

Drone Warfare: Terrorism With a Bigger Budget

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by Amanda Mullins

In the last four years, the use of unmanned drones to engage in so-called “targeted killing” has escalated dramatically. In Pakistan alone, US drone strikes have increased five fold during the Obama administration, according to the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, which tracks US drone strikes [11].

Drones have become the go-to weapon in the United States’ “War on Terror”. The drone war’s apparent “successes” are celebrated by administration officials on a regular basis, often while avoiding the more disturbing details, such as the under-accounted for civilian death toll, the violation of international and humanitarian laws, the counter-productivity of drone warfare, and the lasting effects of such blatant disregard for human life.

It is a challenge to find an accurate count of civilian casualties, thanks in large part to the effort of the United States government to keep information about the drone program shielded from the public. Under the Freedom of Information Act, the American Civil Liberties Union and the New York Times both have filed requests for documents relating to the CIA’s drones. The CIA replied that it can “neither confirm or deny the existence of records”. This response was challenged by the ACLU in a lawsuit containing nearly 200 statements (both on- and off-the-record) made by current and former members of the CIA itself. Justice Department lawyers argue that revealing the existence of such documents relating to targeted killing or a drone program would unveil “sensitive information about the nature and scope of such a program” [1]. A federal judge in Washington D.C ruled in favor of the CIA in September, which the ACLU appealed.

Adding to the difficulty, the information that *is* being made public is opaque, misleading, and contradicting. In one statement made to the public, the United States reported that there have been “no” or “single digit” civilian casualties [4]. In late June of 2011, President Obama’s chief counter-terrorism adviser John Brennan stated “in the last year, ‘there **hasn’t been a single collateral death** because of the exceptional proficiency, precision of the capabilities that we’ve been able to develop [9].” The Bureau of Investigative Journalism cites civilian casualties as follows: From June 2004 to mid-September 2012, US drone strikes killed 2,562-3,325 people in Pakistan alone. Out of that total, 474-881 were civilian, and of those 176 were children. Additionally, 1,228-1,362 people were injured [11]. Perhaps the government’s estimate of civilian deaths is due, in part, to the fact the US counts “any military-aged male” killed in a drone strike as a “militant”, not a civilian [1][10].

The United States publicly praises it’s drone program’s unprecedented ability to “distinguish

... effectively between an al Qaeda terrorist and innocent civilians,” and glorifies its missile-armed drones as being capable of carrying out strikes with “astonishing” and “surgical” precision. The Obama administration chooses its victims by using a strategy of “signature strikes”. According to authorities, signature strikes are based on a “pattern of life” analysis and target “groups of men who bear certain signatures or defining characteristics associated with terrorist activity but whose identities aren’t known.” In one such “signature strike”, three men were killed, because “one of them had gray hair and was as tall as Osama Bin Laden [2].” John Brennan called civilian deaths “exceedingly rare”. The number of “high level” targets in relation to total casualties, estimated to be a mere 2%, and the civilian death count stated above speak very heavily to the contrary [8]. Brennan also said: “if there are terrorists who are within an area where there are women and children or others, you know, **we do not take such action that might put those innocent men, women and children in danger [9].**” **With at least 176 children being victims of the drone strikes, one questions the truth behind Brennan’s statements. Still, the government maintains that these strikes are of “surgical” precision.**

The New York Times reported that if the CIA “did not have a ‘near certainty’ that a strike would result in zero civilian deaths, Mr. Obama wanted to decide personally whether to go ahead.” This means that our president, who in 2009 won the Nobel Peace Prize “for his extraordinary efforts to strengthen international diplomacy and cooperation between peoples [7]”, has knowingly ordered the murder of innocent men, women, and defenseless children, and continues to do so.

Questions have been raised as to the legality of the United State’s drone warfare in the middle east. Article 2 of the U.N. Charter prohibits the threat or use of force by one state against another. Two exceptions relevant to the use of targeted killing by the US in Pakistan are 1) when the use of force is carried out with the consent of the host state; and 2) when the use of force is in self-defense in response to an armed attack or an imminent threat, and where the host state is unwilling or unable to take appropriate action [6].

Publicly, Pakistan has repeatedly expressed its adamant disapproval of the use of the drone program. Pakistani Parliament voted unanimously in demanding the immediate termination of the drone attacks within Pakistani borders [8]. However, information released by WikiLeaks, suggests that in private, Pakistan was not critical of the drone strikes, and had in fact secretly allowed small groups of US Special Operations units to operate on its soil [6]. Pakistani officials repeated criticisms, “declaring that US strikes are illegal, counter-productive, and violate the country’s sovereignty”, coupled with the fact that the strikes continue, very seriously call into question whether or not members of the Pakistani government have made such arrangements with the United States government, and why this has not been investigated and clarified.

Furthering the question of the legality of the attacks in Pakistan, evidence suggests that the United States is engaging in “follow up” or “double tap” drone strikes- secondary drone attacks occurring soon after the first, targeting rescuers and those aiding victims of the initial strike. In a February 2012 joint investigative report, Chris Woods of *The Bureau of Investigative Journalism (TBIJ)* documented that: “[o]f the 18 attacks on rescuers and mourners reported at the time by credible media, twelve cases have been independently confirmed by our researchers. In each case civilians are reported killed, and where possible we have named them.” The fear of drone strikes is so great, that one humanitarian organization adapted a six hour waiting period before they would offer aid [6]. Only the

locals, the poor, would tend to their loved ones, and as documented by numerous interviews and first hand accounts, many do not survive the rescue attempt. This is an egregious violation of “international humanitarian law’s basic rules of distinction, but it also potentially violates specific legal protections for medical and humanitarian personnel, and for the wounded [6].”

The numerous and long lasting effects of drone warfare on the citizens who survive it are not to be ignored, or underestimated. Numerous interviews with Pakistani citizens, as documented by researchers at NYU and Stanford University, explain the impact the attacks have had on many aspects of the communities.

Damage or complete destruction of homes, extensive medical bills, and/or the death of the primary income providers due to drone strikes inflict severe financial hardship upon families. The damage is especially devastating in places like FATA (Federally Administered Tribal Areas), where “underdevelopment and poverty are particularly stark,” and Pakistanis do not have the luxury of “savings, insurance, and social safety nets” [6].

Families are forced to abandon homes they’ve spent their entire lives in, homes that have housed the families for generations in some cases, after losing everything they have in the attacks. Men are the primary income providers in Pakistani families, so, as all military-aged men are classified as militants and targeted by the US, many families are left in the aftermath of these drone strikes with no income. Women and children are left to live on what little charity their village can provide in the poverty stricken desert. Those injured or maimed in the strikes face many challenges. Many ended up in private hospitals, racking up bills equivalent to several thousand American dollars, several times the average annual income in FATA [6].

The drones constantly hover over communities in northwest Pakistan, striking at will and without warning. The threat of attack is ever present, adding a substantial amount of stress, taking its toll on the body, mentally and physically; manifesting itself through chronic insomnia, hyper startled reactions to loud noises, and fainting. Physicians in the area report drastically increased cases of anxiety disorders, night terrors, emotional breakdowns, respiratory problems, and outbursts of anger or irritability.

Post traumatic stress disorder and anticipatory anxiety disorder are especially prevalent in those who have witnessed drone attacks, or who have had loved ones killed or injured, [6]. In adults, these effects can be very devastating, and in children, the damage is extensively worse. A Pakistani mental health professional had this to say when interviewed: “The biggest concern I have as a [mental health professional] is that when the children grow up, the kinds of images they will have with them, it is going to have a lot of consequences. You can imagine the impact it has on personality development. People who have experienced such things, they don’t trust people; they have anger, desire for revenge... So when you have these young boys and girls growing up with these impressions, it causes permanent scarring and damage [6].”

The United States claims this is a “War on Terror”. But who is really causing terror? One major study shows that 74% of Pakistanis consider us to be an enemy [12]. In their eyes, we are the terrorists. Taking into consideration the research shown, and the facts the extensive studies present, it is not difficult to see why they view us this way. The United States is murdering innocent civilians- men, women, children. With every attack on Pakistan, the US plants seeds of destruction, of hate, of retaliation. How long before we reap what we sow?

The United States as a whole, the policy makers and the public, cannot continue to ignore the detrimental effects and counter-productive impacts of targeted killing in Pakistan, and worldwide. The study “Living Under Drones” calls for the legality, accountability and transparency in the US drone strike policies. This is necessity.

Joe Scarbrough said, “What we are doing with drones is remarkable. The fact that.. over George W. Bush’s eight years, when a lot of people brought up a bunch of legitimate questions about international law- my God, those lines have been completely eradicated in a drone strike policy that says that, if you’re between 17 and 30, and you’re within a half mile of a suspect, we can blow you up. And that’s exactly what’s happening.” Joe Klein responded: “But the bottom line is this: whose 4 year olds get killed? What we’re doing...is limiting the possibility that 4 year olds here are going to get killed by indiscriminate acts of terror.” [8]

This justification- that the United States has to kill Pakistani children in order to protect our children- is the exact same mindset of every person in US history deemed to be a terrorist.

Notes

1. Currier, Cora. “Drone Warfare: How the Government Talks About a Drone Program it Won’t Acknowledge Exists”. Huffington Post. September 13, 2012
2. Wolff, Ernst. “The terror of U.S. drone warfare”. WSW. September 28, 2012
3. Levesque, Julie. “Drone Warfare: The Brutal Reality”. Global Research. September 27, 2012
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6. International Human Rights and Conflict Resolution Clinic (Stanford Law School) and Global Justice Clinic (New York University School of Law). “Living Under Drones: Death, Injury, and Trauma to Civilians from US Drone Practices in Pakistan”. September 2012
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8. Naiman, Robert. “Five Questions Every Journalist Should Ask About the Drone Strike Policy”. TruthOut.org. October 26, 2012
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10. Becker, Joe and Scott Shane. "Secret 'Kill List' Proves a Test of Obama's Principles and Will". New York Times. May 29, 2012.
11. "Covert Drone War". Data on US drone strikes in Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia. The Bureau of Investigative Journalism.
12. Pew Research Center. "Pakistani Public Opinion Ever More Critical of U.S.: 74% Call America an Enemy. 2012

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