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President Obama has reversed plans to withdraw most U.S. troops from Afghanistan by the time he leaves office. On Thursday, Obama said a deteriorating security situation will force him to maintain the current deployment of 9,800 soldiers through 2016. When Obama's term ends in 2017, the U.S. will keep at least 5,500 troops at four bases across Afghanistan. After 14 years of war, the Taliban now holds more of Afghanistan than at any point since the 2001 U.S. invasion, and some estimates put them in control of half the country. President Obama's announcement comes nearly a year after he declared an official end to the U.S. combat mission, though U.S. military operations have continued. The move assures that despite previous pledges, the war will continue under his successor. We are joined by Intercept reporters Jeremy Scahill, Ryan Devereaux and Cora Currier, whose new series "The Drone Papers" includes a detailed look at the drone war in Afghanistan based on government leaks.

**AMY GOODMAN:** We're talking about this explosive new [series](#) called "The Drone Papers," that *The Intercept* has obtained, this cache of secret documents that expose the inner workings of the U.S. military's assassination program in Afghanistan, Yemen, Somalia. Is there a new Edward Snowden? Our guests are some of the authors of these pieces: the lead co-founder of *The Intercept*, Jeremy Scahill; staff reporters for *The Intercept* Ryan Devereaux and Cora Currier. Juan?

**JUAN GONZÁLEZ:** Jeremy, before we go on to Afghanistan, I wanted to ask you about this—in your articles, you also mentioned this French base in Djibouti that the United States uses for a lot of its—coordinate its efforts in Somalia, in Yemen, in the Horn of Africa. Could you talk about that base? Because most people have never heard of it or our government's involvement there.

**JEREMY SCAHILL:** Right. I mean, Djibouti is one of the tiniest countries in the world, and it's positioned conveniently for U.S. counterterrorism operations next to Somalia, and it's sort of a stone's throw across the Gulf of Aden from Yemen. And the U.S. started using this toward the end of the Bush administration, Camp Lemonnier, which is a former French army outpost. And they basically built that up as the epicenter of these emerging twilight wars or covert wars in Somalia and Yemen, and it's just grown and grown and grown over the years.

And what the documents show is that JSOC, the Joint Special Operations Command, had a really impressive cache of firepower there. They had drones, they had medium fixed-wing aircraft. They also had eight F-15s, which can drop these massive 5,000-pound bunker buster bombs. And then they had other operatives, commandos positioned throughout that region. They have a base in Kenya called Manda Bay, where actually some of the SEALs that did the rescue operation of Captain Phillips were based. They've also done interdictions into Somalia.

One of the slides just shows where they have all of these drone bases, including in Ethiopia and elsewhere. Nick Turse did a great [piece](#) for us that people should look at, where he maps out sort of the spread of all these new bases on the African continent. You know, this is a sort of undertold story, that the U.S. is quietly just sort of spreading its footprint around Africa with a focus on drone technology. And so, Djibouti has been the main hub for striking Yemen and striking Somalia. And that's—

**AMY GOODMAN:** These are places where the U.S. has not declared war.

**JEREMY SCAHILL:** Right. And this is—I mean, this is a big issue of contention, in that it's—you know, does the Authorization for the Use of Military Force give them the right to go after people who were toddlers on 9/11, you know, if you have some of these younger people in militant groups? And there's a debate about that right now. And that's why the president is trying to put it back on Congress and say, "OK, you guys decide then."

**JUAN GONZÁLEZ:** Well, the longest war in American history has been indefinitely extended. As we reported earlier, on Thursday, President Obama reversed plans to withdraw most U.S. troops from Afghanistan by the time he leaves office. Instead, the current deployment of 9,800 soldiers will remain through 2016. When Obama's term ends in 2017, the U.S. will keep at least 5,500 troops at four bases across Afghanistan. Speaking at the White House, the president said the deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan forced him to act.

**PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA:** The bottom line is, in key areas of the country the security situation is still very fragile. And in some places there's risk of deterioration. ... Maintaining our current posture through most of next year, rather than a more rapid drawdown, will allow us to sustain our efforts to train and assist Afghan forces as they grow stronger, not only during this

fighting season, but into the next one.

**JUAN GONZÁLEZ:** But after 14 years of war, the Taliban now holds more of Afghanistan than at any point since the 2001 U.S. invasion. Some estimates put them in control of half the country. The Islamic State has also emerged in Afghanistan with a presence that grows by the day. Addressing the American people, Obama said while he does not favor endless war, it's in the U.S.'s national security interest to stay in Afghanistan.

**PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA:** I know that many of you have grown weary of this conflict. As you are well aware, I do not support the idea of endless war. And I have repeatedly argued against marching into open-ended military conflicts that do not serve our core security interests. Yet, given what's at stake in Afghanistan, and the opportunity for a stable and committed ally that can partner with us in preventing the emergence of future threats, and the fact that we have an international coalition, I am firmly convinced that we should make this extra effort.

**AMY GOODMAN:** President Obama's announcement comes nearly a year after he declared an official end to the U.S. combat mission in Afghanistan, though U.S. military operations have continued throughout Afghanistan. One of the most controversial U.S. attacks in the war's 14 years came just this month, when the U.S. bombed a Doctors Without Borders hospital in Kunduz, killing at least 22 people. Another more than 30 are missing. On Thursday, the Associated Press reported U.S. forces were monitoring the hospital for alleged Taliban activity before the bombing and knew it was a medical facility. The intelligence included maps of the region with a circle drawn around the hospital. Thursday marked the second time this year Obama has delayed an Afghan withdrawal, and assures that despite previous pledges, the war will continue under his successor.

So, for more, let's bring Ryan Devereaux into the conversation, staff reporter at *The Intercept*, who wrote a part of the "Drone Papers" series dealing with Afghanistan, which is headlined ["Manhunting in the Hindu Kush."](#)

It reveals that despite official claims of precision attacks, U.S. drone strikes often kill far more people than the intended target. During one year-long operation in Afghanistan, strikes on 35 direct targets killed at least 200 other people. In one five-month period, nine out of 10 victims were not the intended target. The ratios could be even worse in the undeclared war zones of Yemen and Somalia.

Ryan, talk about what you found.

**RYAN DEVEREAUX:** So, I looked at this special operations campaign that lasted from 2011 to 2013, and all the statistics that you cited were accurate. And what's interesting about this campaign is it's really emblematic in a lot of ways, both of what the administration has sort of outlined in their plan in terms of how to deal with Afghanistan going forward and sort of the experience of the United States in Afghanistan and Afghan experience of the United States in Afghanistan throughout the course of this war.

So, this campaign was aimed at taking out specific people—right?—and using airstrikes, particularly drone strikes, to take them out. And what the documents show is the sort of breakdown of who some of these targets were. And while there are sort of al-Qaeda-affiliated guys and Taliban-affiliated guys in there, there are also local forces guys who took up arms after the United States arrived in 2002 in their province, you know, who for decades had resisted the presence of the Taliban and al-Qaeda in their province, who took up arms after the United States partnered with local power brokers who would point to their business rivals and say, "Hey, this guy's a Talib, this guy's al-Qaeda," and then the United States would bomb those guys, and then all of a sudden you have an insurgency in these provinces. So this is a—it's a campaign that really reveals the story of the war in Afghanistan.

And what it breaks down is how these operations, which aim to sort of decapitate these groups, you know, even when they have the best sort of intelligence assets that they need—this campaign, they actually had informants on the ground, they actually had the whole area sort of mapped with signals intelligence—the results were still pretty terrible. They had marginal disruption of al-Qaeda and Taliban presence in the area, and now, in 2015, a recent report found that al-Qaeda's presence in one of the valleys that this campaign focused on specifically is greater than it was in 2002.

So, we're talking about—these are the sort of operations that are going to continue as the Obama administration continues to fight this war. We know that airstrikes, in particular, the kind of—the kind of things that are detailed in these documents are going to be the sort of tip of the spear in what the United States does in Afghanistan. We know that there has been a rise in civilian casualties resulting from airstrikes in Afghanistan. We know that a number of those airstrikes are airstrikes that are carried out by drones. We know that in 2013, research—a report found—a report that was contracted by the U.S. military found that drone strikes in Afghanistan were 10 times more dangerous to civilian populations. I mean, the story of this campaign is the story of the United States' experience in Afghanistan. And it's the story of what the war will look like going forward.

**JUAN GONZÁLEZ:** And it seems to me it's also the story of a country that wants to fight a war without having to endure any casualties on its side, so therefore it's taking the most expedient way, which is drone strikes, to be able to—and then not worry about the impact on the population as a whole.

**RYAN DEVEREAUX:** But then it's a vicious cycle, right? Because without really understanding where you are, without understanding—the story of the province of Kunar, specifically, where a lot of these operations took place, is the story of the United States finding itself in a place that it didn't understand and being sort of pulled into these internecine local conflicts, and then, as a result, sort of fomenting an insurgency that goes on and on and on. It's hard to see an end to this. And especially if these sorts of operations are going to be the face of the United States' presence in Afghanistan going forward, it's hard to see any end in sight.

**AMY GOODMAN:** And explain what the Hindu Kush is.

**RYAN DEVEREAUX:** So this is the mountain range in which these operations took place. So this is a—the province of Kunar, specifically, is a historically rebellious province. This is the region of Afghanistan that first rose up during the Soviet occupation. So this is a very, very complex and complicated area. This was an area that, like I said, resisted Taliban and al-Qaeda presence, until the United States came to their province.

**AMY GOODMAN:** So, Jeremy, the president announcing this indefinite extension of the war—and you look at the civilian casualties. Can you further draw these connections to why there is more Taliban control today than there was when the U.S. attacked Afghanistan in October of 2011—of 2001?

**JEREMY SCAHILL:** I think that's a complicated question. I mean, first of all, the Taliban as it exists today is not the Taliban that existed on 9/11. And, you know, Taliban is a generic term at this point. It's like Kleenex is a brand, but everyone calls it that, even if the brand isn't Kleenex, you know, that you're buying facial tissue or something. And so, Taliban now is being used by the U.S., in particular, as a much sort of broader term. I think part of it has to do with the fact that people are sick of the occupation, that the Taliban are actually, you know, Muslims rather than white guys in camouflage kicking down doors. And I think part of it is that the Taliban actually do have indigenous support in some parts of the country—large swaths of the country,

actually. And they're also brutal thugs, gangsters, murderers. But I think, in part, the U.S. has dramatically misread, as it did in Iraq, how ordinary people were going to respond. And I think that opened the door for the Taliban to retake power in parts of the country. You know, so it's—the idea that the president thinks that by just sort of extending this, that there's going to be some markedly different outcome, I think it's a bankrupt belief.

**JUAN GONZÁLEZ:** But it also appears to be his attempt to prevent the developments in Afghanistan that have already occurred in Iraq after the United States pulled out, which is the rise of ISIS, isn't it?

**JEREMY SCAHILL:** Well, I mean, if you look at what's fueling ISIS right now, I mean, they took a bunch of U.S. weapons systems and ordnance and everything, and combined it with military expertise of former Baathists. And, you know, I mean, look, the Bush administration, in invading Iraq, created this whole situation, and Obama is sort of replicating that now by further extending the Afghan War.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Is there a prospect for a truce between the Taliban and the United States?

**JEREMY SCAHILL:** Ryan maybe could answer that.

**RYAN DEVEREAUX:** I mean, there was a prospect for truce when the United States invaded more than a decade-and-a-half ago and really blew that opportunity. You know, we're looking at—like Jeremy said, we're looking at a different situation now. One would hope that the United States pursues a way forward in Afghanistan that isn't just trying to kill its way to victory.

**AMY GOODMAN:** I want to ask each of you what most shocked you in the documents that you saw, that you based your articles on, that you looked at and said, "Is this possible?" Cora Currier?

**CORA CURRIER:** I think that the sort of frank admission about the over—the military's own admission that the intelligence that was behind drone strikes was—and other airstrikes in Yemen and Somalia—was so limited and of such a inferior quality than the intelligence that

they wanted, just to see that frank admission and to see it laid out in their technical terms, in their charts, in their own things. Because this is something that you hear from people on all sides of the debate about counterterrorism campaigns like these, is, like, "Well, drone strikes are only good as the intelligence that goes into them. You know, you can—drones strikes can be precise, but they can also be precisely wrong." And I think that seeing the military's own admissions about the faulty—the flawed intelligence collection systems that they have in these countries was remarkable.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Ryan Devereaux?

**RYAN DEVEREAUX:** There's a graphic in one of the slides in the Haymaker documents that breaks—

**AMY GOODMAN:** And explain Haymaker.

**RYAN DEVEREAUX:** Haymaker is the campaign in Afghanistan that I looked into. And it breaks down the number of jackpots—so, a jackpot is removing, either through killing or capturing a target from the battlefield—and the number of strikes that the U.S. conducted, airstrikes. And it presents, in the far right side, a percentage, right? Seventy-some percent. Out of the airstrikes that they conducted, you know, they hit their—they got their jackpots this number of times, right? Seventy percent. All right. Except, in their calculation, they completely leave out the 155 people in the EKIA—enemy killed in action—column. So the calculation doesn't take into account the number of bystanders killed in these operations, or the intelligence opportunities lost by failing to capture people, failing to interrogate people. They just solely calculate the number of jackpots killed in airstrikes.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Jeremy Scahill, your surprise, and when you got these drone papers?

**JEREMY SCAHILL:** Well, you know, I think that people should look at the kind of cold, corporate language in the sort of vocabulary of assassination. If people want a really good, quick way to understand the scope of all of this, but also to see the banality of kind of the language of assassination, you should really start with Josh Begley's amazing contribution to this series, which is this—the [glossary](#) of it. And it's a visual tour through these documents and what they reveal. And, you know, I would encourage people to take the

time to read all of these pieces. We have an incredible group of journalists at *The Intercept*, and I'm really proud of our entire team for all the work that they did on this.

**AMY GOODMAN:** And what you're calling for right now?

**JEREMY SCAHILL:** Well, we're—I mean, look, we're not calling for anything. Amnesty International is calling for an independent investigation into this, a congressional inquiry into it. ACLU is basically saying the same thing.

**AMY GOODMAN:** In response to the new *Intercept* series on drones, NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden tweeted, "In an astonishing act of civil courage, one American just shattered an unspeakable lie," and, quote, "Today, @DanielEllsberg is smiling." That last tweet, of course, refers to Pentagon Papers whistleblower Daniel Ellsberg.