

Washington secretly authorized military raids on 20 countries since 2004

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Since 2004, the Bush administration has secretly authorized military raids against up to 20 countries without any declaration of war or even any explicit congressional authorization for armed action, according to a report published Monday in the New York Times.

The report, which cites recent attacks on targets in Pakistan, Syria and Somalia, establishes that under an order issued by then-Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and approved by President George W. Bush in the spring of 2004, the US military's Special Operations forces were given license to attack alleged al Qaeda targets "anywhere in the world."

Citing unnamed senior US officials, the Times reported that the authorization provided a "sweeping mandate to conduct operations in countries not at war with the United States." It confirmed that the US military has used the authority to "carry out nearly a dozen previously undisclosed attacks."

Among the attacks carried out under the order was the October 26 raid on the Syrian village of Sukkiraya, near the Iraqi border, in which four US attack helicopters participated. Two of the helicopters landed Special Forces troops while the other two provided covering fire. The troops shot at civilians working on a farm, killing eight, including four children, and wounding a number of others. The raid sparked demonstrations in Damascus and the Syrian government denounced it as a "war crime" and a "terrorist act of aggression."

According to the Times account, the raid, ostensibly aimed at an individual involved in smuggling fighters into Iraq, was not the first time that the US military had carried out such an operation on Syrian territory.

Similarly, on September 3, a US strike force believed to be composed of Navy Seals was helicoptered into Pakistan's Waziristan region, near the Afghan border, to attack three houses. Between 15 and 20 people were killed in the raid, reportedly including eight women and children.

The Times report also established that this was not the first such attack on Pakistani soil. It revealed that in 2006, a similar Navy Seal team raided a compound in Pakistan's Bajaur region, an operation that was filmed by a pilotless Predator drone and watched in real time by officials at the CIA's Counterterrorism Center in Langley, Virginia.

The September 3 operation, in which at least 20 people were killed, was launched based on another secret order signed by Defense Secretary Robert Gates last July with Bush's approval. The order directed the military—in collaboration with the Central Intelligence Agency—to prepare cross-border raids by Special Operations forces into Pakistan's tribal

areas. The authority for these operations was based on the previous order issued in 2004.

A January 2007 strike carried out by AC-130 gunships against southern Somalia, in which scores of civilians were killed, was also conducted under the authority of the executive order. Special Operations troops were subsequently landed in the area near the Kenyan border to sift through the rubble to determine if any of those killed by the aircrafts' heavy cannons were actually targeted Islamist militants.

In addition to the raids that were carried out, the Times reports, up to a dozen more had been planned but were then scrapped after administration officials decided that they were "too risky" or "too diplomatically explosive."

The decision authorizing these operations, known as "Al Qaeda Network Exord" (for executive order), represented a practical corollary to the so-called "Bush doctrine," which arrogated to the United States the "right" to wage aggressive war anywhere in the world in the name of a global struggle against terrorism. In enunciating this doctrine in a June 2002 speech at the US Military Academy at West Point, Bush spoke of the need for the US military to "be ready to strike at a moment's notice in any dark corner of the world."

What is involved in many of these operations is the use of special task forces known as "hunter-killer teams," in essence assassination squads. In most of them, however, the military has utilized air support resulting in the deaths of large numbers of civilians.

The Times report traces the executive order back to a campaign by Rumsfeld to take over operations that had traditionally been carried out by the US Central Intelligence Agency, whose utilization of such methods had earned it the nickname "Murder Inc." Rumsfeld, the paper reported, "pressed hard to unleash the military's vast firepower against militants outside the combat zones of Iraq and Afghanistan."

While the Times account describes the order issued by Rumsfeld as "secret" and "classified," there is every reason to suspect that, like the orders involving the use of waterboarding, extraordinary rendition, domestic spying and other criminal actions associated with the Bush administration's "global war on terror," the directive authorizing the US military to freely conduct raids in violation of the sovereignty of nations across the globe was made known to and received tacit approval from the Democratic leadership in Congress.

Moreover, any illusion that such practices are about to fade into history with the end of the Bush administration and the coming to office of Barack Obama in January would be wholly unfounded.

The Democratic president-elect made his advocacy of precisely such raids against targets in Pakistan a persistent theme in his campaign for the Democratic nomination and the presidency. Moreover, his platform prominently features the call for not only the expansion of US troop strength by another 100,000 soldiers and Marines, but also the "building up" of the military's Special Operations forces for just such acts of aggression.

Obama's advisers, the Democratic leadership in Congress and the Bush administration are all sending signals that the shift in administrations will be characterized more by continuity than any radical change in US foreign policy.

This was spelled out most clearly by Obama foreign policy adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, who served as US national security advisor in the Carter administration, playing a key role in the US strategy of promoting and funding the war by Islamist forces—elements of which went on to found al Qaeda—against the Soviet-backed regime in Afghanistan.

Speaking to Deutsche Welle last Friday, Brzezinski cautioned against expectations of “a dramatic change” in US foreign policy. “You have to think of foreign policy as, for example, a boat moving on the sea,” he said. “A huge ocean liner doesn’t change its course in the way that a fast motor boat does. Therefore it is not possible for the United States to dramatically change every one of its policies.”

Meanwhile, on Saturday, Vice President Dick Cheney delivered a speech to cadets at the Virginia Military Institute in which he described “jihadists” as a “strategic threat to the United States” on a par with that once posed by Nazi Germany. He vowed an unending war against them, while promising a “smooth and graceful transition of power to President-Elect Obama and Vice President-Elect Biden, as they take up the duty of protecting America.”

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