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At a covert forward operating base run by the US Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) in the Pakistani port city of Karachi, members of an elite division of Blackwater are at the center of a secret program in which they plan targeted assassinations of suspected Taliban and al-Qaeda operatives inside and outside Pakistan. The Blackwater operatives also gather intelligence and help direct a secret US military drone bombing campaign that runs parallel to the

well-documented CIA predator strikes, according to a well-placed source within the US military intelligence apparatus.

Captain John Kirby, the spokesperson for Admiral Michael Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told the *Nation*, “We do not discuss current operations one way or the other, regardless of their nature.” Meanwhile a defense official specifically denied that Blackwater performs work on drone strikes or intelligence for JSOC in Pakistan. “We don’t have any contracts to do that work for us. We don’t contract that kind of work out, period,” the official said. “There has not been, and are not now, contracts between JSOC and that organization for these types of services.” The Pentagon has stated bluntly, “There are no US military strike operations being conducted in Pakistan.”

Blackwater’s founder Erik Prince contradicted this statement in an interview, telling *Vanity Fair* that Blackwater works with US Special Forces in identifying targets and planning missions, citing an operation in Syria. The magazine also published a photo of a Blackwater base near the Afghanistan–Pakistan border.

Jeremy Scahill’s military intelligence source said that the previously unreported program is distinct from the CIA assassination program, which the agency’s director, Leon Panetta, announced he had canceled in June 2009. “This is a parallel operation to the CIA,” said the source. “They are two separate beasts.” The program puts Blackwater at the epicenter of a US military operation within the borders of a nation against which the US has not declared war—knowledge that could further strain the already tense relations between the US and Pakistan. In 2006, the two countries struck a deal that authorized JSOC to enter Pakistan to hunt Osama bin Laden with the understanding that Pakistan would deny it had given permission. Officially, the US is not supposed to have any active military operations in that country.

Blackwater, which also goes by the names Xe Services and US Training Center, has denied that the company operates in Pakistan. “Xe Services has only one employee in Pakistan performing construction oversight for the US government,” Blackwater spokesperson Mark Corallo said in a statement to the *Nation*, adding that the company has “no other operations of any kind in Pakistan.”

A former senior executive at Blackwater confirmed the military intelligence source’s claim that the company is working in Pakistan for the CIA and JSOC. He said that Blackwater is also

working for the Pakistani government on a subcontract with an Islamabad-based security firm that puts US Blackwater operatives on the ground with Pakistani forces in “counterterrorism” operations, including house raids and border interdictions, in the North-West Frontier Province and elsewhere in Pakistan. This arrangement allows the Pakistani government to utilize former US Special Operations forces that now work for Blackwater while denying an official US military presence in the country. He also confirmed that Blackwater has a facility in Karachi and has personnel deployed elsewhere in Pakistan.

The covert program in Pakistan dates back to at least 2007. The current head of JSOC is Vice Admiral William McRaven, who took over the post from General Stanley McChrystal, who headed JSOC from 2003 to 2008 before being named the top US commander in Afghanistan. Blackwater’s presence in Pakistan is “not really visible, and that’s why nobody has cracked down on it,” said Scahill’s military source. Blackwater’s operations in Pakistan, he adds, are not done through State Department contracts or publicly identified defense contracts. “It’s Blackwater via JSOC, and it’s a classified no-bid [contract] approved on a rolling basis.”

Blackwater’s first known contract with the CIA for operations in Afghanistan was awarded in 2002 and was for work along the Afghanistan–Pakistan border.

According to Scahill’s source, Blackwater has effectively marketed itself as a company whose operatives have “conducted lethal direct action missions and now, for a price, you can have your own planning cell. JSOC just ate that up.” Blackwater’s Pakistan JSOC contracts are secret and are therefore shielded from public oversight, he said.

In addition to planning drone strikes and operations against suspected al-Qaeda and Taliban forces in Pakistan for both JSOC and the CIA, the Blackwater team in Karachi also helps plan missions for JSOC inside Uzbekistan against the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan.

Since President Barack Obama was inaugurated, the United States has expanded drone-bombing raids in Pakistan. Obama first ordered a drone strike against targets in North and South Waziristan on January 23, 2009, and the strikes have been conducted consistently ever since. The number of strike orders by the Obama administration has now surpassed the number during the Bush era in Pakistan, inciting fierce criticism from Pakistan and some US lawmakers over civilian deaths.

The military intelligence source also confirmed that Blackwater continues to work for the CIA on its drone-bombing program in Pakistan, as previously reported in the *New York Times*, but added that Blackwater is working on JSOC's drone bombings as well. "It's Blackwater running the program for both CIA and JSOC," said the source. When civilians are killed, "people go, 'Oh, it's the CIA doing crazy shit again unchecked.' Well, at least 50 percent of the time, that's JSOC [hitting] somebody they've identified through HUMINT [human intelligence] or they've culled the intelligence themselves or it's been shared with them and they take that person out and that's how it works."

In addition to working on covert action planning and drone strikes, Blackwater SELECT also provides private guards to perform the sensitive task of security for secret US drone bases, JSOC camps, and Defense Intelligence Agency camps inside Pakistan.

Blackwater's ability to survive against odds by reinventing and rebranding itself is most evident in Afghanistan, where the company continues to work for the US military, the CIA, and the State Department despite intense criticism and almost weekly scandals.