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As the US confirms killing another key al-Qaeda target, we ask if its reliance on drone strikes can be justified.

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When Barack Obama was elected in 2008, his predecessor George W. Bush's global 'war on terror' was renamed an 'overseas contingency operation'.

But while the rhetoric has been less incendiary, far from abandoning the tactics of the Bush years, Obama has intensified the ferocity of attacks on the US' enemies.

Under the command of the man who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2009, the use of unmanned drone attacks has surged. And according to the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, so has the number of civilians killed.

A *New York Times* article has revealed that the US president personally approves or vetoes each drone strike after consulting closely with security officials.

There is no direct risk to American military personnel. But critics, including the Pakistani government, point out that the drone strikes are imprecise and violate the sovereignty of the countries they strike.

Hard and fast numbers on drone strikes are hard to come by. However, according to the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, 409 drone strikes have been carried out under the Obama administration, killing at least 2,114 people, compared to 53 drone strikes carried out under the Bush administration, killing at least 438.

During a video conference on the social networking site Google+ in January, Obama was asked about the increase in the number of drone strikes under his presidency and whether the loss of civilian life was worth it for US interests.

The president responded by saying: "I want to make sure the people understand, actually, drones have not caused a huge number of civilian casualties. For the most part they have been very precise precision strikes against al-Qaeda and their affiliates It is important for everybody to understand that this thing is kept on a very tight leash. It's not a bunch of folks in a room somewhere just making decisions."

But in a recent *New York Times* article, unnamed former senior intelligence officials criticised the White House civilian death estimates. One of them said: "It bothers me when they say there were seven guys, so they must all be militants They count the corpses and they're not really sure who they are."

So can the US' reliance on drone strikes be justified?

Inside Story Americas, with presenter Shihab Rattansi, discusses with guests: Scott Shane, a national security reporter for the *New York Times* who co-authored the piece on Obama's 'Secret Kill List'; Clifford May, a former director of communications for the Republican National Committee and president of the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies; and Ray McGovern, a security analyst with the CIA for over 25 years.

"It doesn't make any sense. There is no one that will tell you that this will do anything other than make a lot of people angry, a backlash will come back, and everybody who's been killed will have an extended family of 100 people, who will, inevitably, at some point, get access to this country."

Ray McGovern, a veteran CIA security analyst

FACTS: US DRONE STRIKES

- Critics say policy of targeted killings violates international law
- Critics also say that the criteria for identifying terrorists is too lax
- The US mounts drone strikes in Yemen, Pakistan, Somalia and Afghanistan
- Drone strikes have caused widespread public anger in Pakistan
- Pakistan's government has demanded an end to US drone strikes within its borders

Source: Al Jazeera