy agency.

It may be true that moving the drone program to the Department of Defense would address some of the critiques regarding transparency and legality. Drone strikes carried out by the military, as they have been in Afghanistan, would be subject to the rules of engagement that govern the use of military force. They would also have a clearer chain of command that would disclose, at least generally, the parameters used to select targets and order strikes, both contentious points on which the CIA-run drone program has been criticized.

Unlike the CIA, the Department of Defense would not be able to classify all drone operations as "covert" or "clandestine" and would be subject to oversight from other branches of the United States government. Furthermore, while the President did not have to sign off on every strike conducted by the CIA, under a military run program he would have, as Commander-in-chief, clear ultimate authority over the program.

Under the new formulation, operations would move gradually from the CIA to the Department of Defense, with a lengthy period of transition in which the two agencies would work together. The move would allow the CIA to move out of counter-terrorism and focus again on the collection of human intelligence, a facet of

its operation that is said to have suffered. On March 20, the Washington Post reported that a panel of White House advisors had expressed grave concerns that the CIA was paying inadequate attention to collecting intelligence on China, the Middle East, and other national security flashpoints, because of its inordinate focus on military operations and drone strikes. A move away from drone strikes, then, would free up the Agency's resources to do the sort of traditional intelligence gathering with which it is tasked.

On their own side, White House officials are keen to change the impression that the President Obama is a champion of secret assassinations using armed drones on shaky legal grounds. A major counter terrorism speech is expected soon in which the President will define a new direction in counter-terrorism policy and deflect criticism that his Administration has been operating an illegal killing program. While details of timing are unknown, such a speech can be seen as provoked by the questions raised in Senator Paul's filibuster regarding the possibility of the President ordering drone strikes on US citizens based on unknown determinations. Although Attorney General Eric Holder denied such a possibility in his response to Senator Paul, questions have continued as to the legal authority of CIA targets and the fact that United States citizens cannot demand any sort of accountability for them.

Not really a change

Moving the drone program from the CIA to the Department of Defense is thus being painted as a victory, even a capitulation, to those critics who have criticized the lack of transparency, accountability, and legal basis of the drone program. However, the details of the move do not suggest a reversal or even a rethinking of the strategic imperatives that the Obama Administration and the CIA have used to justify the drone program.

First, the gradual process of the transition without any publicly disclosed details of how and when it will be completed are likely to create a situation in which, at least for a time, it would be difficult if not impossible to tell which agency, the Department of Defense or the CIA, would actually be responsible for a strike. Second, according to a government official who spoke to the Washington Post, the CIA program in Pakistan would be phased out even later "because of the complexities there" and because the program, unlike the ones in Yemen and Somalia, was actually begun by the CIA. Finally, even if the drone program is actually moved to the Department of Defense, it will be incorporated into its most secret portion, the Joint Special Operations Command, whose top-secret

operations are also covert and never released to the public.

When these factors are considered, the effort to provide more transparency and an institutional framework for the drone program seem chimerical at best and deceptive at worst. All of them point to a continuation of a national security mindset, within the Obama Administration and the State Department, both believing that drones, cheaply bought and unmanned, are a perfect way to bombard other countries with minimal cost the United States. With the risk of dead American soldiers reduced to nothing, military officials are also gobbling up the idea of waging remote-control wars all over the world, wherever a possible or even supposed threat can be identified.

Are Drones effective?

Starkly absent from the debate are any meaningful critiques of the actual effectiveness of drone strikes. Figures obtained from the South Asia Terrorism Portal indicate, for example, that the drastic escalation in drone strikes in Pakistan during the Obama Administration has caused no decrease in the capacity of drone-targeted groups to carry out terrorist attacks in the region. According to the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, President Obama ordered 53 drones strikes in Pakistan in 2009. These strikes were reported to have killed, among others, Tehreek-e-Taliban Commander Baitullah Mehsud and Maulvi Gul Nazeer. In turn, there were approximately 500 bomb blasts in Pakistan that year, most of which were concentrated in the northwestern tribal areas of Pakistan.

In 2010, President Obama ordered 128 drone strikes which were again reported to have killed various prominent Taliban figures and various Al-Qaeda commanders. The number of bomb blasts carried out by terrorist groups in Pakistan that year was 473, with most of them again concentrated in the tribal areas and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. In 2011, President Obama ordered 75 drone strikes which killed, among others, Al-Qaeda Chief financial officer Abu Zaid Al Iraqi and Taliban spokesperson Shakirullah Shakir. However, despite this being the third year of drone strikes, terror groups within Pakistan were still able to carry out 673 bomb blasts. They also expanded the geographic area of the blast operations to include not only the remote and sparsely populated tribal areas, but also the urban centers of Karachi in the south and Quetta in the southwest of Pakistan. Finally, in 2012, President Obama ordered 48 drone strikes which were alleged to have killed between 242 and 400 people. Among the dead was Taliban commander Hakimullah Mehsud,

whose death was said to be a big blow to the operative capacities of the organization.

However, even despite this being the fourth year of drone strikes in Pakistan, with so many Al-Qaeda and Tehreek-e-Taliban leaders allegedly killed in strikes in past years, terrorists were nevertheless able to still carry out 652 attacks killing 1,007 people and injuring 2,687. Not only were they able to kill more, they were also able to expand their ambit of operations into other parts of Pakistan, with terrorist attacks in Karachi and Quetta now almost equivalent in damage to the ones that occurred in the northwest, where the war against Al-Qaeda and the Taliban had once been isolated.

The move of Tehreek-e-Taliban activity from the tribal areas of Pakistan, where drones operate more effectively, to urban areas like Karachi has also been documented in a recent report issued by the United States Institute for Peace, which stated that Karachi is now the "preferred hideout of the TTP, Afghan Taliban, other extremist, and sectarian outfits" and that Karachi's urban density and sprawl offer "the best militant hideout," since U.S drone strikes cannot be enacted in Karachi, which unlike Federally Administered Tribal Area is the country's economic and financial capital. The report further goes on to say that militants "are relocating to Karachi and are able to plan local and international operations in the city."

That those allegedly being targeted by drones do not seem at all weakened by them seems largely absent from the discussion on drones and the preoccupations of whether the program will be snuck from the secret corners of one US agency to another. The problem of an increase in terrorist attacks in Pakistan, even after their leaders have been hammered for years by drones, can be ignored by American officials whose interest is ostensibly limited only to protecting Americans. However, if it is concerns of transparency and legality that are provoking the responses from the Obama Administration and the purported move to reassign the drone program to the Department of Defense, perhaps the issue of actual effectiveness can also be added to the mix.

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