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# **U.S. shifts unmanned drones from al-Qaida to Taliban in Afghanistan**

## **U.S. begins focusing drones on Taliban, away from al-Qaida**

By Julian E. Barnes Tribune Newspapers

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KABUL— - [U.S. military](#) leaders believe they've been too focused on al-Qaida in the war in [Afghanistan](#) and have begun to shift Predator drones to the fight against the [Taliban](#) and other militants to prevent the country from slipping further into anarchy.

The military also is moving similar aircraft to Afghanistan from Iraq, despite resistance from [the U.S.](#) command there.

The command in Afghanistan is reallocating its fleet of armed, pilotless planes to focus on major insurgent strongholds rather than scour remote mountain ranges for would-be terrorists. The move represents a major, and potentially controversial, revamping of the military's use of one of its most precious intelligence assets.

The sweeping redeployment means that insurgent groups that have carried out a campaign of ambush attacks and roadside bombings will for the first time be tracked by dozens of drones capable of loitering over a target for hours undetected, identifying key people, and firing missiles within seconds.

The move could invite protest from politicians and experts who believe that changing the focus from al-Qaida is misguided, and could allow the organization to rebuild strength. Others may argue that killing or capturing al-Qaida members should be the top priority of military forces.

But military officials believe the best way to ensure al-Qaida cannot mount attacks against the U.S. is not to hunt endlessly for al-Qaida leaders but to do everything possible to increase the strength and stability of the Pakistani and Afghan governments.

Boosting the stability of Afghanistan, top military officials have concluded, will require a broad counterinsurgency campaign designed to build confidence in the local government by making the population feel more secure. "We have been overly counterterrorism-focused and not counterinsurgency-focused," one U.S. official said.

The shift of assets from Iraq is sensitive. Military officials said that U.S. generals in Iraq resisted moving the assets.

But the Obama administration's primary military effort is now clearly Afghanistan. And a senior defense official said Central Command made its moves to shift Predator drones in consultation with both Gen. Ray Odierno, the commander in Iraq, and Gen. Stanley McChrystal, the commander in Afghanistan.

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