OMNI NEWSLETTER #1 ON COVERT OPS. April 19, 2012. Compiled by Dick Bennett for a Culture of Peace and Justice.

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The Age of American Shadow Power
Juan Cole
April 11, 2012 | This article appeared in the April 30, 2012 edition of The Nation.

Covert operations are nothing new in American history, but it could be argued that during the past decade they have moved from being a relatively minor arrow in the national security quiver to being the cutting edge of American power. Drone strikes, electronic surveillance and stealth engagements by military units such as the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC), as well as dependence on private corporations, mercenary armies and terrorist groups, are now arguably more common as tools of US foreign policy than conventional warfare or diplomacy. But these tools lend themselves to rogue operations that create peril for the United States when they blow back on us. And they often make the United States deeply unpopular.

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The massive popular protests that shook the globe this year have much in common, though most of the reporting on them in the mainstream media has obscured the similarities.

Shadow power has even become an issue in the presidential campaign. Newt Gingrich advocates ramped-up “covert operations” inside Iran. President Obama replied to Mitt Romney’s charge that he is an “appeaser” by suggesting that his critics “ask bin Laden” about that.

Obama often speaks of the “tide of war receding,” but that phrase refers only to conventional war. In Afghanistan, where the administration hopes to roll up conventional fighting by the end of 2013, it is making plans for long-term operations by special forces through units such as JSOC. It is unclear what legal framework will be constructed for their activities, other than a wink and a nod from President Hamid Karzai.

Although the Iraqis managed to compel the withdrawal of US troops by the end of last year, Washington is nevertheless seeking to remain influential through shadow power. The US embassy in Baghdad has 16,000 employees, most of them civilian contractors. They include 2,000 diplomats and several hundred intelligence operatives. By contrast, the entire US Foreign Service corps comprises fewer than 14,000. The Obama administration has decided to slash the number of contractors, planning for an embassy force of “only” 8,000. This monument to shadow power clearly is not intended merely to represent US interests in Iraq but rather to shape that country and to serve as a command center for the eastern reaches of the greater Middle East. The US shadow warriors will, for instance, attempt to block “the
influence of Iran,” according to the *Washington Post*. Since Iraq’s Shiite political parties, which dominate Parliament and the cabinet, are often close to Iran, that charge would inescapably involve meddling in internal Iraqi politics.

Nor can we be sure that the CIA will engage only in espionage or influence-peddling in Iraq. The American shadow government routinely kidnaps people it considers dangerous and has sent them to black sites for torture, often by third-party governments to keep American hands clean. As usual with the shadow government, private corporations have been enlisted to help in these “rendition” programs, which are pursued outside the framework of national and international law and in defiance of the sensibilities of our allies. How the United States might behave in Iraq can be extrapolated from its recent behavior in other allied countries. In November 2009 an Italian court convicted in absentia twenty-three people, most of them CIA field officers who had kidnapped an alleged Al Qaeda recruiter, Abu Omar, on a Milan street in the middle of the day and sent him to Hosni Mubarak’s Egypt for “interrogation.” Obama has explicitly continued this practice as a “counterterrorism tool,” though he says torture has been halted. Iraq is likely to continue to be an arena of such veiled struggles.

The Obama administration’s severe unilateral sanctions on Iran and attempts to cut that country off from the world banking system have a shadow power aspect. Aimed at crippling Iran's oil exports, they are making it difficult for Iran to import staples like wheat. Although Washington denies carrying out covert operations in Iran, the US government and allies like Israel are suspected of doing just that. According to anonymous US intelligence officials and military sources interviewed by *The New Yorker’s* Seymour Hersh, the United States has trained members of the MEK (Mojahedin-e Khalq, or People’s Jihadis), based in Iraq at Camp Ashraf, to spy on Iran and carry out covert operations there, just as Saddam Hussein had done, though any American support for the organization would directly contradict the State
Department listing of it as a terrorist organization. The MEK is suspected of carrying out a string of assassinations against Iranian nuclear scientists, but US intelligence leaks say Israel’s Mossad, not the CIA, is the accomplice. Indeed, the difficulty of disentangling Washington’s shadow power from that of its junior partners can be seen in the leak by US intelligence complaining that Mossad agents had impersonated CIA field officers in recruiting members of the Jundullah terrorist group in Iranian Baluchistan for covert operations against Iran. Jundullah, a Sunni group, has repeatedly bombed Shiite mosques in Zahedan and elsewhere in the country’s southeast. Needless to say, the kind of overt and covert pressure Obama is putting on Iran could easily, even if inadvertently, spark a war.

The recent release of more than 5 million e-mails hacked from the server of the private intelligence firm Stratfor shows that it did more than analysis. It engaged in surveillance and intelligence activities on behalf of corporate sponsors. Dow Chemical, for example, hired Stratfor to monitor a protest group agitating on the issue of the catastrophic 1984 gas leak in Bhopal, India, which killed at least 3,500. WikiLeaks maintains that Stratfor exemplifies the “revolving door” between private intelligence firms and the US government agencies that share information with them.

The increasingly frequent use of civilian “security contractors”—essentially mercenaries—should be a sore point for Americans. The tens of thousands of mercenaries deployed in Iraq were crucial to the US occupation of that country, but they also demonstrate the severe drawbacks of using shadow warriors. Ignorance about local attitudes, arrogance and lack of coordination with the US military and with local police and military led to fiascoes such as the 2007 shootings at Baghdad’s Nisour Square, where Blackwater employees killed seventeen Iraqis. The Iraqi government ultimately expelled Blackwater, even before it did the same with the US military, which had brought the contractors into their country.
The bad feelings toward the United States generated by hired guns can also be seen in the infamous Raymond Davis incident in Lahore, Pakistan. On January 27, 2011, Davis, a CIA contractor, was waiting at a traffic light when two Pakistanis pulled up next to him on a motorcycle. Davis, who later alleged that one of them had a gun, became alarmed and shot the men. The driver survived the initial volley and tried to run away, but Davis shot him twice in the back. Instead of fleeing the scene, he spent time searching and then photographing the bodies and calling the US consulate for an extraction team. Undercover CIA field officers raced toward the site of the shooting in a consulate SUV, hoping to keep Davis out of the hands of Pakistani authorities, who were approaching, sirens blaring. In its haste, the extraction team killed a motorcyclist and failed in its mission. Davis was taken into custody. His cellphone yielded the identities of some forty-five members of his covert network in Pakistan, who were also arrested.

The incident provoked rolling street demonstrations and enraged Pakistanis, who are convinced that the country is crawling with such agents. Davis was jailed and charged with double homicide, and only released months later, when a Persian Gulf oil monarchy allegedly paid millions on behalf of the United States to the families (in Islamic law, families of a murder victim may pardon the murderer on payment of a satisfactory sum). It was a public relations debacle for Washington, of course, but the salient fact is that a US public servant shot two Pakistanis (likely not terrorists) in cold blood, one of them in the back.

American drone strikes on individuals and groups in the tribal belt of northwestern Pakistan, as well as in Yemen, also typify Washington’s global shadow wars. The United States has 7,000 unmanned aerial vehicles, which it has deployed in strikes in six countries. Both the CIA
and the US military operate the drones. Rather than being adjuncts to conventional war, drone strikes are mostly carried out in places where no war has been declared and no Status of Forces Agreement has been signed. **They operate outside the framework of the Constitution, with no due process or habeas corpus, recalling premodern practices of the English monarchy**, such as declaring people outlaws, issuing bills of attainder against individuals who offend the crown and trying them in secret Star Chamber proceedings.

Despite President Obama’s denials, the Britain-based Bureau of Investigative Journalism has found that not only are civilians routinely killed by US drone strikes in northern Pakistan; often people rushing to the scene of a strike to help the wounded are killed by a second launch. The BIJ estimates that the United States has killed on the order of 3,000 people in 319 drone strikes, some 600 of them civilian bystanders and 174 of those, children. Some 84 percent of all such strikes were launched after Obama came to office.

Moreover, the drone operations are classified. When asked about strikes, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton refuses to confirm or deny that they have occurred. The drones cannot be openly debated in Congress or covered in any detail by the US media. Therefore, they cannot be the subject of a national political debate, except in the abstract. The Congressional intelligence committees are briefed on the program, but it is unlikely that any serious checks and balances can operate in so secret and murky a realm, and the committees’ leaders have complained about the inadequacy of the information they are given. No hearing could be called about them, since the drone strikes cannot be publicly confirmed. Classified operations create gods, above the law.

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The WikiLeaks State Department cables reveal that Pakistani Prime Minister Yousaf Raza
Gilani and former Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh secretly authorized US drone strikes, pledging to take the blame from their angry publics. But a private conversation with a single leader, repeatedly denied thereafter in public, is hardly a treaty. The only international legal doctrine (recognized in the United Nations charter) invoked to justify drone strikes is the right of the United States to defend itself from attack. But it cannot be demonstrated that any drone strike victims had attacked, or were in a position to attack, the United States. Other proposed legal justifications also falter.

The doctrine of “hot pursuit” does not apply in Yemen or Somalia, and often does not apply in Pakistan, either. The only due process afforded those killed from the air is an intelligence assessment, possibly based on dubious sources and not reviewed by a judge. Those targeted are typically alleged to belong to Al Qaeda, the Taliban or some kindred group, and apparently thought to fall under the mandate of the September 14, 2001, Congressional Authorization for the Use of Military Force by the president against those behind the September 11 attacks and those who harbored them. The AUMF could probably legitimately be applied to Ayman al-Zawahiri’s Al Qaeda faction, which still plots against the United States. But a new generation of Muslim militants has arisen, far too young to be implicated in 9/11 and who may have rethought that disastrous strategy.

Increasingly, moreover, “Al Qaeda” is a vague term somewhat arbitrarily applied by Washington to regional groups involved in local fundamentalist politics, as with the Partisans of Sharia, the Yemeni militants who have taken over the city of Zinjibar, or expatriate Arab supporters in Pakistan of the Haqqani network of Pashtun fighters—former allies of the United States in their struggle against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. How long will the AUMF be deployed in the Muslim world to authorize cowboy tactics from the skies? There is no consistency, no application of the rule of law. Guilt by association and absence of due process
are the hallmarks of shadow government. In September the Obama administration used a drone to kill a US citizen in Yemen, Anwar al-Awlaki. But since the Supreme Court had already ruled, in *Hamdan v. Rumsfeld* (2006), that the AUMF could not authorize military tribunals for Guantánamo detainees that sidestepped civil due process—and since the subsequent Military Commissions Act of 2006 allows such tribunals only for aliens—it is hard to see how Awlaki’s right to a trial could be summarily abrogated. Two weeks after he was killed, his 16-year-old son, also a US citizen and less obviously a menace to the superpower, was also killed by a drone.

By contrast, the United States and its allies are sanguine about a figure like the Libyan Abdel Hakim Belhadj, now in charge of security in Tripoli, who fought in Afghanistan against the Soviet Union and was later held in US black sites. Released, he emerged as a rebel leader in Libya last year. The circumstantial case against him would easily allow a US drone strike on him even now under the current rules, but he was rehabilitated because of his enmity toward Muammar el-Qaddafi.

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Among the greatest dangers to American citizens from Washington’s shadow power is “blowback,” the common term for a covert operation that boomerangs on its initiator. Arguably, the Reagan administration marked a turning point in the history of US infatuation with shadow power. Reagan strong-armed King Fahd of Saudi Arabia into providing funds to the right-wing Contras in Nicaragua, and the president developed his own resources for the Contras by illegally selling weapons to Iran (despite its being on the terrorist watch list and ineligible for such sales). Washington also joined Fahd in giving billions of dollars of arms and aid to the fundamentalist mujahideen in Afghanistan (“freedom fighters,” Reagan called them, “the
equivalent of America’s founding fathers”), where Arab volunteers ultimately coalesced into Al Qaeda. They later used the tradecraft they had absorbed from CIA-trained Afghan colleagues to stage operations in the Middle East against US allies and to carry out the 9/11 attacks. Two allied groups that received massive aid from the Reagan administration became among the deadliest US enemies in Afghanistan after 2002: the Haqqani network and the Hizb-i-Islami. Blowback goes hand in hand with covert operations.

The use of mercenaries and black units by the US government undermines discipline, lawfulness and a strong and consistent chain of command. Regular armies can be deployed and then demobilized, but Al Qaeda–like networks, once created, cannot be rolled up so easily, and they often turn against former allies. Black intelligence and military operations with virtually no public oversight can easily go rogue.

Reagan’s shadow government was a disaster, but it was a pygmy compared with Obama’s. Americans will have to be prepared for much more blowback to come if we go on like this—not to mention further erosion of civil liberties at home, as the shadow government reaches back toward us from abroad. (Electronic surveillance without a warrant and the militarization of our police forces are cases in point.) Moreover, the practices associated with the shadow government, because of the rage they provoke, deepen mistrust of Washington and reduce the international cooperation that the United States, like all countries, needs. The shadow government masquerades as a way to keep the United States strong, but if it is not rolled back, it could fatally weaken American diplomacy.

Juan Cole
April 11, 2012 | This article appeared in the April 30, 2012 edition of The Nation.
It's Rambo Time: Covert Ops Drives Pentagon Strategy

New York: William H. McRaven is an admiral in Obama's Navy. He was a member of Seal Team 3, and oversaw the killing of Osama Bin Laden.
He's the consummate Special Ops warrior and wants more special ops forces, more drones and, most significantly, more "autonomy" (read, power) to position "his" troops in more places. He is now lobbying to expand his "freedom" by building a bigger personal arsenal of undercover operatives under his command.

The New York Times refers to his guys somewhat vaguely as "elite units" that have traditionally operated in "the dark corners of American foreign policy."
That shines light on it, doesn't it? What it says is: forget transparency and accountability. The hidden government is always hiding

These units like Special Forces, Delta Force, SEALs, and Rangers often operate outside the chain of command and, as they become institutionally stronger, tend to dominate military decision-making.

McRaven's ambition represents a takeover of the military by more and more clandestine killer units. They are deceptive, secretive, and are growing in influence. There are no cuts planned in this realm.

Under military governments, these are the units who support the secret police, often engaging in torture and murder with impunity.
They are given a sense of being our supermen, the real chosen people; ordinary rules don't apply to them.

Democracy is not their "thing."
At the same time, they operate in a climate of high stress, prone to mistakes, as the military newspaper Stars And Stripes points out:

"The families of all troop operations live with fear, craving every crumb of information they can find about their deployed service members, whether through military channels, Facebook, email or other outlets. Special operations families get less information.

For special operations forces, ranging from Army Special Forces and Rangers to Marine Force Recon to Air Force Pararescue to Navy SEALs, there are no public welcome home ceremonies, no crowds to sing their praises. Even if their missions, such as the raid in which bin Laden was killed, become public, the troops and their families remain anonymous.

Since most of those in special operations forces are recruited from within the services, the average member is older and has a larger family unit than those in other military occupations, according to Special Operations Command Europe commander Maj. Gen. Michael S. Repass."

Officials are attracted to these well-trained, real-life "action figures" They like the idea of having "badasses" at their beck and call. Like New York's Mayor Bloomberg, they see special units as their 'private army," but, unlike Mayor Mike, usually don't say so.

JFK gave us the "Green Berets" who were glamorized in movies, with a pop song of their own, only to be later ground up in the Vietnam War like our other forces.
There is a growing fusion between intelligence ops and the military. To watch how this works, just follow Leon Panetta's career from CIA to the Pentagon.

This command is **an army within the army**. It has doubled in size since 2001 with an official budget of $10.5 billion that is probably understated. They have at least 12,000 operatives in the field with 66,000 in the command itself and operate in more than 70 countries.

Can you name them? I didn't think so.

The new Denzel Washington flick Safe House, shot in Cape Town, South Africa, takes us into the nether world of assassins and secret jails at the heart of the Special Ops mission. It's not pretty.

McRaven is very media savvy with a degree, no less, in journalism. He was the go-to guy by Obama used to put bin laden on ice through an extrajudicial killing. They don't call it assassination or liquidation, but that's what it was.

According to the *New York Times*, "In February, Mr. Panetta called Vice Adm. William H. McRaven, commander of the Pentagon's Joint Special Operations Command, to CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia, to give him details about the compound and to begin planning a military strike."

Admiral McRaven, a veteran of the covert world who had written a book on American Special Operations, spent weeks working with the C.I.A. on the operation, and came up with three options: a helicopter assault using U.S. Navy SEALs, a strike with B-2 bombers that would obliterate the compound, or a joint raid with Pakistani intelligence operatives who would be told about the mission hours before the launch."

Wikipedia reports, "the day before the assault, "Mr. Obama took a break from rehearsing for the White House Correspondents Dinner that night to call Admiral McRaven, to wish him luck." Thus blessed, he became a runner-up for *Time*'s Man of the Year. He even played football for the NFL.

What a perfect resume to get the full General Petraeus treatment, our latest "hero" in the making.

In the media world, including in many Hollywood films and the latest video games, Special Ops gets the Full Monte treatment, despite their well cultivated mad dog, wild man image. Many of these "counter-terrorists" become, in fact, terrorists. This **idealization of killer commandos** is nothing new. Back in 1910, Theodore Roosevelt, known for his exploits as a "rough rider" in the Spanish American War, was ecstatic about their role:

"It is not the critic who counts, not the man who points out how the strong man stumbled, or where the doer of deeds could have done better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena; whose face is marred by the dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs and comes short again and again; who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions and spends himself in a worthy course; who at the best, knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who, at worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly; so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat."

While the *New York Times* reports the Admiral wants a freer hand, Fox reports it is already happening with the Pentagon's Afghan role likely to be expanded with more special ops warriors. (Even, as we are told, troops there are being "drawn down"!)

While the passage of the NDAA Defense Authorization act, how soon will it before these tactics come home? We are already seeing the militarization of the police in the "homeland" or "Battlefield" or whatever the hell we are living in.

The use of sophisticated sound weapons and infiltration against Occupy protesters is a sign that they are already being targeted as terrorists.
A commitment to more special forces is a commitment to more imperial intervention, and specialized units operating above the law and beyond the law. It's more secrecy in government with a constant danger of abuse. It promises more secrecy and manipulation.

Our President, as a candidate, opposed bad wars. Now, he hasn't seen many wars he doesn't want to get involved in -- as long as they can be fought in the shadows.

Who's going to tell his (Mc)Raven: Never More.

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**Analysis: The rise and rise of western covert ops**


By Peter Apps, Political Risk Correspondent

WASHINGTON | Tue Oct 18, 2011

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - Four months ago, Admiral William McRaven commanded the operation that killed Osama bin Laden. Now, as the new head of U.S. special forces, he argues that his shadowy, secretive warriors are increasingly central to how America and its allies fight.

When the suntanned, towering SEAL testified to the Congressional House Armed Services Committee in September, just a few weeks after he took over his new role, he used posters detailing the growth of his forces. In the decade since September 11 2001, U.S. Special Operations Command personnel numbers have doubled, its budget tripled and deployments quadrupled.

The Bin Laden takedown is simply the tip of an iceberg of fast-growing, largely hidden action by the United States and its allies. Those with knowledge of such operations say this changing state of warfare could spark a range of unintended consequences, from jeopardizing diplomatic relationships to unwanted, wider wars.

That's not entirely new. Secret wars against communism in Southeast Asia in the 1960s helped spawn larger conventional conflicts. In the 1980s, the "Iran-Contra" arms-for-weapons scandal embarrassed the Reagan administration, while support for Islamist guerrillas fighting Russian occupation in Afghanistan helped produce Bin Laden and Al Qaeda.

And it's not just western powers. Just last week, the United States accused Iran of a plot to kill the Saudi ambassador.

The appeal of such tactics is clear. Military operations are far more politically palatable if you keep dead bodies off TV screens. A computer worm planted in Iran's nuclear program, secret help to rebels in Libya, drone strikes to cripple Al Qaeda -- all can achieve the desired effect without massive publicity.

In an era of budget cuts, they are also cheap -- particularly compared with the cost of
maintaining and deploying a large conventional military force. McRaven said his 58,000 operatives cost a mere 1.6 percent of the Pentagon's predicted 2012 budget.

"Put simply, (they) provide a tremendous return on the nation's investment," McRaven told the unclassified portion of the Congressional hearing. "The special operations forces have never been more valuable to our nation and allies around the world than they are today, and that demand will not diminish for the foreseeable future."

MORE WARS, FEWER PEOPLE?

The CIA has long retained its own, much smaller band of paramilitary operatives, sometimes operating with military special forces. Their numbers have also risen sharply in recent years to hundreds or even thousands, security experts say. Under its new director, General David Petraeus, the agency is expected to further increase such deniable operations as assassination and sabotage.

Britain, Israel and others are also believed to have renewed their focus on specialist, hidden techniques, and are plowing resources into emerging fields such as cyber warfare.

As the Iraqi and Afghan campaigns ramp down, Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, the Philippines and Mexico are all touted by security and intelligence experts as potential theaters for new operations. U.S. special forces are now deployed in some 75 countries, where their missions range from training to assassinations. Yet even some supporters of the new tactics worry about the lack of public discussion.

"We may find ourselves fighting more wars with fewer people," says John Nagl, a former U.S. Army officer who wrote its counterinsurgency manual and now heads the Center for New American Security, a think tank. "That raises some interesting questions -- like whether we have the right to do that. There is much less public debate. Society doesn't pay the cost and so doesn't ask the questions."

A MODERN WAY OF WAR

Quietly, this approach is already redefining how conflicts are waged. Conventional troop surges might have dominated coverage of Iraq and Afghanistan, but behind the scenes the generals were heavily dependent on secret, special operations. Intelligence operators, remote-controlled drones and troops from the SEALS, Delta Force, Britain's SAS and other forces fought hidden campaigns against insurgent leaders and bomb makers, working with local communities to turn conflicts against Al Qaeda, the Taliban and their allies.

"There has been a real renewed focus on special operations and clandestine services," says Fred Burton, a former U.S. counterterrorism agent and now vice president for strategic intelligence firm Stratfor. "They were always there, of course, but they had become somewhat sidelined. That's definitely changed now."

To an extent, the shift is down to technology. This provides some entirely new weaponry -- such as the cybermunition Stuxnet, which caused Iranian nuclear centrifuges to rip themselves apart. It also allows force to be more targeted.

"You change your ability to integrate information, which in many ways is at least as important as collection," says Anthony Cordesman, a former senior U.S. intelligence official now at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. "You have collation of information almost in real time. You can pull together the information and find the target."

That is already changing the shape of western militaries. A drone can be flown remotely by
just one pilot, but it takes around 20 analysts to interpret and assess the data it collects. This in turn produces a much larger array of potential targets. In Afghanistan alone last year, McRaven says his forces conducted some 2,000 raids against identified high-value adversaries.

LIKE LAWRENCE IN ARABIA

To work with tribal groups and win their loyalty, language skills and cultural awareness are essential. Special forces helped shape both the "Sunni awakening", which swept Al Qaeda and its allies from much of Iraq, and the more recent rebel victory in Libya. McRaven said he believed the Afghan "village program", working with local communities and police, might prove his forces' most important contribution to that war.

The need for such skills is not new, of course. McRaven demands all his officers and NCOs learn a second language. Others in the field read ancient histories or the writings of idiosyncratic English archeologist T.E. Lawrence, better known as "Lawrence of Arabia".

Often dressed as a local Bedouin, Lawrence worked with Arab rebels against Turkish forces during World War One, selecting the leaders he felt had the best chance of success and supplying them with arms and tactical advice. It was better and more sustainable, he believed, that local forces do the job than for outsiders to do it for them.

"What you need is people who can put themselves in harm's way, understand the different cultures and think fast enough to be able to adapt to events," says retired Lieutenant-General Graeme Lamb, a former director of Britain's special forces. "We don't have a huge number of these people, but... there are enough out there who have read Lawrence, dealt with people like Sunni insurgents and are comfortable in that kind of environment."

THIS OR THE 101ST AIRBORNE?

But some argue the most important force driving the new tactics is an almost visceral objection to more conventional warfare in the wake of the Iraq conflict, and Israel's wars in Lebanon and Gaza.

"It's almost always a matter of political will," says Nigel Inkster, a former deputy chief of Britain's Secret Intelligence Service (MI6). "The new technologies do give you some new options, but broadly these capabilities have always existed. The question is whether you choose to take the more covert route or send in the 101st Airborne."

Cash flow is also key. Those with knowledge of western strategy toward Libya say it was driven more by what could not be done than what could. A wider military intervention was politically impossible and financially unaffordable, yet politicians demanded something be done.

Some of the most successful strategies were not conventional. British officials say the secret "oil cell" that helped starve Muammar Gaddafi of fuel supplies was key to rebel victory, yet involved the use of little or no military force.

Besides straining budgets, the global financial crisis has also made great powers more reluctant to risk the economic shock of serious conflict. One reason Stuxnet was such an appealing tool, security experts say, is that it carried less risk of Iranian military retaliation against shipping in the Gulf. That would have sent oil prices soaring.

A senior Israeli official has said cyber warfare offers a less politically dangerous option for nations in a media-saturated age. Israel suffered widespread international scrutiny and
frequent condemnation for its wars in Lebanon and Gaza.

"War is ugly, awfully ugly," Israel's Deputy Prime Minister Dan Meridor -- who overseas spy services and nuclear affairs -- told diplomats and journalists at the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs in February. "War is all the time on television... people see this and can't take it... Because it is difficult, one looks for other ways. One of these ways is the intelligence community ... are trying to do things that don't look that ugly, don't kill people."

RISK OF BLOWBACK?

But the secret campaign against Iran's nuclear program has not been entirely bloodless. Sabotage might be relatively clean, but Israel's Mossad is also suspected of being behind the killings of several of Tehran's nuclear scientists.

With so much now taking place behind the scenes, a handful of critics is expressing concern that there is simply far too little scrutiny.

"The implications are vast," says Patricia De Gennaro, a counterinsurgency expert and professor at New York University who has worked with U.S. forces in the Middle East. "There is no accountability. People have been basically brainwashed, with the help of the media and others in the Beltway, into believing we don't have a right to know what their military is doing."

In an era that may see heightened state-to-state rivalry -- not least between older western powers and increasingly assertive emerging states such as China -- any operations that go awry could heighten tensions further.

The information revolution may also be making it harder to keep operations secret. The Bin Laden raid was reported by a local resident on Twitter within minutes of the helicopters touching down.

It would be a delusion to see covert operations as a simple solution to global problems. "This comes in cycles," says Cordesman.

"There is a tendency to grossly exaggerate success and underestimate the cost... These things are never under control, not even in a democracy. Nothing you ever do with violence is going to be clean or simple. But sometimes you just have to look at the options, look at the consequences of not acting, and then do it."


END COVERT OPS NEWSLETTER #1