

US Drone Killings in Waziristan. Indepth Investigation by American and Pakistani Lawyers

By [Asad Ismi](#)

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Joe Lombardo is co-coordinator of the United National Anti-War Coalition (UNAC), the largest anti-war coalition in the United States. He is also a founding member of Project Salaam, a group that helps Muslims persecuted (mainly by the government) in the U.S. In October 2012, Lombardo visited Pakistan as one of the leaders of a 31-member delegation of U.S. anti-war activists. They were there to show solidarity with activists in that country who were protesting the slaughter of Pakistani civilians by U.S. drone attacks.

The delegation was sponsored by a group of Pakistani lawyers based in Islamabad, capital of Pakistan, who are documenting the effects of drone warfare in the Waziristan area where most drone attacks occur. Waziristan is in the far north of Pakistan and borders Afghanistan.

The delegation visited the major cities of Karachi, Lahore, and Islamabad, but were turned back by the Pakistan Army — “at the behest of the U.S. government,” according to Lombardo — when they approached Waziristan. Lombardo later went on a North American tour, speaking about drone warfare and his experience in Pakistan. In November he spoke in Toronto, where I interviewed him.

“Just about everyone in Pakistan opposes the drones,” Lombardo told me. “We met with many political parties from the Socialist left to the Islamist right. They were all against the U.S. war, all against the U.S., and all against the drones. The Pakistani people were very friendly to us. Our tour was front-page news in the Pakistani press for the whole time we were there. At a press conference in Karachi, the questions from reporters differed greatly from what we are asked in the U.S. The level of politics is such in the U.S. that, when anti-war activists hold a press conference there, the media will usually pose this question: ‘If we don’t get them with drones, won’t they get us?’ That’s the level of U.S. media coverage of politics. The Pakistani reporters, in contrast, asked us why the killing by drones is being done, how the American people feel about it, and what could they do about it?”

U.S. President Barack Obama authorized about 300 drone strikes in Pakistan during his first four years in office, more than six times the number that occurred during the preceding eight-year George W. Bush administration. Since 2004, there have been a total of 337 U.S. drone strikes in Pakistan. Obama’s re-election in November 2012 infuriated and saddened Mohammad Rehman Khan. The 28-year old Pakistani man accuses Obama of killing his father, three brothers, and a nephew in a U.S. drone attack in February 2009.

“The same person who attacked my home has gotten re-elected,” Khan told Reuters in Islamabad, where he fled after the attack on his village in Waziristan. “Since then, the

mental pressure has increased. I remember all of the pain again. America just wants to take over the world.” The drone attack left Rehman Khan as the main provider for 13 family members.

Joe Lombardo asked the acting U.S. Ambassador in Pakistan, Richard Hoagland, about the civilian casualties caused by drones. Says Lombardo

“Hoagland asked to meet our delegation and tried to persuade us not to go to Waziristan. He told us, ‘I know why you’re here, but the U.S. is really not so bad. We don’t really kill civilians with drones. These are surgical strikes and we only kill militants.’”

We asked Hoagland, ‘How many civilians have you killed with drones?’ and he replied ‘none.’ He said this with a straight face. So we started naming some names to Hoagland: Tariq Aziz, what about him? Aziz is a 16-year-old boy from Waziristan who came to Islamabad for a conference on drones and when he returned he was given a video camera to document drone strikes. The U.S. then targeted Aziz and killed him and his 12-year-old cousin with a drone. We named other drone victims to Hoagland, who finally admitted then that ‘there were a few civilians killed by drones, but these are just anomalies.’ He said, ‘I can guarantee you that there have been fewer than 100 civilians killed by drones.’

“This is crap,” Lombardo said. “At the time of our visit to Pakistan, a joint report on drones was issued by New York University (NYU) and Stanford University and another by Columbia University. These reports have documented that up to 6,000 civilians [including 670 women and 176 children] have been killed in Pakistan by the drones in the Waziristan area alone. We met several groups of family members of drone victims. They held up pictures of their murdered relatives and described what had happened.

“Waziristan is a semi-autonomous area of Pakistan and is not directly ruled by the central state,” Lombardo explained. “The area has its own legislature called the Jirga or tribal council. When the Jirga met in March 2012, it was targeted by the U.S. with drones and 54 people were killed. The U.S. and Pakistan don’t usually offer reparations for drone strikes, but in this particular case they offered the bereaved families \$6,000 each. Every one of the families refused, declaring that they wanted justice, not money.”

The families described to Lombardo how the drones intimidate them and disrupt their daily lives. They hear the drones flying overhead at all hours of the day, and have no warning when one of them will attack and destroy a building, or a house, or a car. They are in a constant state of fear. They are afraid to congregate at someone’s house or even meet together on a street corner. They are afraid to go to weddings or funerals, since both these group events have been targeted by drones and many innocent people, including children, killed or crippled.

“The children in North Waziristan no longer go to school,” Lombardo said. “The drone strikes have afflicted many of them with depression and other serious mental health problems. For the first time in Waziristan, many teenagers have been driven to commit suicide. The NYU report has documented such mental health issues. Because of the drones, these young people are suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), just as many soldiers do. The people in Waziristan actually have a name for the sound of the drones: they call it ‘chicken screech’.”

Reprieve, a rights organization based in Britain which took part in the Stanford/NYU study,

points out that “drone strikes go much further than simply killing innocent civilians.” According to Clive Stafford Smith, Reprieve’s director, “An entire region is being terrorized by the constant threat of death from the skies. Their way of life is collapsing: kids are too terrified to go to school, adults are afraid to attend weddings, funerals, business meetings, or anything that involves gathering in groups. Yet there is no end in sight, and nowhere the ordinary men, women and children of Northwest Pakistan can go to feel safe.”

Obama mourned the 20 American children killed by a deranged man in Newtown, Connecticut, in December 2012, but he himself is responsible for the killing of more than a hundred Pakistani children and does not even have the excuse of being mentally deranged. The killing of children in other countries is an integral part of U.S. foreign policy. Not only is the Obama administration murdering children with drones, but it also dehumanizes such civilian victims. Drone operators describe their casualties as “bug splats, since viewing a body through a grainy-green video image gives the sense of an insect being crushed,” according to Rolling Stone magazine.

Bruce Riedel, Obama’s counterterrorism adviser, has gone even further, reducing drone attack victims to vegetation. Riedel justified the drone war by saying: “You’ve got to mow the lawn all the time. The minute you stop mowing, the grass is going to grow back.”

Obama’s drone policy is so extreme that the former U.S. ambassador to Pakistan, Cameron Munter, resigned in May 2012 over this issue. According to a colleague of Munter’s quoted in the New York Times, “he did not realize that his main job was to kill people.” Once back in the U.S., where he is now a visiting professor at Columbia Law School in New York City, Munter corrected this statement, saying that, “Of course I knew part of my job was killing people.” The New Yorker magazine called this “a startling admission”. Munter explained to Tara McKelvey of the Daily Beast website (owned by Newsweek Magazine) that “the Times had been wrong about him. It made him sound like a softie, a mischaracterization that he wanted to correct.”

Munter actually supported drone strikes, but wanted “a more selective use of drones” combined with more diplomacy towards Pakistan’s government, that would put “a bigger emphasis on diplomacy and less reliance on force.” Says Munter, “The problem with drones is the political fallout. Do you want to win a few battles and lose the war?” When McKelvey asked Munter, “What is the definition of someone who can be targeted by a drone?” he replied shockingly, “The definition is a male between the ages of 20 and 40. My feeling is one man’s combatant is another man’s — well, a chump who went to a meeting.”

Munter identified three different types of drone attacks: 1) high-value targets, 2) imminent threats, mainly to U.S. troops in Afghanistan, and 3) signature strikes that are aimed at people who merely “look like they’re up to no good —targeting based on behaviour rather than identity.” Munter supported the first two types of attacks, and was only opposed to signature strikes, but this became an issue between him and the CIA that led to his resignation. “When you kill people and you don’t know who they are, what are you leaving yourself open to?” Munter asks.

Munter complains that the CIA is driving U.S. policy in Pakistan and other countries and that he was “constantly big-footed” by the agency. “I got tired of it all,” he says. In March 2011, when the CIA ordered a “signature” drone strike in North Waziristan, Munter tried to stop it, but then CIA Director Leon Panetta “dismissed” the ambassador’s request.

McKelvey explains that, according to an aide of Munter’s, the strike had nothing to do with

any activity in Waziristan: “The timing of the strike was noteworthy: it was the day after CIA contractor Raymond Davis, who had shot two Pakistani men, was released from a Lahore jail. The fact that Davis had been detained for weeks reportedly angered the CIA. ‘It was in retaliation for Davis,’ a former aide to Munter told the Associated Press, referring to the strike. In the end, the strike killed at least 10 militants, and reportedly 19 or more civilians. And Munter wasn’t the only one who was upset. So were the Pakistanis: General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, the Army chief, said the men had been ‘callously targeted.’ Rumours circulated that some of them were spies for the military, risking their lives to help fight the Taliban.” According to McKelvey, Munter’s resignation stemmed from the fact that he did not share the Obama administration’s very aggressive attitude towards the Pakistani government and preferred a greater use of diplomacy. As she puts it, “During our interview, Munter criticized the way White House officials approached Pakistan. ‘They say, ‘Why don’t we kick their ass?’ Munter then asked, ‘Do we want to get mad at them or look at the larger picture?’” McKelvey adds that “Munter recalled his last National Security Council meeting: ‘The president says, ‘It’s an hour meeting, and we’re going to talk about Afghanistan for 30 minutes and then Pakistan for 30 minutes.’ Seventy-five minutes later, we still haven’t talked about Pakistan. Why? Because Pakistan is too fucking hard.”

The Obama administration’s enthusiasm for drone strikes is shared by the U.S. Congress. According to an investigative report published in the San Francisco Chronicle and the Houston Chronicle in November 2012, “A large bipartisan group in Congress is promoting the building and use of drones.” The report, which was written by the Center for Responsive Politics and Hearst newspapers, looked at campaign contributions from corporations involved in building and arming drones, to Democratic and Republican congressmen and senators. The largest political election donors include General Atomics, maker of the Predator, the number-one remote killer for the CIA and Pentagon; BAE Systems, maker of the Mantis and Taranis drones; Boeing Co., manufacturer of the Phantom Eye; Honeywell International, manufacturer of the RQ-16 T-Hawk; Lockheed Martin, manufacturer of the RQ-170 Sentinel; and Raytheon Co., which produces the Cobra.

More than \$8 million in campaign contributions from drone manufacturers and operators has gone to 60 members of the House Unmanned Systems Caucus. Most of the caucus’s members are from California, Texas, Virginia, and New York, including the chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, Howard McKeown, a California Republican. The Senate group of drone promoters includes eight members, and is co-chaired by Democrat Joe Manchin of West Virginia. As the World Socialist website puts it: “The very existence of what the CRP/Hearst report calls the ‘drone caucus’ is an indication of the profound degeneration of American democracy. It was not so long ago, in the 1970s, that leading Democrat Henry Jackson became notorious as the ‘senator from Boeing.’ Now an entire caucus has been formed of promoters of weapons of mass murder. What is next: The napalm caucus? The poison gas caucus?”

The U.S. has 8,000 drones deployed, and plans to spend \$37 billion on drone warfare over the next eight years. This U.S. buildup has “sparked a global arms race in drone building and deployment. More than 50 countries operate surveillance drones, and many of these are beginning to fit their drones with weapons.” A Pentagon study warns that enemy drones could be a “very serious threat” to U.S. aircraft carriers and other large ships, and to “supply convoys and other combat support assets which have not had to deal with an airborne threat in generations.”

Joe Lombardo explains that “U.S. war policy has changed under Obama, and drones are part

of this. President George W. Bush invaded countries with troops. Obama tried to do that with the 'surge' in Afghanistan, but this quickly failed and he backed off. Instead, Obama has greatly increased Special Operations forces in all military services. These include units such as the Navy Seals. These forces have been put under one command called the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC). On any given day, JSOC has operations running in 75 countries around the world, according to the former head of JSOC, General McChrystal, who also commanded U.S. forces in Afghanistan.

"This is the new way of U.S. war policy. Obama is the drone president. The strategy of using drones and Special Operations forces instead of large-scale invasions is the way he sees of conducting wars without getting too much public opposition in the U.S. The CIA is operating drones in several countries, including Pakistan, Yemen, and Sudan. A lot of the drones are not being flown by the military. They are being flown by the CIA in countries we are not at war with. The main motivation for this change in policy is to lower U.S. casualties. The surges in both Afghanistan and Iraq have been failures, and the U.S. government is looking for other ways to carry out its wars. A large number of troops being sent abroad will no longer be tolerated by the American people. After the Vietnam War, people in the U.S. did not want to see another such war, and it took a whole generation before the government could do it again in Iraq, and this war, too, was a failure. The American people do not want any more such military exercises that are so costly in both human lives and government revenue.

"Of course," Lombardo added, "we as the anti-war movement in the U.S. want to shut the drones down, too. The Upstate New York Anti-Drone Network (UNYADN) are a group of people who have been protesting for the past three years outside the Hancock Air National Guard Base near Syracuse, where some of the drones in Afghanistan are flown from. While we were in Pakistan, the UNYADN folks had a protest in solidarity with our tour of Pakistan and actually managed to shut down that base for an hour. Maybe they saved someone's life. They blocked the entrance to the base and a number of them were arrested. They temporarily stopped people who were going to work in that base.

"It does not end with the drone strikes, of course. War is an endemic part of the U.S. capitalist system. Because we've globalized our system, we have troops in 120 countries around the world to protect capitalist interests. That is why we are doing it. That's why we invented the 'War on Terror.' That's why we use these drones that motivate more people to pick up a gun against us that we can then call terrorists so we can perpetuate more war and militarization. The U.S. military budget is as high as that of all the other countries in the rest of the world combined. We cannot allow that to continue."

Asad Ismi is the CCPA Monitor's international affairs correspondent. He is an expert on U.S. foreign policy who has published more than a hundred articles on this subject. He is also author of the book *Informed Dissent: Three Generals and the Vietnam War* which is used as a text in U.S. universities.

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