

NO SOFA? THEN TRANSITION DEATH SQUAD CONTROL FROM SPECIAL OPERATIONS TO CIA

A little over a year ago, Greg Miller outlined what he said would be the CIA's roles in Iraq and Afghanistan in the near future. It appears now that he was only half right:

The CIA is expected to maintain a large clandestine presence in Iraq and Afghanistan long after the departure of conventional U.S. troops as part of a plan by the Obama administration to rely on a combination of spies and Special Operations forces to protect U.S. interests in the two longtime war zones, U.S. officials said.

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The withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq in December has moved the CIA's emphasis there toward more traditional espionage – monitoring developments in the increasingly antagonistic government, seeking to suppress al-Qaeda's affiliate in the country and countering the influence of Iran.

In Afghanistan, the CIA is expected to have a more aggressively operational role. U.S. officials said the agency's paramilitary capabilities are seen as tools for keeping the Taliban off balance, protecting the government in Kabul and preserving access to Afghan airstrips that enable armed CIA drones to hunt al-Qaeda remnants in Pakistan.

Note that bit about the US withdrawing all of

its troops from Iraq in December of 2011. The full withdrawal of course wasn't what the US intended, but was a result of the botched negotiations for a Status of Forces Agreement that would confer immunity to US troops who remained behind in Iraq after the official "withdrawal". A significant portion of those troops that would have been left behind would have been Special Operations Forces to train and control counterinsurgency militia groups. We were reminded just last week that these groups in Iraq were responsible for so many atrocities that they became known as death squads. As I pointed out, Petraeus' counterinsurgency program in Afghanistan was built in the same way.

We have a report today in the Wall Street Journal that shows Miller's prediction of "espionage only" for the CIA's role in Iraq was wrong, as militias formerly trained and run by Special Operations Forces are now under CIA control (h/t to Joanne Leon for tweeting me a link to this article):

In a series of secret decisions from 2011 to late 2012, the White House directed the CIA to provide support to Iraq's Counterterrorism Service, or CTS, a force that reports directly to Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, officials said.

The CIA has since ramped up its work with the CTS—taking control of a mission long run by the U.S. military, according to administration and defense officials. For years, U.S. special-operations forces worked with CTS against al Qaeda in Iraq. But the military's role has dwindled since U.S. troops pulled out of the country at the end of 2011.

In Afghanistan, it turns out that the CIA trained its own secret militia very soon after arriving there. Kimberly Dozier and Adam Goldman described the CIA's Afghan militia back in 2010:

The CIA has trained and bankrolled a well-paid force of elite Afghan paramilitaries for nearly eight years to hunt al-Qaida and the Taliban for the CIA, according to current and former U.S. officials.

Modeled after U.S. special forces, the Counterterrorist Pursuit Team was set up in the months following the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2002 to penetrate territory controlled by the Taliban and al-Qaida and target militants for interrogations by CIA officials.

The 3,000-strong Afghan teams are used for surveillance and long-range reconnaissance missions and some have trained at CIA facilities in the United States. The force has operated in Kabul and some of Afghanistan's most violence-wracked provinces including Kandahar, Khost, Paktia and Paktika, according to a security professional familiar with the program.

But of course, as with all the militia groups the US trains and sets into motion, they eventually moved to activities that provoked serious problems in the population. Dozier reported Sunday on the role of CIA-affiliated Afghan personnel in one of the many incidents that set Hamid Karzai into his rants over the weekend:

Karzai raised another difficult issue when he denounced the alleged seizure of a university student Saturday by Afghan forces his aide said were working for the CIA. It was unclear why the student was detained.

Presidential spokesman Aimal Faizi said in an interview with The Associated Press that the CIA freed the student after Karzai's staff intervened, but

that Karzai wants the alleged Afghan raiders arrested. The president issued a decree on Sunday banning all international forces and the Afghans working with them from entering universities and schools without Afghan government permission.

If, as I expect, Afghanistan also refuses to grant immunity to US forces remaining after the scheduled NATO withdrawal at the end of next year, look for all of the Special Operations trained militias (known in Afghanistan as the Afghan Local Police) to also come under CIA control along with the current force under CIA control. Who needs a SOFA with immunity for US troops when we have the CIA?

Postscript: Yes, I realize that in military academic-speak counterinsurgency and counterterrorism activities are viewed as separate functions. Given what we have seen, though, in terms of actual reported activities for various groups set up in Iraq and Afghanistan under one or the other name, I would say that they differ in name only and overlap virtually entirely in terms of what they really do.