RESEARCHER EXPOSES GOVERNMENT, MILITARY LIES ABOUT CIVILIAN DRONE DEATHS IN AFGHANISTAN

A tweet this morning by Daphne Eviatar alerted me to a very important article by Spencer Ackerman at his new home with the Guardian. Ackerman interviewed Dr. Larry Lewis, who is a research scientist at the Center for Naval Analyses but is also described by National Defense University as a Current Field Representative to the Joint Staff J7, Joint and Coalition Operational Analysis Division. In speaking with Ackerman, Lewis referred to a study he conducted with access to classified data, where his work had a remarkable finding:

> Larry Lewis, a principal research scientist at the Center for Naval Analyses, a research group with close ties to the US military, studied air strikes in Afghanistan from mid-2010 to mid-2011, using classified military data on the strikes and the civilian casualties they caused. Lewis told the Guardian he found that the missile strikes conducted by remotely piloted aircraft, commonly known as drones, were 10 times more deadly to Afghan civilians than those performed by fighter jets.

Ackerman points out in the article that Lewis mentions some of this work in a recently published article in Prism, which is published by NDU (note: To make things clearer to folks reading Marcy's work on Snowden, I will call the journal Prism and not PRISM, even though the Guardian is once again breaking the news and the journal uses all caps in its name). Although NDU doesn't make it easy to find the most recent

issue of Prism, I finally found a pdf of the entire latest issue here, where the article by Lewis and coauthor Sarah Holewinski (who is at the Center for Civilians in Conflict) can be found on pages 57 to 65.

Lewis and Holewinski open by framing the issue of protection of civilians as a lesson that the US military has to learn repeatedly:

> Civilian casualties can risk the success of a combat mission. While not new, this is a lesson us defense forces have had to repeatedly relearn. Historically, civilian protection and efforts to address harm became priorities only when external pressures demanded attention. As the Pentagon reshapes its defenses and fighting force for the next decade, continuing this ad hoc pattern in the future is neither strategically smart nor ethically acceptable.

As Ackerman notes in the Guardian article, the Prism article makes mention of the finding regarding civilian drone casualties in Afghanistan outpacing those from conventional aerial attacks:

> The assumption that UAS (Unmanned Aerial Systems) strikes are surgical in nature is also belied by research on recent combat operations in Afghanistan. There, UAS operations were statistically more likely to cause civilian casualties than were operations conducted by manned air platforms.

Lewis and Holewinski describe the impact of both failing to protect civilians and lying about operations in which civilians have died. After describing relatively well-known examples of drone strikes in Pakistan that included such horrors as a double-tap targeting rescuers, the strike on a jirga addressing mining issues that killed up to 40 civilians or deaths at a

restaurant, Lewis and Holewinski move back to Afghanistan:

> Independent investigations are not always correct in their assessment of civilian deaths; however, the inability of the U.S. to adequately investigate the outcome of its clandestine UAS strikes calls into question official denials of civilian harm. The U.S. has stated that these strikes kill only combatants; however, operations in Afghanistan are replete with examples where all the engaged individuals were believed to be combatants, but a later investigation found many or all were civilians misidentified as combatants.

The continued claims of lack of civilian deaths despite hard evidence to the contrary takes a huge toll both on US credibility and on what takes place in the war theater:

> A growing body of research, including that conducted by this article's authors, shows that civilian casualties (CIVCAS) and the mishandling of the aftermath can compel more people to work against U.S. interests. Indeed, America's image has suffered for years under the weight of anger and dismay that a nation, which stands by the value of civilian protection in wartime, seemed indifferent to civilian suffering.

Sadly, this is a lesson that has not been learned by such luminaries as Barack Obama, Diane Feinstein and John Brennan. As Ackerman points out:

> While the drone strikes remain classified, several senior Obama administration officials and their congressional allies have described them as notable for their precision. John

> Brennan, now the CIA director responsible for the agency's drones, said in 2012 they provide "targeted strikes against specific al-Qaida terrorists". While defending the strikes as legal and "targeted", Obama conceded in May that "US strikes have resulted in civilian casualties, a risk that exists in all wars". Dianne Feinstein, the California Democrat who chairs the Senate intelligence committee, said in February that drones kill only "single digits" worth of civilians annually.

It does not appear that we have even gotten to a "least untruthful" official US accounting of the civilian casualty rates due to drones. In the meantime, our credibility will continue to suffer and our enemies will continue to accumulate.