

America's Undeclared War on Pakistan: Deadly Drone Attacks Reach Record High

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On September 25 three missiles fired from a U.S. Predator drone killed four people near the capital of North Waziristan in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas, marking at least the 16th such attack in the country so far this month.

This September has seen the largest amount of American unmanned aerial vehicle - drone - attacks in Pakistan and the most deaths resulting from them of any month in the nine-year war waged by the United States and its North Atlantic Treaty Organization allies in Afghanistan and, though insufficiently acknowledged, increasingly in Pakistan.

By way of comparison, in the deadliest month preceding this one, January of 2010, there were 11 missile strikes directed by the Central Intelligence Agency's Special Activities unit inside Pakistan. Last September there were six.

In 2009 there were 53 drone attacks. This year so far there have been nearly 75. The estimated death toll from strikes for last year was 709. In less than nine months this year there have been close to 650. If the annual, and surely if September's monthly, rate continues, 2010 will be the deadliest year to date just as this month is already the deadliest month.

The amount of fatalities this year may well have been substantially higher except for the catastrophic flooding that beset Pakistan starting in late July and caused the confirmed deaths of at least 1,500 people, the destruction of one million homes and the displacement of millions of Pakistanis. Although the inundation and the damage it wreaked did not directly affect the main targets of U.S. drone strikes, North Waziristan and South Waziristan, there were only five unmanned aerial vehicle attacks in July and four in August. There have been at least four times more strikes and almost the same ratio of deaths this month than in the preceding one.

Reliable figures for fatalities are harder to determine than the number of Hellfire missiles fired by U.S. Predator drones. Calculations for both are provided on a daily basis by the website of the New America Foundation and by a Wikipedia page on the subject. [1]

The first is transparently supportive of the drone assassination campaign; the tone of the second is closer to being neutral. As of September 25 both sites show identical figures for the amount of attacks and deaths so far this year - 72 and 639, respectively - and list information on every individual incident from 2004 to the present. However, the casualty figures are within a range of minimum to maximum estimated deaths in each instance and are occasionally lower than reports in Pakistani news accounts.

For example, the New America Foundation reports the deaths of 4-6 people identified as militants on September 20 in North Waziristan and Wikipedia reports a total of 19 killed in two attacks in the agency on the same day, but Pakistan's Daily Times revealed that "At least 28 people were killed in three US led drone strikes in the remote areas of South and North Waziristan" [2] on that day. The additional numbers in the Pakistani version alone push this month's death toll - 122 by adding the Wikipedia numbers - to only one short of the previous monthly high of 132 from this January. And there are five more days left in September.

Wikipedia calculations from 2004 to now document 167 drone attacks and 1,753 deaths. 72 or more strikes this year, then, account for over 43 percent of the total in a six-year period, notwithstanding the lull following this summer's flooding. The 2010 death count to date constitutes 37 percent of all fatalities since 2004.

The approximately 1,800 people killed in Pakistan by drone attacks are invariably referred to in the Western press as armed militants belonging to outfits affiliated with al-Qaeda, members of Pakistani Taliban and allied formations like the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan of Baitullah Mehsud (killed with his wife and in-laws in a drone strike in August of 2009), Lashkar al-Zil and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi and veteran Afghan Mujahedin organizations such as the Haqqani network and Hezb-e-Islami Gulbuddin, ethnic Arab fighters, and members of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and the Turkistan Islamic Party (al-Hizb al-Islami al-Turkistani), the last claiming to be fighting for the liberation of what it calls East Turkistan - that is, China's Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region.

It is worth recalling that last year then-commander of all U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan, General Stanley McChrystal, issued his COMISAF (Commander of International Security Assistance Force) Initial Assessment which, while calling for the surge in U.S. and NATO forces that has occurred in the interim, stated "The major insurgent groups in order of their threat to the mission are: the Quetta Shura Taliban (QST), the Haqqani Network (HQN), and the Hezb-e Islami Gulbuddin (HiG)." [3]

The Haqqani network is led by Jalaluddin Haqqani and his son Sirajuddin and Hezb-e-Islami Gulbuddin by its founder Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. The elder Haqqani and Hekmatyar were among America's - the CIA's - main clients and proxies during the Pakistani-based war against the successive Afghanistan governments of Nur Muhammad Taraki, Hafizullah Amin, Babrak Karmal and Mohammad Najibullah and their Soviet backers from 1978-1992. Several thousand Afghans and Pakistanis have been killed in the past nine years in a war waged by Washington in large part against its former assets.

Citing Pakistani government sources, the nation's Dawn News reported this January that in 2009 the U.S. launched 44 Predator drone attacks in Pakistan which killed 708 people. Contrary to how the victims were routinely characterized in the American and most of the world press, of the nearly four dozen attacks "only five were able to hit their actual targets, killing five key Al-Qaeda and Taliban leaders, but at the cost of over 700 innocent civilians."

As a result, "For each Al-Qaeda and Taliban terrorist killed by US drones, 140 innocent Pakistanis also had to die. Over 90 per cent of those killed in the deadly missile strikes were civilians, claim authorities." [4]

The persistent threat of attacks has instilled intense and abiding fear in the people of South

Waziristan in particular and the cumulative effect of over two years of steady drone strikes – never knowing at what hour of the day or night they will occur, whether the first will be followed by others – will unavoidably create collective post-traumatic stress disorder among all sectors of the population, especially children, who face a lifetime of panic and other anxiety and mood problems, flashbacks, night terrors and hypervigilance.

With this month's numbers added, U.S. drone attacks have killed more people in Pakistan than those confirmed dead from the recent disastrous flooding.

Starting last year strikes have expanded beyond the Federally Administered Tribal Areas to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (until this April the North-West Frontier Province). In 2009 the New York Times reported that leading American government officials were "proposing to broaden the missile strikes to Baluchistan," on Iran's southeast border.

Several milestones have been marked in South Asia this year. There are now more foreign troops in Afghanistan than in any other period in the nation's history: 150,000 under U.S. and NATO command, currently 80 percent of them under NATO's. On September 25 the 535th Western soldier was killed, surpassing last year's previous high of 521.

And U.S. drones attacks in Pakistan have claimed more victims than in any previous year amid indications that their number and lethal effect will continue to escalate.

Notes

1) New America Foundation

The Year of the Drone

<http://counterterrorism.newamerica.net/drones>

Wikipedia: Drone attacks in Pakistan

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Drone_attacks_in_Pakistan

2) Daily Times, September 22, 2010

3) Washington Post, September 21, 2009

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/09/21/AR2009092100110.html>

4) Dawn News, January 2, 2010

<http://www.dawn.com/wps/wcm/connect/dawn-content-library/dawn/news/pakistan/18-over-700-killed-in-44-drone-strikes-in-2009-am-01>

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