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"Intel Wars: The Secret History of the Fight Against Terror," by Matthew M. Aid

By Dina Temple-Raston, Published: February 17

When American aid worker Jessica Buchanan and her Dutch counterpart were freed from a makeshift Somali pirate camp last month, the helicopter flight to the safety of a U.S. military base in East Africa was a brief one. The Black Hawk lifted off under cover of darkness and flew straight to the East African nation of Djibouti, landing at a small American base called Camp Lemonnier.

Matthew M. Aid's new book, "Intel Wars," reveals that the base is more than just a dusty, desert lily pad from which to launch covert missions. It is also home to the kind of U.S. intelligence assets that have transformed the way the United States is battling terrorism around the world. Camp Lemonnier, just a small compound next to the Djibouti airport, has a U.S. Air Force/CIA Predator drone detachment and a listening station that, one intelligence official told me, "allows us to blanket Somalia with surveillance."

According to "Intel Wars," Somalia is only the beginning.

Camp Lemonnier allows the United States to track "the movement of illegal narcotics between Yemen and Somalia," the Lord's Resistance Army in southern Sudan and small guerrilla groups in Ethiopia. Aid says that for the past two years, U.S. intelligence has used Lemonnier to detect "the presence of foreign Muslim fighters claiming allegiance to al-Qaeda fighting alongside Janjaweed militia groups against local separatists" in Darfur, Sudan. The breadth of intelligence Lemonnier provides goes a long way toward explaining how U.S. Special Forces were able to find two lone aid workers and rescue them from that pirate camp in Somalia.

Every chapter in the book is braided with intelligence nuggets. Aid weaves together original reporting, volumes of unclassified documents and his expertise. The book's chapters on Afghanistan and Pakistan are particularly engrossing, although they don't put the intelligence community in a particularly good light.

Aid writes that after 10 years of war in Afghanistan, the United States still doesn't understand the enemy. "We did not know how many Taliban we were fighting, where they came from or why they were against us," the late Richard Holbrooke, President Obama's special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, told Aid in 2010. "Intel did not even have a good bio for Mullah Omar," the Taliban leader, and "we did not even know who was on our side and who was on theirs."

The book also provides crucial behind-the-scenes details that shed new light on a June 2008 trip to Pakistan by the CIA's then-deputy director, Stephen Kappes. Newspapers, including The Washington Post, reported that Kappes wanted to talk to Pakistani officials about links between their intelligence service, the Inter-Services Intelligence agency, or ISI, and tribal militant groups. Kappes's chief concern: the Haqqani network, a tribal group that had ties to al-Qaeda and appeared to have an uncommonly close relationship

to Pakistani intelligence officials. Aid reveals for the first time what motivated that trip — just weeks earlier, there was a failed CIA drone strike against a Haqqani compound in Pakistan’s North Waziristan. The feeling was that the Pakistanis purposely derailed the strike.

Aid reports that the CIA notified Pakistan of the intention to strike a Haqqani base, and, in response, the ISI began working “feverishly to delay the drone attack until they could get their clients out of the way.” Pakistani air force officials claimed they were having “technical difficulties,” which caused a delay in launching the drones from Shamsi Air Base, in western Pakistan. By the time those “difficulties” were resolved, the Haqqani officials in the cross hairs had fled. Aid’s sources say that cellphone intercepts indicated that the terrorists had been warned.

Not all the Pakistani anecdotes are negative. In February 2009, Aid writes, the cease-fire the Pakistanis signed with the Taliban, ceding the Swat Valley to the militants, turned into a boon for U.S. intelligence. When the Taliban broke the agreement just months later, the Pakistanis did something no one was expecting: They allowed U.S. Air Force drones based in Afghanistan to fly missions over Pakistani Taliban strongholds for the first time. Starting in June 2009, Aid reports, the Pakistanis gave the CIA permission to use Predator and Reaper unmanned drones to attack Pakistani Taliban targets not just in northern Pakistan but around the city of Peshawar. It was, he writes, “remarkable from an intelligence perspective.”

Aid, who wrote a definitive history of the National Security Agency called “The Secret Sentry,” provides other details that allow readers to feel like insiders. For example, I didn’t know that country singer Johnny Cash had been a Morse intercept operator in the U.S. Air Force, that comedian David Brenner served as a cryptologist for the U.S. Army in Germany in the 1960s or that comedian Wanda Sykes worked as a procurement officer at the National Security Agency headquarters from 1986 to 1992.

As enjoyable as the book is, it has shortcomings. It can be a little scattered and often reads like a series of articles cobbled together rather than a cohesive whole. And there are some factual errors. Aid writes that the man who attempted to blow up a car bomb in Times Square in 2010 followed in the footsteps of Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh and “had no problem buying 250 pounds of the fertilizer ammonium nitrate for his crude but potentially deadly bomb.” But the Times Square bomb wasn’t made from ammonium nitrate. The bombmaker bought a different fertilizer precisely because he was worried about arousing suspicion.

When he writes about Guantanamo, Aid gets the numbers wrong. He says that since 2009, about 200 of the 245 Guantanamo detainees that Obama inherited from the Bush administration have been transferred to prisons in their home countries, leaving 48 prisoners that the Justice Department has decided to hold indefinitely without trial. In fact, there are still 171 detainees at Guantanamo, and the number to be held indefinitely is, at best, vague. The number had been 48 until two of the detainees thought to be slated for indefinite detention died late last year. The Bush administration and the Obama administration have never confirmed a specific number.

Those lapses aside, Aid has written a highly entertaining and interesting book that provides a full-color, detailed snapshot of how the Obama administration is using intelligence to battle terrorism and that hints about how that battle is likely to be waged in the future.

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