

US global assassination programme exposed

Dirty Wars

Jeremy Scahill

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Jeremy Scahill's *Dirty Wars* is one of the most important books on international affairs to be published in recent years. Here we have laid out before us details of a series of crimes that for some reason the International Criminal Court chooses to ignore; but crimes they are. Indeed, one of the criminals he exposes, a certain Barack Obama, has actually received the Nobel Peace Prize.

The story has its origins in the 9/11 attack on the United States and the Bush administration's response. On the one hand, the CIA was let loose to hunt down the perpetrators with J Cofer Black famously promising the idiot president that 'when we're through with them, they will have flies walking across their eyeballs'. From being reliant on US special forces for its paramilitary operations, the CIA once again began building up its own in-house capabilities; although in our neo-liberal world, this also involved, from the very beginning, the use of private contractors. The CIA launched a covert war against America's enemies throughout the world, a war that continues today. As part of this war, the CIA established its own covert gulag, a network of secret prisons in Poland, Romania, Lithuania, Thailand, Mauretania, Diego Garcia and elsewhere. Here prisoners could be tortured without their screams being heard by anyone who cared.

But while the CIA was given its head, Donald Rumsfeld, the Secretary of State for Defence, was not happy about the Agency's track record, its failure to embrace the neo-con world view or its susceptibility to tiresome Congressional oversight. He built up his own covert operations organisation, the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC), that was intended to supplant the CIA and give the administration a completely free hand in the destruction of America's enemies. JSOC was, at this time, 'the most closely guarded secret force in the US

national security apparatus'. It only went public after the killing of Osama Bin Laden.

Scahill explores JSOC's record during the occupation of Iraq. Here the US Army found itself fighting a full-blown insurgency which, for a while, actually looked capable of making the American position untenable. The scale of the resistance saw the American military eventually embrace a counterinsurgency strategy championed principally by the celebrated General David Petraeus. (He, it is worth remembering, was briefly hailed as the saviour of the US Army and was even being talked about as a future President.)

Alongside the counterinsurgency efforts of the US Army and Marine Corps, however, there were also the activities of US (and British, although we know very little about this) special forces under the direction of JSOC. JSOC had no time for any hearts and minds nonsense. It hunted down and captured or killed its targets, with those captured being interrogated to provide the intelligence for the next raid. JSOC operated its own prison in Iraq at Camp NAMA. According to Scahill, the CIA which 'had inflicted more than its share of dirty deeds on prisoners had become so shocked at the torture at NAMA that it withdrew its interrogators from the base in August 2003'. He quotes one former NAMA interrogator who saw 'a British SAS officer.....mercilessly beat a detainee'. What the US were operating in Iraq were 'death squads', taking out America's enemies, in a rerun of the Vietnam War's Phoenix Programme. All this was to be replicated in Afghanistan.

A number of commentators have observed the contradiction between a counterinsurgency strategy at least paying lip-service to 'hearts and minds' and the activities of US death squads which effectively alienated the local civilian population. In fact the 'counterinsurgents' in the US had only a brief ascendancy. Petraeus and his co-thinkers were brought in to try and salvage something from George W Bush's Iraq debacle; but Obama dropped the strategy as soon as he could without too much political damage. The cost of long-term occupation, its domestic unpopularity, and the realisation that there was no guarantee that the strategy would actually be

successful, led to it being speedily abandoned by Obama in favour of a more 'economical' strategy of assassination, the use of special forces and proxy armies. This is not a new approach, of course, but very much the traditional way the US used to police its informal empire. What is different today is the technology, the arrival of assassination by drone.

Indeed, even while the US Army was battling insurgents in Iraq and Afghanistan, the CIA was pursuing America's enemies globally. As part of this global war, the US sponsored the Ethiopian invasion of Somalia in order to overthrow the Islamic Courts Union. Some 50,000 Ethiopian troops occupied the country, with the Americans launching air attacks and armed raids in support from their Manda Bay base in Kenya. US air raids, according to Scahill, killed 'a shocking number of Somali civilians'. All this particular adventure accomplished was to provide a huge boost for al Shabab, the al Qaeda affiliate that led the way in fighting the Ethiopian occupation. Al Shabab had very little support when the Ethiopians invaded but grew dramatically so that when the Ethiopians finally withdrew, they were able to take over much of the country. US policy 'had backfired spectacularly'. The other battlefield where the CIA took on America's enemies was the Yemen where the US was propping up the Saleh regime.

How did Obama respond to this covert war that the Bush administration had been waging? As we have seen, he stepped it up. On his fourth day in office, Obama authorised two drone strikes in Pakistan that killed more than a dozen civilians. At this point, he was introduced to the 'signature' strike whereby the CIA would attack a group of men who fitted its targeting profile rather than because they had a listed target in their sights. For example, a group of young men of 'military age' – and this included teenagers – assembled in an area known to be sympathetic to America's enemies became a legitimate target for drone attack under this policy. As Scahill puts it, Obama and his officials enthusiastically 'embraced the neoconservative vision of the world as a battlefield and the kill lists they built would encompass the globe'. Moreover, whereas Bush used to

delegate assassination decisions, more from laziness than any other factor, Obama is a hands-on assassin who 'insisted in signing off on most strikes'. Tuesdays were normally 'assassination' day, when Obama and his team, including his 'assassination czar', John Brennan, today Director of the CIA, would decide who was to die that week. His administration was engaged in 'an aggressive embrace of assassination as a centrepiece of US national security'. Under Obama, the CIA and JSOC now supposedly work in tandem.

For Scahill, the most shocking of the Obama administration's actions was the assassination of the first US citizen, Anwar Awlaki, a dissident preacher, hiding out in the Yemen. The Americans had been looking for an opportunity to kill Awlaki for two years, then on 30 September 2011 he was identified as a passenger in a car which was destroyed by Predator drone. Obama himself made the public announcement of the assassination, claiming it as a great victory. What he did not announce was that also killed was another US citizen, Samir Khan. He was not on any death list and appears to have been completely innocent of involvement in any activities against the US. Scahill argues that this assassination was some sort of watershed: the US government now claimed the right to kill its own citizens without due process. And the released details of the evidence against Awlaki, as one ex-CIA officer observed, certainly did not merit a death sentence. It got worse because on 14 October, Awlaki's sixteen year-old son, Abdulrahman, and a number of his teenage cousins were targeted. They were eating a meal outside when a drone strike blew four of them to pieces (the four dead boys were buried in a single grave because their individual body parts could not be identified). The strike was justified as a legitimate attack on known al Qaeda targets. Abdulrahman was also an American citizen.

How effective is this US assassination policy? Scahill argues that all the evidence in Somalia and Yemen points to it having backfired, that the drone killings with their inevitable toll of dead civilians have turned local people against the US and its allies and proxies, and only increased support for al

Qaeda and its affiliates. Certainly, the situation in Somalia seems to bear this out. As he puts it, the war on terror has 'become a self-fulfilling prophecy'.

Alongside the *Dirty Wars* book, Scahill has also produced a chilling documentary film with the same title that is available on DVD. It is, as they say, essential viewing.

John Newsinger

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