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Anti-war activists, Muslims gather to remember 9/11 and lament its consequences

Anti-war activists and American Muslims from Washington, D.C., to West Las Vegas descended on Southern Nevada on Sept. 11 to remember the victims of the 2001 terrorist attacks while bemoaning the two wars and the slew of controversial U.S. military programs launched in their wake.

Lead by members of the Nevada Desert Experience, one of the nation's most prominent anti-war groups, the activists commemorated the ninth anniversary of the deadliest attacks on U.S. soil in history with demonstrations and a call to dismantle the mammoth American war machine ostensibly geared up to kill terrorists.

One of the activists' chief targets, Creech Air Force Base, about 50 miles north of Las Vegas, from where U.S. airmen fly squadrons of unmanned aerial vehicles, or drones, over large swaths of the Middle East and Southwest Asia.

Activists said shortsighted U.S. programs like the so-called drone war, which has killed hundreds of innocent civilians across Afghanistan and Pakistan, only strengthen America's enemies while robbing this country of its formal moral high ground.

"For me, it just keeps coming back to the same thought, and that is we're not eliminating terrorism with these drones. Even though in the short run, the reconnaissance [function] of the drones saves American lives, in the long run, they kill too many innocent civilians, mostly women and children, which creates more hatred and calls for revenge and retaliation toward our guys over there and toward the United States in general," said Iowa-based activist Brian Terrell.

For years, pilots with Creech's 432nd Wing have continuously flown a fleet of more than 100 drones over large swaths of Southwest Asia and beyond -- all from a series of nondescript, air-conditioned trailers on this quiet military outpost. Exact details are classified, but while the scores of unmanned Predators and their beefed-up cousins, Reapers, have killed some prominent Taliban and al-Qaida leaders, the drones have also killed more than 1,000 innocent civilians in the U.S. war against terrorists -- all with the twist of a joystick and the push of a button from thousands of miles away.

A July 2009 report from the Brookings Institution found that for every supposed terrorist taken out by a drone strike, more than 10 Afghan or Pakistani civilians have been killed. And on Sept. 10, an Air Force investigation found a Predator pilot played down concerns about the presence of children before another military attack killed 23 civilians in Afghanistan -- a danger echoed in a July 2010 report to the United Nations Human Rights Council that warned the use of drones undermines "global constraints" on the use of military force.

But the day wasn't just about anger at America's unmanned war on terrorism; it was also a day to call for unity.

Scores of American Muslims, most of them from Southern Nevada, later joined up with anti-war activists in downtown Las Vegas in a show of brotherhood.

Aslam Abdullah, director of Islamic Society of Nevada and the organizer of the Muslim peace rally outside the Lloyd D. George Federal District Courthouse, said the scores of members of his community were there to "demonstrate to our fellow citizens that Islam cares for America as much as Christianity and Judaism and any other faith cares for America ... It's a demonstration of solidarity."

Abdullah said Muslims and activists gathered not only to mourn the deaths on 9/11 but also to counter the intensity of the hatred of Muslims recently demonstrated by those such as Gainesville, Fla., pastor Terry Jones, who made headlines with his planned, then abandoned, burning of the Quran.

"We're here to say we will no longer be silent, and we will be standing together with the rest of the country in condemning 9/11, in respecting the victims of 9/11 and joining the forces for peace," Abdullah said.

The day's events also drew participation from some of the country's most renowned anti-war voices.

Ann Wright, a retired U.S. Army colonel and one of three former U.S. State Department officials who resigned on the eve of the 2003 invasion of Iraq, said she came to lend her voice to the growing cry for sanity in America's prosecution of the war on terrorism.

Specifically in town to testify at a Sept. 14 trial of anti-war protesters, Wright had strong words against the growing use of unmanned aerial warfare.

"In a lot of people's minds, using drones is just like playing a game on TV. They think the relevance of pushing that button in here in Nevada is not as relevant as if you're flying over Afghanistan or Iraq, but I think it's the distance -- it's the fact that we are making continuous mistakes and that we are killing a heck of a lot of civilians. We know the track record on drones is pretty miserable," Wright said.