

Drone attacks will lead to inevitable blowback in Pakistan

By [Global Research News](#)

Global Research, October 14, 2012
mondoweiss.net

Region: [Asia](#)

Theme: [Crimes against Humanity](#),
[Militarization and WMD](#)

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“I will never forget what the American soldiers did to my country, my tribe and my family. They violated our national sovereignty and our Islamic laws. They killed my son and my younger brother. They destroyed my home. If I see the soldiers who are responsible for this - if I have the opportunity — I will kill them.” (translated from Pashtoun)

These are the chilling words of Kareem Khan, a Pakistani journalist from a tribe in Northern Waziristan, whose compound was destroyed by a Hellfire missile from an American drone on Dec. 24, 2009. They starkly illustrate the concept of “blowback.” What you sow today, you will reap tomorrow — in this case, hatred and a desire for revenge born from shattering personal loss and a tribal code (called Pashtunwali, or “way of the Pashtuns”) that dictates a simple recipe for justice: eye for an eye.

To a large extent, this equation explains the intense and ongoing anger over the movie trailer that denigrated the prophet Mohammed. The video by itself would not have produced anger that is so sustained. The Western world’s disrespect of the Islamic culture is perceived to be - often justifiably so - long and broad. In Pakistan, anti-American riots on Fridays after prayers are continuing even now - so much so that the U.S. embassy compound is in almost total lock-down. When CodePink — a delegation of Americans — tried to visit the embassy in our van, we were held in virtual captivity a half mile away by the Pakistani police for more than 40 minutes. (After a phone call to the deputy head of mission - a connection most Americans and Pakistanis don’t have - we were miraculously permitted to drive by. We had to argue with the guards, using a show of CodePink “chutzpah,” to be allowed just to take pictures outside.)

The cordon of security that isolates the U.S. embassy into a Green-Zone “bubble” also creates a sense of American impunity among a people who feel that their very survival is under threat. “If they think specific people have done something wrong, arrest them and bring them to court. That is a basic right you give to your own people,” Khan told us. “But (Americans) don’t consider us human beings. I can’t go to your embassy (to register a complaint). This is our sovereign state, but no one can go there without permission.”

Each of these Hellfire Missiles Costs \$60,000

Only three persons were in Kahn’s compound when the drone sent six Hellfire missiles crashing into it: a mason who was building a mosque nearby, Kahn’s 16-year-old son and his younger brother, who worked as a teacher and believed education was more powerful than

the gun. Instead, the drones came and taught his students hatred. As the *New York Times* has reported, “drones have replaced Guantanamo as the recruiting tool of choice for militants.” Earlier this year, the Pew Research Center found that 74 percent of Pakistanis now consider the United States to be an enemy. Particularly insidious is the increasingly common belief that the CIA is paying informants to plant tiny, silicon-chip homing devices that attract drones in homes of suspected “militants”; however, says Khan, those chips are frequently used instead to settle old grudges and disputes between tribes. (A note about that word “militant,” so often used by the Western media: Too often all those who are killed by drones are assumed to be terrorists. U.S. officials have confirmed that it now counts all adult males to be militants, absent exonerating evidence. In other words, all men living in Waziristan are guilty until proven otherwise.)

Although the U.S. announced shortly after the strike on Khan’s compound that a “militant target” named Al Juma had been killed, no one by that name was present. Several months later, yet another strike allegedly killed the same man. “I think actually he is still alive today,” Khan said with graveyard humor.

“Twenty-four hours a day, the American drones circle our airspace. Whenever they want to attack any house, no one can (or will even try to) stop them,” Kahn observed. “Everything in our lives is affected – our ability to work, go to school and provide a future for our children. Our boys are leaving for cities elsewhere in Pakistan.”

Another Waziri tribal elder, Malik Jalal, echoed Kahn’s concerns, reporting 17 suicides in the region in the last month alone.

“Family members can’t sit together in large gatherings anymore, for weddings or even funerals; we are too afraid of appearing ‘suspicious’ to the Americans,” he explained. Consider the story of Sherabaz Khan, who lost both of his brothers on March 17, 2011, when 50 of his tribe members were killed while participating in a jirga, an assembly of Pashtun elders in which tribal decisions are made. Pakistani government authorities had been informed in advance of the planned meeting, yet they clearly did nothing to stop the drone attack. (Despite protestations to the contrary by officials, it is widely acknowledged among the Pakistani people that their government is cooperating at some level with the United States in the drone program.)

Noor Behram, a photojournalist from North Waziristan, has been documenting the effects of drone strikes for four years, focusing on the deaths of children and women. Many women have been killed in drone attacks, since the kitchen is normally adjacent to the large meeting room where jirgas and other gatherings are held. Yet, they frequently go undocumented due to the practice in Waziristan of purda, or the separation of women – to the point that they are not allowed to be photographed, for instance, or even talked about in conversation with outsiders. Women’s deaths are not officially reported.

“So far I have counted more than 670 women who have been killed by drones, most while working in kitchens, and 100 children,” said Behram. To work around the purda restrictions, he begins by collecting the names of the brothers or fathers of women who have been killed, and photos of their clothing. Slowly, as word of his work spreads, tribal members are coming forward to tell them the stories of their women and children, and he often travels up to seven hours to collect the information.

Behram has held an exhibition in Islamabad, and foreign publications like the UK’s *Guardian*

and Germany's *Der Spiegel* have printed his pictures. But Pakistani media will not use his images, or even announce the deaths he documents.

"The mainstream narrative in Pakistan has been very pro-drone," explained Shahzad Akbar, founder of the Foundation for Fundamental Rights (FFR), the organization that is sponsoring the CodePink delegation and sued the CIA for wrongful deaths caused by drones in Pakistan. "If a woman is whipped for violating some norm, those images are shown right away. But drone victims? No. That is slowly changing. "

FFR also is challenging the Pakistani government's acquiescence with the drone program and - with the UK's Reprieve - the British government for its own role in providing intelligence.

"Tell your president he must stop using drones to kill innocent people, and tell your fellow Americans they must join you in protesting," pleaded Kareem Khan. "We are proud of our culture and our way of life, and you are destroying it."

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