

Dirty Wars, Filthy Hands: Five Unsavory Ways America Conducts Its “Global War on Terror”

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America’s allies are terrorists, warlords, and corrupt officials, plied with bounty payments and quid-pro-quo assassinations.

The recent revelation that the Central Intelligence Agency has handed tens of millions of dollars over to the offices of the president of Afghanistan should come as no surprise. The CIA has a long history of this sort of activity. And most importantly, it’s the latest reminder of how America’s global “war on terror” has been forged through backroom deals, cold hard cash and the fostering of corruption.

From Yemen to Afghanistan to Somalia, America has prosecuted its perpetual war the usual way U.S. foreign policy is conducted: partnerships with unsavory leaders who are corrupt and commit abuses. Here are five striking examples of how the U.S. global war has been characterized by unsavory activity since 2001.

1. Bounty Payments For Alleged Terrorists

Cash payments in Afghanistan aren’t limited to the CIA paying off corrupt Afghan government officials. The lure of money played a major role at the start of the war on Afghanistan when the U.S. was looking for suspected terrorists to arrest and eventually throw in Guantanamo detention camp. The U.S. offered thousands of dollars to people to turn in alleged terrorists; 86% of all Guantanamo prisoners were people who were captured by bounty hunters, according to a report published by Seton Hall University in 2005. Many of them ended up being innocent of any crime—another clear example of how money is a corrupting tool in America’s never-ending global war.

The U.S. paid off Afghan warlords to capture people they suspected of having a role in terrorism. The payments ranged from \$3,000 to 25,000, [according to the Associated Press](#). The U.S. also gave money to Pakistani security forces to do the same. The AP article on bounties for people who ended up at Guantanamo [reported that](#) “a detainee who said he was a Saudi businessman claimed, ‘The Pakistani police sold me for money to the Americans.’ ‘This was part of a roundup of all foreigners and Arabs in that area,’ of Pakistan near the Afghan border.”

Former Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf admitted the bounty payments to security forces in his memoir, published in 2006. “We have captured 689 and handed over 369 to the United States. We have earned bounties totalling millions of dollars. Those who habitually accuse U.S. of not doing enough in the war on terror should simply ask the CIA how much prize money it has paid to the Government of Pakistan,” [he wrote](#).

2. Secret Blood-Soaked Deal With Pakistan

Despite the on-again, off-again nature of the U.S.-Pakistan relationship, the country has been a major partner in the U.S. “war on terror.” The country’s tribal areas have been pounded by American drones. While the Pakistani government has never outright admitted that it accepts all drone strikes, their former president said [it signed off on at least some](#). And Pakistan has never shot down a U.S. drone, is told about strikes in advance and [even clears its airspace](#) so drones can fly unimpeded.

The American program of drone strikes in Pakistan—which has killed between 2,541-3,533 people, [according to the Bureau of Investigative Journalism](#)—started out with a secret, blood-soaked deal which wasn’t revealed until this year in a [book by New York Times reporter Mark Mazzetti](#). Here’s how the deal went down: in 2004, the Pakistani government wanted a tribal leader allied with the Pakistani Taliban dead. Nek Muhammad had been leading a fight against Pakistani troops in the largely ungoverned tribal areas of Pakistan. And for a few years, the government had balked at allowing the CIA to wage a campaign of drone strikes.

But all that changed with a secret deal: the CIA would kill Muhammad in exchange for the use of airspace for its drones. Despite the fact that Muhammad was thought to be more a Pakistani internal problem than a threat to U.S. security, a drone ripped through his compound, killing him and two young boys. That paved the way for a ferocious campaign of U.S. drone strikes in the country that continues today.

Mazzetti detailed the terms of the deal in an excerpt of his book in the *New York Times*: “Pakistani intelligence officials insisted that they be allowed to approve each drone strike, giving them tight control over the list of targets. And they insisted that drones fly only in narrow parts of the tribal areas...The ISI and the C.I.A. agreed that all drone flights in Pakistan would operate under the C.I.A.’s covert action authority — meaning that the United States would never acknowledge the missile strikes and that Pakistan would either take credit for the individual killings or remain silent.”

Indeed, the Pakistani government lied through its teeth about the killing of Muhammad. It told its people he was killed by troops who fired a rocket at him.

3. Keeping U.S. Strikes in Yemen Secret

The first American strike on Yemen occurred in 2002, but it wasn’t until the Obama administration took office that a ramped-up military campaign commenced that has so far killed between an estimated 232-333 people. But the Yemeni government wanted to keep that campaign secret because the assassination by drone program is deeply unpopular among the civilian population. The Obama administration, which has been far from transparent about its drone program and other activities in Yemen, happily obliged.

The evidence for this comes [via WikiLeaks. In January 2010](#), General David Petraeus, then the head of US Central Command, met with Ali Abdullah Saleh, the president of Yemen at the time. Their discussion centered around U.S. assistance for Yemen’s fight against Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. By that time, the U.S. had conducted a few cruise missile and drone strikes on Yemeni territory to beat back the militant group which has been accused of plotting attacks on the U.S.

“We’ll continue saying the bombs are ours, not yours,” Saleh told Petraeus. That telling line

was prompted by a discussion about a controversial cruise missile strike that occurred in December 2009 that killed 41 civilians, including women and children. The Yemeni government insisted it carried out the attack in al-Ma'jalah, Abyan.

Yemen's Deputy Prime Minister Alimi joked that "he had just 'lied' by telling Parliament that the bombs in Arhab, Abyan, and Shebwa were American-made but deployed by the ROYG." The reference to Arhab and Shebwa was a nod to other American attacks on Yemen in those areas.

It was Amnesty International that exposed the fact of U.S. involvement in the strike. The human rights group published photos of U.S. cluster munitions and Tomahawk cruise missiles that were used in the deadly strike in al-Ma'jalah.

Despite the fact that the drone program is deeply unpopular in Yemen and has helped fuel Al Qaeda recruitment, the campaign continues, though it has become untenable to pretend that the Yemeni military was carrying out the attacks. In September 2012, the new Yemeni president, Abdu Rabbu Mansour Hadi, [praised U.S. drone strikes in his country](#). "They pinpoint the target and have zero margin of error, if you know what target you're aiming at," he said. The U.S., though, continues to maintain a policy of silence on specific drone strikes in the country.

4. Working With Somali Warlords

Somalia is yet another front in the U.S. war on terror. Since 2011, the U.S. has carried out drone strikes on the country targeting al-Shabaab, an Islamist militant group in the country that is also an affiliate of Al Qaeda. The U.S. has also snatched and rendered alleged terrorists in the country and has operated a secret prison there run by the CIA.

To do all this, U.S. intelligence and military officials have worked with unsavory Somali warlords and intelligence agents. *Nation* investigative reporter Jeremy Scahill [exposed details](#) of the CIA's backing of Mohamed Afrah Qanyare, a notorious Somali warlord. Since Qanyare owned a secretive airport the CIA wanted to use, they began paying him \$100,000 to \$150,000 a month. Although the U.S. did not begin carrying out direct strikes in the country until 2007, Qanyare thought he had U.S. backing to carry out his own attacks. So he and other warlords began hunting down people they thought Washington would want taken care of, [according to Scahill's reporting](#). But these activities ended up producing blowback and empowered Al Qaeda-affiliated forces, much as other U.S. policies, like supporting Ethiopia's war in the country, ended up spreading militant influence.

"These people were already heinous warlords; they were widely reviled in Mogadishu. And then they start assassinating imams and local prayer leaders who had nothing to do with terror," one expert on Somalia, Abdirahman "Aynte" Ali, told the *Nation*. "They were either capturing them and then renditioning them to Djibouti, where there is a major American base, or in many cases they were chopping their head off and taking the head to the Americans or whoever. And telling them, 'We killed this guy.'"

Another example of misguided policy is the secret sites the U.S. operates in Somalia, which [Scahill also exposed](#). One of the sites is a prison used by the CIA and run by Somali intelligence agents, who get paid \$200 a month. The prisoners held at the site in Mogadishu are alleged members of al-Shabaab. But some of them have been held for over a year, and haven't been charged with a crime.

And in 2003, a [Somali militia sold an alleged Al Qaeda member](#) named Suleiman Abdallah to the CIA after capturing him from a hospital. Abdallah was then spirited off to Kenya, and eventually to Afghanistan. He was reportedly beaten and tortured by CIA agents. No charges were ever brought against him, and he was released in 2008.

5. Cash for the Karzais

The [New York Times revealed April 29](#) that “wads of American dollars packed into suitcases, backpacks and, on occasion, plastic shopping bags have been dropped off every month or so at the offices of Afghanistan’s president — courtesy of the [Central Intelligence Agency](#).” The literal bags of cash to Karzai’s office were made in an effort to influence the Afghan president and maintain access to his inner circle, thus ensuring that the CIA continued to play a role in prosecuting the Afghanistan war.

What the cash ended up doing, though, was fueling corruption—an inevitable outcome considering the fact that Karzai and his family are known to be corrupt, as [WikiLeaks cables revealed](#).

The money went to paying off warlords and politicians, “many of whom have ties to the drug trade and, in some cases, the Taliban,” the *New York Times* reported. The CIA pays these unsavory figures to ensure that they continue serving as proxies in the fight against the Taliban. In turn, the money ended up bolstering the corrupt patronage networks the U.S. insists it wants dismantled. Some of the money also went directly into the pockets of aides to the Afghan president.

This isn’t the first time the CIA was caught paying off corrupt Afghan officials. In October 2009, [the New York Times exposed](#) cash payments to Ahmed Wali Karzai, the president’s brother and a powerful figure in southern Afghanistan. The intelligence agency made the payments because Karzai helps operate an Afghan paramilitary force that is a partner in the CIA’s effort against militants battling the U.S. occupation of the country. There was a big problem with these payments: Ahmed Karzai is suspected of being a major player in the drug trade in Afghanistan, the same drug trade the U.S. has been fighting against.

“If we are going to conduct a population-centric strategy in Afghanistan, and we are perceived as backing thugs, then we are just undermining ourselves,” one U.S. military intelligence official told the *New York Times*.

So despite high-minded rhetoric from U.S. leaders about how American wars are conducted, cash payments, backroom deals and the fostering of corruption are the norm. The CIA’s payments to corrupt Afghan leaders are the latest in a long line of counter-productive U.S. actions taken in the name of the war on terror. And if history is any guide, more of these activities will be revealed in the future.

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