

“Inequality: The Costs of the Knife (Book Review),” *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, 16(1)

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When CIA contractor Raymond Davis shot and killed two Pakistani nationals in the streets of Lahore, Pakistan denied Davis diplomatic immunity and charged him with double murder, all the complexities and tensions of the U.S. shadow war against global terrorist networks were laid bare for the world to see. In theory, the shadow war can work cleanly: with smooth coordination and collaboration between the United States and its international partners, clear definition of roles and responsibilities between the CIA and the Department of Defense (DoD), and surgical action against identified terrorist targets. But, as Mark Mazzetti ably demonstrates in his book *The Way of the Knife*, in practice, the shadow war is often messy, complex, and fraught with moral and strategic tension. Generally, Mazzetti provides a great deal of insight as to how this shadow war developed and has been conducted over the past decade; however, he does little to evaluate its effectiveness or explore alternatives. As tensions boil over in the Middle East and extremist organizations proliferate across the globe, the United States needs to focus less on the tactical aspects of counterterrorism, and instead to engage in a broader national discussion on the direction and execution of its counterterrorism strategy.

The “way of the knife” is Mazzetti’s euphemism for the U.S. approach to counterterrorism after 9/11—practices and policies steeped in invasive intelligence collection, lethal preemption of terrorist threats, and minimal transparency. This “shadow war” was the U.S. response to the unprecedented strategic challenge 9/11 presented to a national security apparatus that was ill-equipped to confront an enemy that hides in densely populated cities and ungoverned sanctuaries. America’s lumbering, hierarchical security agencies were trained and equipped to defeat any conventional military force. But to confront al-Qaeda, the United States needed to find a way to collect intelligence and conduct lethal operations inside sovereign nations with which it was not at war.

Mazzetti reveals the “muddled” state of this shadow war after a decade of its development and execution. Through his use of detailed vignettes, Mazzetti describes how after 9/11 neither the military nor the CIA demonstrated a refined understanding of the terrorist threat or how to collect useful intelligence about it. With minimal DoD assets in embassies and few military intelligence collectors in threat areas, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld found that his agency was unable to direct the powerful U.S. military towards enemy personnel in this new context. Responding to Rumsfeld’s inquiry two weeks after 9/11 about what special operations were being planned, General Charles Holland replied: “Well, it would be difficult, because we don’t have any actionable intelligence.”⁽ⁱ⁾ Likewise, the CIA lacked human sources within terrorist organizations and was overly dependent on liaison activities with unreliable host nation intelligence services (such as Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence) for tactical information. Because of this, the CIA was also incapable of providing Rumsfeld’s military forces the specific information they needed to strike.

Mazzetti next discusses the mismatch in the legal authority and capabilities possessed by the military and the CIA. While the military enjoyed a robust capability to conduct strikes and collect intelligence on rival military forces in specified war zones, it had little ability or legal authority to find and contend with non-state actors operating outside of those designated war zones. Rumsfeld mused: “Given the nature of our world, isn’t it conceivable that the Department ought not to be in a position of near total dependence on the CIA in situations such as this?”^[iii] Presidential directives provided the CIA greater operational latitude than the DoD in areas such as Pakistan and Yemen, but the intelligence agency did not possess offensive capabilities that could be deployed against emergent targets. Rather than developing a coordinated whole-of-government approach to address these gaps, both the military and the CIA scrambled to construct the capabilities they lacked. Rumsfeld created a new intelligence under-secretariat and charged his confidant Stephen Cambone with overseeing new and deeply resourced “Pentagon spying efforts.”^[iiii] The CIA responded by creating its own lethal drone capabilities. The Bush administration permitted this duplication to occur, casting off the 9/11 Commission’s recommendation that paramilitary activities should be consolidated in the Department of Defense.

Despite these efforts, the thirst for actionable intelligence was virtually unquenchable. Mazzetti catalogues the government’s effort to meet this demand by turning to commercial profiteers to construct and operate their own independent spy networks. Efforts to set up these private networks by businesswoman Michele Ballarin, former CIA operative Dewey Clarridge, and shadowy Defense Department civilian Michael Furlong, initially gained traction and funding, but withered upon legal review. These efforts were finally terminated when senior intelligence officials doubted the reliability of the private intelligence sources and opposed diverting resources to them.

Finally, Mazzetti explores the hot disputes between diplomats and the CIA regarding the effectiveness of preemptive drone strikes. While they undoubtedly took enemies off the battlefield, the strikes simultaneously undermined international relationships, heightened global anti-American sentiment, and stoked the flames of radicalization. Mazzetti refers to an incident when Cameron Munter, then the U.S. Ambassador to Pakistan, requested to be notified in advance of planned drone strikes and be provided the authority to veto them. Munter believed that he was better equipped than the CIA to weigh the value of targeted killings against their negative impact on diplomatic relations. The CIA, with President Obama’s support, refused to make such a concession. Subsequently, even some CIA officers, like Ross Newland, began to question whether the CIA should be conducting such strikes. Referring to the drone program, he observed that “the predator ends up hurting the CIA. This is just not an intelligence mission.”^[iv]

Mazzetti’s description of the contours and tensions of the shadow war encourages the reader to consider normative judgments on the strategic and moral issues his book brings to light. Do all of our counterterrorism activities need to be secret? Is the shadow war an effective antidote to terrorism, or is it treating the symptoms rather than the cause of violent extremism? If not the shadow war, what are the alternatives?

Mazzetti's reporting on drone strikes demonstrates how excessive secrecy has damaged U.S. counterterrorism interests. For years, our government remained silent as drone strikes proliferated in Pakistan, Yemen, and elsewhere. Instead of explaining exactly whom we killed and why we killed them, the entire program was shrouded in secrecy. Had we been more transparent, the global debate would have been about the heinous actions of the militants that were killed and the damage inflicted on al-Qaeda by removing its militants from the battlefield. Instead, the world expressed outrage at the United States' use of unilateral force, violation of other countries' sovereignty, and disregard for civilian casualties. Despite the fact that drones are weakening groups that pose a threat to many countries around the world, a recent Pew Research Center [poll](#) showed that the U.S. drone program was opposed by majorities in 37 of the 44 countries surveyed.^[v] The level of opposition is stunning. Large majorities of the public in NATO allies Spain (86 percent), Turkey (83 percent), France (72 percent), Germany (67 percent), and even the UK (59 percent) oppose U.S. drone strikes, even though these countries have experienced terrorist attacks on their soil.^[vi] It appears that our preoccupation with excessive secrecy about drones and other aspects of our counterterrorism program has been akin to unilateral disarmament in the battle for hearts and minds around the world.

War in the shadows has also precluded a comprehensive public assessment of U.S. counterterrorism policy. America's stated goals are to deny safe havens to al-Qaeda and its affiliates and associates, dismantle al-Qaeda cells through targeted use of force and financial pressure, build the capacity of partner governments to counteract these movements themselves, and address the underlying political and social grievances that give rise to extremist movements. But, with a dearth of public information, it is virtually impossible to assess progress on these goals or evaluate the validity of public officials' statements, such as President Obama's proclamation that "al-Qaeda has been decimated."^[vii]

For example, denying safe havens for terrorist organizations anywhere in the world is a lofty goal, oft repeated by politicians, but it does not appear to be achievable at an acceptable cost. The United States spent about \$25 billion to train and equip Iraq's army, but the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) routed it in a matter of weeks and now enjoys a safe haven spanning large swaths of the Levant.^[viii] Extremist organizations like Boko Haram already have safe havens; it and other groups will continue to do so in pockets of North Africa, the Sahel, the Middle East, and South Asia. Unless we are willing to send ground troops and then deal with the hazards of occupation and reconstruction, there is very little we can do to address the safe haven problem other than support governments willing to take up the fight against the extremists themselves.

Yet, our effort to develop a network of governmental counterterrorism partners has borne little fruit to date. The large-scale capacity building exercise in Iraq failed, and most are predicting that Afghanistan will follow course. Elsewhere, many countries are happy to accept American financial assistance, and perhaps some advisors, but these are transactional encounters, not strategic ones. The global unpopularity of the shadow war makes it difficult, if not impossible, for many governments to work with the United States overtly. And the detritus of the shadow war—Guantanamo, black sites and extraordinary rendition, drone strikes that hit civilians—continues to loom over us like a dark cloud, diminishing our soft

power. Now, well into the second decade of this conflict, it is worth asking whether national security policymakers are grappling with the dire state of U.S. counterterrorism strategy, or remain mired in the mindset of the shadow war that Mazzetti has described.

It goes without saying that clandestine activity must be, by definition, secret. Yet there are ways to talk about how we pursue our counterterrorism goals that would not breach the operational secrecy of the missions themselves. We can also be far more transparent—and frankly, honest—about the mixed results that our efforts have produced without increasing the risk to the people who are bravely executing dangerous counterterrorism missions ordered by the government.

Are there alternatives to the shadow war? Sure. Perhaps the Obama administration is slowly gravitating in that direction. There were only six drone strikes in Pakistan in the first half of 2014, down from a high of 122 in 2010.^[ix] Drone and air strikes in Yemen have also become less frequent, with 11 in the first six months of 2014, down from a high of 56 in 2012.^[x] After unleashing military force in Libya only to end up with chaos, Obama resisted pressure to become deeply involved in Syria for two years before deciding to lead a coalition military effort against ISIS in September 2014. Finding the sweet spot between sweeping interventionism and excessive caution, however, has proven to be a challenge.

Some claim that our failure to intervene militarily wherever conflicts pop up around the globe is a sign of American withdrawal and weakness. But, it could also be seen as a message to perpetual free-riders on the American security enterprise that it is time to step up their game, take up the fight, and start addressing core governance problems that are undermining their (not U.S.) security and prosperity. This tension is precisely what we are seeing in the effort against ISIS. Now that the United States has intervened, other countries appear to be content to allow the United States to take care of the ISIS problem for them. Of course there is no substitute for American leadership, and leaving large-scale problems—such as ISIS—to fester is unacceptable. But the shadow war assumes that America can be in all places, at all times, and effectively address counterterrorism threats through clandestine means. Recent experience suggests that this is a cross the shadow war cannot bear. As the shadow war suffers through the law of diminishing returns, the effectiveness of American counterterrorism policy will depend on the ability to rediscover the virtue of patient, persistent diplomacy, the efficacy of soft power, and the benefit of truly reciprocal alliances, rather than transactional relationships.

Looking back, the way of the knife that Mazzetti has explored was an irresistible path for leaders seeking a quick solution to the dangers presented in their daily threat briefing in the post- 9/11 era. And undoubtedly they will resort to this path again at times of insecurity and fear. But when they consider the promised benefits of the shadow war, they should also recall the repulsive scene at the Pakistani court room where Raymond Davis was whisked away by U.S. consular authorities after the embassy indemnified the families with “blood money,” leaving many with the impression that the United States believes it can send armed killers into any country it wants and then buy its way out of accountability. The way of the knife is replete with unspoken pitfalls and challenges; it is rarely as clean, simple, and cost-free as its purveyors claim.

^[i]Mark Mazzetti, *The Way of the Knife* (New York: Penguin Books, 2014), 67.

^[ii]*Ibid.*, 63.

^[iii]*Ibid.*, 79.

^[iv]*Ibid.*, 318.

^[v]Pew Research Global Attitudes Project, “Global Opposition to U.S. Surveillance and Drones but Limited Harm to America’s Image,”
Internet, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2014/07/14/global-opposition-to-u-s-surveillance-and-drones-but-limited-harm-to-americas-image/> (date accessed: 4 August 2014).

^[vi]*Ibid.*

^[vii]Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President at a Campaign Event” (Green Bay, WI, 1 November 2012).

^[viii]Eric Schmitt and Michael R. Gordon, “U.S. Sees Risks in Assisting a Compromised Iraqi Force,” *The New York Times*, 13 July 2014.

^[ix]“Drone Wars Pakistan: Analysis,” *The New American Foundation*,
Internet, <http://securitydata.newamerica.net/drones/pakistan/analysis> (date accessed: 4 August 2014).

^[x]“Drone Wars Yemen: Analysis,” *The New America Foundation*,
Internet, <http://securitydata.newamerica.net/drones/yemen/analysis> (date accessed: 4 August 2014).