

# The United States Drone Program: Ethics and Blowback

## Policy Recommendation: Scale Back the Use of Weaponized Drones in Non-Combat Zones

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### Introduction

*“Dear Obama, when a U.S. drone missile kills a child in Yemen, the father will go to war with you, guaranteed. Nothing to do with Al Qaeda,”*<sup>1</sup> - Yemeni Lawyer on Twitter

This narrative from Yemen has become a familiar story along the Arab Peninsula and Pakistan, a five-hundred pound bomb is detached from an MQ-9 reaper (Drone), cruising at 50,000 feet above, the laser guided bomb explodes on impact devastating everything within a hundred yard radius. There is considerable evidence that argues weaponized drone usage within non-combat zones is hampering the United States goal of combating terrorists. With the rise of ISIL, an examination of the negative repercussions resulting from the United States over reaching drone program is necessary. In doing so one will find that the strikes are in fact damaging public opinion and support for American policy and more importantly is motivating extremists into violent resistance in order to attempt to stop this aggressive US program.

On October 22, 2013 Al-Jazeera reported “White House Defends Drone Program against War Crime Claim,” ‘the report came out based off Amnesty International’s claims that the United States has breached international law via drone attacks in Pakistan and Yemen.<sup>2</sup> Expectedly the U.S. officials strongly disagreed with the findings, they quickly responded releasing a statement that the drone program is in full compliance of international law. In the new report Al Jazeera made note of Amnesty International’s request for greater pellucidity in the drone program, citing both the C.I.A. and the presidential administration’s lack of transparency in the ongoing drone program.

Contained in the article was the Human Right report which went examined six drone strikes and the aftermath that followed, highlighting the international issues with this far foreign policy tool.

This and many other reports come in response to the dramatic increase in drone strikes throughout non-combat zones over the past few years. There have been countless pleas from countries and international rights groups for the Obama administration to not only release details about the drone strikes, but to terminate the controversial program altogether. Pakistan’s Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif urged this point when he directly called for “an end to drone attacks” in a meeting with president Obama back in November, 2013.<sup>3</sup> However, we all see this too often in countries receiving US aid; opposition in public, but consent of leadership behind closed doors. Inevitably without widespread domestic opposition to the onslaught of drone strikes, there will surely be no change in American policy.

To further contextualize how drastically this type of warfare has increased, in 2009 there was only one drone strike in Yemen, by 2012 there were forty-one.<sup>4</sup> In comparison to just five years ago, the drone program has grown at an alarming rate. This goes to show that drone use has become a central part of the Obama Administration’s evolving strategy in the “War on Terror.” There are obvious ethical concerns with drone strikes such as civilian casualties, minimal transparency, and noncompliance with the Fourth Geneva Convention which established protection of civilian personnel during wartime in 1949.<sup>5</sup> These concerns have not proven to be an effective agitator to prevent the United States government from halting the drone program. With growing media attention

1. Ibrahim Mothna. “How Drones Help Al-Qaeda” New York Times June 13, 2012. [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/14/opinion/how-drones-help-al-qaeda.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/14/opinion/how-drones-help-al-qaeda.html?_r=0) accessed: January 1, 2014.

2. “White House Defends Drone Program Against ‘War Crime’ Claims” Al-Jazeera. (October 22, 2013) <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2013/10/22/whitehousedefendsdroneprogramagainstawarcrimeclaim.html>.

3. Ibid 2.

4. Bill Roggio, Bob Barry. “Charting the Data for US air strikes in Yemen, 2002-2014” The Long War Journal. (May 12, 2014) <http://www.longwarjournal.org/multimedia/Yemen/code/Yemen-strike.php>.

5. Geneva Convention Relative to Protection of Civilian Person, Aug. 12, 1949, 6 U.S.T. 3316.

and international opposition to the strikes, it is necessary to determine how effective this counter terrorism tactic is. Thus, I pose the question: Is the United States drone strikes undermining America's security?

## Public Opinion

A 2013 Gallup Poll showed 65% of American support for drone strikes abroad.<sup>6</sup> Thus, around 2/3rd of all Americans feel that drones effectively help combat the terrorist threat. Another poll published in May, 2013 by Pew Research Center reported that only 53% of the US public is "very concerned" with drone strikes endangering civilian lives, and another 32% reported deep concern over the possibility of blowback by extremists.<sup>7</sup> The conventional wisdom of the American public regarding drone strikes is off the mark and short-sided in nature. With a large majority of Americans supporting drone strikes, there is failure to not only look at the ethical issues that are backed by numerous reports of staggering civilian casualties, but also the imminent threat of blowback and the erosion of stability among foreign governments in regions most affected by drone strikes.

**Americans lack a well versed perspective to see how drones dropping 500 pound bombs into non-combat zones are in fact ineffective tools to secure the US from terror attacks.**

All the issues arisen in fact go to show that these strikes subvert United States national security efforts to "win the hearts and minds" of those in the Middle East. An inactive civil society is at fault for overlooking the moral issues and latent effects this program is surely causing. By taking the long term perspective on the effects, we garner a greater understanding of the drone strikes impact. The 2013 Gallup Poll also highlighted

a salient issue with drones, that is just under half of Americans pay attention to the drone strikes abroad.<sup>8</sup> With staggering disapproval internationally, even our closest allies such as Britain only have a 39% public approval of the drone strikes.<sup>9</sup> Americans lack a well versed perspective to see how drones dropping 500 pound bombs into non-combat zones are in fact ineffective tools to secure the United States from terror attacks. Drones may often times devastate the enemy, but there lies many more consequences. From the aforementioned Gallup Poll we see that the conventional wisdom domestically is that the drone strikes are assisting the "War on Terror, however if we look at the ethical and legal issues with drones, real answer becomes more transparent (unlike the US drone program). The drone program is violating war ethics and consequently hurting foreign relations, increasing instability, and creating more militants in the process. The White House surely needs to understand that the consequential effects of drones will begin to continue to pop up, giving rise to the possibility of blowback that has become more than just speculation.

## Realism and Blob Theory

The realist paradigm is most relevant in understanding the short sided policy United States' implementation of its drone program. As the realist founder Thucydides remarked "The strong do what they will, and the weak do what they must."<sup>10</sup> This statement really resonates with both sides of the drone debate and terrorist thought. The United States pursues the drone strikes without real repercussions, while those who personally affected by the strikes are helpless and relatively disempowered in comparison to the world power. Realist theory projects the international system as an anarchical one, and no higher authority exists above the state. Hence states must then seek to protect their interests by increasing power and

6. Alyssa Brown. Frank Newport "In U.S., 65% Support Drone Attacks on Terrorists Abroad." Gallup (March 25, 2013) <http://www.gallup.com/poll/161474/support-drone-attacks-terrorists-abroad.aspx>.

7. Bruce Drake, "Obama and Drone Strikes: Support but questions at home, opposition abroad." Pew Research. (May 24, 2013) <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/05/24/obama-and-drone-strikes-support-but-questions-at-home-opposition-abroad/>.

8. Global Attitudes Poll. "Global Indicators Database: Drone

Strikes" Pew Research 2013) <http://www.pewglobal.org/database/indicator/52>.

9. Brown, A. Newport, F. "In U.S., 65% Support Drone Attacks on Terrorists Abroad." Gallup (March 25, 2013). <http://www.gallup.com/poll/161474/support-drone-attacks-terrorists-abroad.aspx>.

10. Quote from: Paul Viotti . Mark Kauppi. "Realism: The State and Balance of Power". International Relations Theory Longman. 2012. (40)

11. Ibid 10.

security.<sup>11</sup> Within the context of drones the United States Drone program, the administration is operating on a “defensive realist” strategy. Defensive realists at their basic level are “security maximizers.”<sup>12</sup> They avoid the offensive realist strategy of expansionism and aggression (power maximizing), holding that it is counterproductive towards the goal of security. Yet this paper shows that this “defensive” paradigm can be as equally harmful.

By using weaponized drones as opposed to boots on the ground in Yemen and Pakistan the United States is ostensibly following the principles of “defensive realism.” This is a change from the offensive realist strategy employed shortly after 9/11. With the drawback of troops in Iraq and soon from Afghanistan, the US has embarked on a “pseudo” defensive realist foreign policy strategy. They have begun placing emphasis on national security and avoiding the occupational roles they maintained in Iraq and Afghanistan from 2002-2011. By “pseudo” we mean there is less an emphasis on this aggressive narrative developed following 9/11, but the casualties show this in not necessarily the case. As previously outlined this falls directly in line with realist assumption of security being a central issue to the state.

Blob theory identified by Marc Sageman describes terrorists within the realm of a ‘social blob’. He maintains that “...Instead of a formal structure, this association, might be better conceptualized as a social blob, with vague, diffuse and porous boundaries. Many people flirt with the blob, and only a very few remain in it for a definite period of time.”<sup>13</sup>

Sageman depicts this ‘social blob’ by making a model of the actors involved in the Hofstad case. The Hofstad Network was a terrorist group, who committed the 2003 Casablanca suicide bombings in which 45 people were killed at a restaurant in the heart of the city.<sup>14</sup> As the figure above denotes, there are three loosely fitting groups within this blob. The first are those that join for short periods of time, the “peripheral members” who may go to demonstration or meeting sponsored

by an insurgent group but never really get active in the movement.<sup>15</sup> The second level of the blob rests “the followers, people who tag along, but would not, by themselves, have driven the plot. They can be as responsible or even more for atrocities, as they willingly and often enthusiastically carry out bombings. But they would not have done so by themselves.” Finally there is the active core, the leaders of terrorist cohorts; they are the driving force behind the movement, often remaining with the group for a long period of time.”<sup>16</sup>

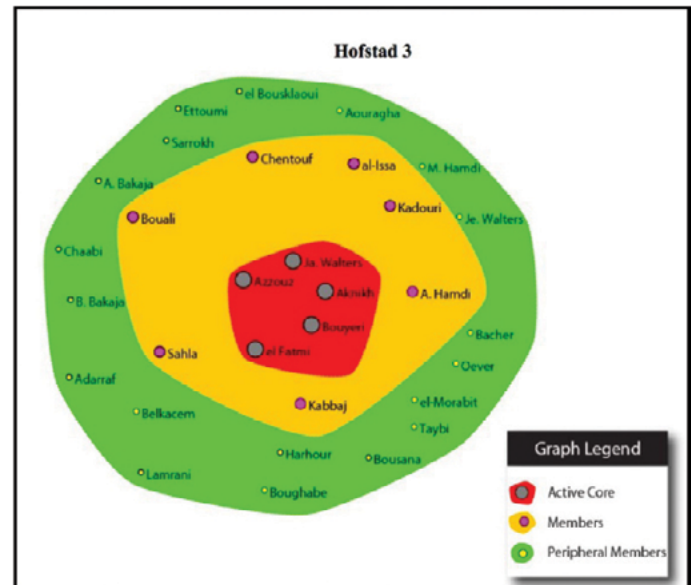


Figure 9.1 Social Blob example using the Hofstad Case.

Blob theory, encompasses the process by which people go from being peripheral activists in radical movements, and subsequently become active members of a terrorist group or insurgency. It also accounts for the research behind the point of ‘moral outrage’ that pushes some from extremist belief into violent extremism. This recommendation will affirm how drone strikes ultimately represent this major moral violation, prompting a shift towards violence.

The following section will provide better understanding of the United States new foreign policy tool of choice, and counter intuitive effects it has on their policy initiative of attempting to win the ‘hearts and mind,’ and inevitably the war.

11. 12. Ibid 10.

13. “Theoretical Frames on Pathways to Violent Radicalization” ARTIS Scientific Research Group. P. 23. (August 2009) [http://www.artisresearch.com/articles/ARTIS\\_Theoretical\\_Frames\\_August\\_2009.pdf](http://www.artisresearch.com/articles/ARTIS_Theoretical_Frames_August_2009.pdf).

14. Wikipedia source used as reference for death toll in the Casablanca bombings. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2003\\_Casablanca\\_bombings](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2003_Casablanca_bombings).

15. Ibid 13.

16. Ibid 13.





## The Threat of Blowback via Drone Strikes

*“Blowback is defined as an unforeseen and unwanted effect, result, or set of repercussions”<sup>17</sup>*  
 - Merriam-Webster Dictionary

Blowback is an ongoing threat related to drone attacks, there is a growing consensus among many given in testimonials that make the case for drones being a direct catalyst of terrorist action. A fall 2011 issue of Middle East Policy Journal published data which highlights this point exactly. From 2008 to 2009 drone strikes drastically increased from 48 to 161 attacks.<sup>18</sup> In direct consequence the US dealt with the Khost Bombing in 2009, during the attack, bomber known as Humam Khalil al-Balawi killed himself and ten others at Forward Operating Base Chapman in Pakistan.<sup>19</sup> Interestingly enough at one time Al-Balawi was considered a close partner with the United States, collecting data for the C.I.A on Al-Qaeda. However prior to the bombing Al-Balawi gave a video testimonial in which he cited the drone strikes

in Zengara, Pakistan as his motivating factor behind the Khost bombing.<sup>20</sup> Another source confirms such blowback, Yemeni activist and writer Farea al-Muslimi spoke to the Senate Judiciary Committee on Constitution, Civil Rights, and Human Rights in April 2013. In her testimony Al-Muslimi brought up the issue of drone strike on her village which resulted in numerous civilian deaths and destroyed the structural integrity of the village.<sup>21</sup> More importantly was that Al-Muslimi noted “Yemenis have begun to turn against the United States as a result of the civilian deaths and destruction caused by weaponized drone strikes.”<sup>22</sup>

These are just a few of the numerous reports exposing the fallacy of drones’ positive impact on national security. It’s in fact turning an increasing number of civilians in states such as Pakistan and Yemen against the United States, and in some cases as evidenced by the Khost bombing directly harming American lives.

The human rights violations are become more frequent and continue to damage America’s ability to combat terrorism and provide stability to these regions.

17. “Blowback” as defined by Merriam-Webster online dictionary. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/blowback>.

18. Colin Owens Hudon. Matt Flannes. “Drone Warfare: Blowback from the New American Way of War.” Middle East Policy Jour Leila nalSeptember 15, 2011. <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1475-4967.2011.00502.x/abstract>.

19. Ibid 13.

20. “CIA Bomber Vowing Revenge for Baitullah Mehsud’s Death,” YouTube, January 9, 2010. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HB1NJ8zOOso>; and Joby Warrick, The Triple Agent: The Al-Qaeda Mole Who Infiltrated the CIA (Random House, 2011).

21. Ryan Reilly. “Farea Al-Muslimi Says Drone Strike on Yemen Village ‘Tore My Heart.’” The Huffington Post. April 23, 2013 [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/04/23/farea-al-muslimi-drone-strike\\_n\\_3142322.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/04/23/farea-al-muslimi-drone-strike_n_3142322.html).

22. Ibid 16.

**“The persistence of these [drone] attacks on Pakistani territory offend people’s deepest sensibilities, alienates them from their government, and contributes to Pakistan’s instability.”**

David Kilcullen brought this up in his New York Times piece, “Death From Above, Outrage Down Below.” Kilcullen points out that “drone strikes are extensively covered in Pakistan and are popularly believed to have killed even more civilians than is actually the case.”<sup>23</sup> He continues, “The persistence of these attacks on Pakistani territory offend people’s deepest sensibilities, alienates them from their government, and contributes to Pakistan’s instability.”<sup>24</sup> Regardless of accurate statistics, the problem is this perception adds to the growing disillusionment of American intervention within the Middle East. Without regional support, any western policies and establishments imbedded in society will surely crumble following troop drawback. Backing the claim for blowback and “fueled anti-Americanism” is the incident of the “Times Square Bomber.”<sup>25</sup> Aspiring bomber Faizel Ahshad told a judge that “New York City was a revenge for the death of Baitullah Mehsud” a Taliban militant who was killed in a drone strike.<sup>26</sup> Looking at this attempted attack, along with the Khost Bombing in 2009, there is without doubt evidence that blowback is occurring and will persist so long as the administration follows this cornerstone policy in the fight against terrorism.

As leading international relations scholar Michael Boyle writes, “The conventional wisdom of drone strikes effectiveness is undermined by numerous factors.” One being that drone strikes have become a tool for recruiting potential militants gaining support

of those whose lives have been torn apart by US drone strikes.<sup>27</sup> This brings to mind the term “Accidental Guerilla”<sup>28</sup> coined by David Kilcullen, he writes that many people who under normal circumstance never chosen the Jihadist path are resorting to such action because of these drone strikes. The consensus among most international relations scholars is quickly becoming that drones are in fact a tool for Al-Qaeda, keeping them relevant and garnishing support for their steadfast opposition towards the United States. Yemeni writer Ibrahim Mothana underlines these concerns: “Anti-Americanism is far less prevalent in Yemen than in Pakistan. But rather than winning the hearts and minds of Yemeni civilians, America is alienating them by killing their relatives and friends. Indeed, the drone program is leading to the ‘Talibanization’ of vast tribal areas and the radicalization of people who could otherwise be America’s allies in the fight against terrorism in Yemen.”<sup>29</sup> Keeping this commentary in mind, it has become a highly backed assertion that the drone strikes are in fact undermining the United States ability to combat extremists.

### **‘Civilian’ and ‘Militant’ Casualties in Yemen and Pakistan**

Drone strikes are nowhere more prevalent than in Yemen and Pakistan, these countries bear the burden of most of these strikes. Just how damaging have these strikes been? Completely accurate data is hard to acquire, given many strikes go unreported, and the lines between ‘civilian’ and ‘militant’ is blurry at best. Yet as of 2014, The Bureau of Investigative Journalism (TBIJ) estimates that around 2,296-3,719 people have been killed with a possible 957 civilian casualties in Pakistan alone.<sup>30</sup> While in Yemen, the Bureau found a similar civilian/militant ratio where a reported 334-488 terrorists have been killed, of which an

23. David Kilcullen. Andrew Exum. “Death From Above, Outrage Down Below.” New York Times. May, 16, 2009 <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/17/opinion/17exum.html?pagewanted=all&r=0> accessed: March, 10, 2015

24. Ibid.

25. Ibid.

26. Michael, Boyle. “Costs and Consequences of Drone Warfare.” International Affairs Vol. 89, No. 1 pp. 1-29 (2013) Published by Wiley <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23479331>.

27. Ibid 20.

28. David Kilcullen. “Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small War in the Midst of a Big One.” (2009) Oxford University Press.

29. Ibrahim Mothana “How Drones Help Al-Qaeda.” New York Times. June 13, 2012 <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/14/opinion/how-drones-help-al-qaeda.html>.

30. Drone strike casualties derived from data collection between 2004-2014 providing an interactive mapping and reports on each strike “Drone Strikes in Pakistan” The Bureau of Investigative Journalism. (2004-2014) <http://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/category/projects/drones/drones-pakistan/>.



Graffiti in Sana, Yemen, protests U.S. drone operations. (Photo Credit: Yahya Arhab / European Pressphoto Agency)

estimated 83 were civilians.<sup>31</sup> These reports indicate the grotesque number of innocents killed by drones over the last few years and call into question the morality of such a weapon.

The 4th Geneva Conventions in 1949 established the norms of warfare regarding civilian personnel whereby the 4th Convention seeks to protect civilians and enemy combatants who lay down their arms.<sup>32</sup> Under the broad outline of the fourth convention, it becomes obvious that the United States is in crude violation of the Geneva Conventions, given both Yemen and Pakistan are bound by it. Further researching drones within the political theory we can apply “Jus in Bello,” war ethics, which are the ethical and moral constraints necessary within warfare.<sup>33</sup> The second and fourth principle of “Jus in Bello” features principles the drone program is plainly conflicting with. The second principle states: “Spare non-combatants and other defenseless personnel,” and the fourth says: “Means not immoral per se: not indiscriminate of causing needless suffering.”<sup>34</sup> One distinct and disturbing contradiction

between the Geneva Conventions, Jus in Bello war principles, and United States use of these weapons was the strike on a Yemeni wedding convoy in May of 2013 killing eleven unarmed civilians.<sup>35</sup> With reports like these becoming commonplaces in recent years, how can there be any moral justification made for drones? Despite the militant casualties who are significant, wouldn't the moral pitfalls significantly undermine how effective the program has become? The idea of proportionality of war also arises from the casualties of drone strikes, “If a 300 pound bomb can be used to destroy a target, a 10,000 pound bomb ought not to be used?”<sup>36</sup> In other words if a surgeon's blade can do the job, why use the hammer. Using the Bureau's estimates on drone strikes, one finds that a median estimate for civilian casualties in comparison to all drone deaths is roughly 30% in Pakistan, while Yemen this estimate lies around 20%.<sup>37</sup> This is an unacceptable reality, and is a stark contrast to President Obama's speech at the National Defense University in May 2013 describing the strikes as “effective” and “legal.”<sup>38</sup>

31. Drone strike casualties derived from data collection between 2002-2014 providing an interactive mapping and reports on each strike “Drone Strikes in Yemen” The Bureau of Investigative Journalism. (2004-2014) <http://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/category/projects/drones/drones-yemen/>

32. Geneva Convention Relative to Protection of Civilian Person, Aug. 12, 1949, 6 U.S.T. 3316.

33. Paul Viotti . Mark Kauppi “Chapter 9: Normative IR Theory: Ethics and Morality.” International Relations Theories (391-414) Longman publishing Copyright by Pearson Education 2012.

34. Ibid 27.

35. Robert Worth, “Drone Strike in Yemen Hits Wedding Convoy, Killing 11.” New York Times December 12, 2013 <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/13/world/middleeast/drone-strike-in-yemen-hits-wedding-convoy-killing-11.html>.

36. Ibid 27.

37. Ibid 25.

38. Released by The White House Office of Press Secretary. Quoting remarks by the President at the National Defense University in Washington D.C. on May 2013 defending the drone usage. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/05/23/remarks-president-national-defense-university>.



**“Combat drones are battlefield weapons... drones are not lawful for use outside of combat zones...Yet the United States is failing to follow International Law”**

In a congressional hearing to the subcommittee on national security and foreign affairs Professor of Law at Notre Dame Mary Elle O’Connell remarked: “Combat drones are battlefield weapons...drones are not lawful for use outside of combat zones. Yet the United States is failing to follow it (international law) more often than not.”<sup>39</sup> The question is then rendered, what defines a ‘battlefield’ and who actually poses a threat to national security. The United States current policy is to use this lethal threat away from battlefield putting it in direct conflict with international law. O’Connell also alludes to this definition in her testimony citing Afghanistan as an example where drone usage is justified, “The United States is currently in an armed conflict with Afghanistan...has tens of thousands of highly trained troops fighting a well-organized opponent.”<sup>40</sup> This is dissonance with the situation in Yemen and Pakistan where we do not have ground troops engaged in combat, thus rendering those regions “non-combat zones.”

Another problem is the collection of accurate data on ‘militant’ and ‘civilian’ casualties in drone strikes. This is because there is no clear definition of who poses a national security threat to the United States. The lines are further shrouded in secrecy by the administration’s lack of transparency on the subject. On top of that are many cases that go unreported or false reporting convolutes the accuracy. In the Congressional hearing on weaponized drones in 2010, O’Connell made the point that beyond the confines of an armed conflict, everyone is a civilian.<sup>41</sup>

This again brings ambiguity to the definition of who is ‘friend of foe’ in this war. According to a recent New York Times article “Mr. Obama embraced a disputed method for counting civilian casualties that did little to box him in. It in effect counts all military-age males in a strike zone as combatants, according to several administration officials, unless there is explicit intelligence posthumously proving them innocent.”<sup>42</sup> In doing so the presidential administration has again gone after the establishment of protecting civilian personnel found in the 4th Geneva Convention. The 2010 congressional hearing was key initiative in trying to set some parameters for who is actually a ‘militant’ or ‘civilian’ by international standards, but inevitably no standardized definition was accepted.

Regardless of these ambiguous definitions of ‘militants’ the fact is around 4,000 lives in Pakistan and Yemen have ended as a result of these strikes, and there lies an overt violation of sovereign boundaries in these countries. The strikes also undermine legal guidelines established by international law that United States is not in ongoing “armed engagements” with. (This includes both Pakistan and Yemen).<sup>43</sup> The question rests do these strikes actually have positive impact on preventing terrorist incidents? The answer is resoundingly “no”. Terrorism incidents they have remained relatively stable since 1978, the difference is the perception of increased terrorist attacks.<sup>44</sup>

Conclusively, how can this counter terrorism tactic be justified as maximizing security if there is lack of evidence to back drones’ positive impact in securing America? As highlighted in here, the casualties are immense, the results of this study shows a weak case to make in support of drones effectiveness in comparison to the loss in civilian life. This only serves to undermine America’s goal to capitalize on ‘soft power’ in the Middle East.

39. “Rise of the Drones II: Examining Legality of Unmanned Targeting.” Hearing Before the Subcommittee on National Security and Foreign Affairs April 28, 2010. (serial no. 111-120).

40. Ibid 35.

41. Ibid 30.

42. Jo Becker. Scott Shane “Secret Kill List proves a Test of Obama’s Principles and Will.” New York Times, May 29, 2012.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/29/world/obamas-leadership-in-war-on-al-qaeda.html?pagewanted=1&r=1>.

43. Ibid 30.

44. John Mueller and Mark G. Stewart, “The Terrorism Delusion: America’s Overwrought Response to September 11th,” International Security, vol. 37, no. 1 (Summer 2012): 81-110.

## Government Instability in Drone Strike Regions

As consequence of these drone strikes, local and national governments in regions most affected are being destabilized and losing legitimacy by the people. This poses numerous problems in the “War on Terror.” The comprehensive study “Global Terrorism Index” (2014) conducted by the Institute for Economics and Peace found there was a multivariate statistically significant relationship between political instability and terrorism. In Pakistan which has been victim to the majority of drone strikes, people have begun to align themselves with enemy groups rather than their established governments, due to inaction on the drone issue. This creates a “credibility gap” among the people and the democratically elected government in Pakistan.<sup>45</sup> This “credibility gap” seriously endangers the current regime’s hold on power, and increases the possibility of regional conflict between the government and their people.

A central strategy of the US counterterrorism policy is building up states such as Yemen, Pakistan, and Iraq so they can eventually prevent terrorism unassisted by US forces.<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, it is necessary to gain popular support and legitimacy from the people if a state is accomplishing this successfully.

The White House’s counter terrorism strategy has focused on, “...building security partnerships” by enhancing the capabilities of governments such as Pakistan and Yemen.<sup>47</sup> Yet a successful outcome in combating insurgent groups growing radicalization movement is contingent upon stabilizing states, and

preventing the regional conflict that has plagued the Middle East. When the European Security Strategy report was released it summarized the effects of intrastate conflict. One of their main summarized findings in the report was: “Conflict can lead to extremism, terrorism and state failure; it provides opportunities for terrorists to gain strength.”<sup>48</sup>

The United States cannot afford another failed state in the Middle East. Both Iraq and Syria sit as potential victims to the ISIL insurgency. Pakistan is particularly susceptible to terrorist movements; especially fearful is its nuclear capabilities. Pakistan’s fragile democratic government must respond to quickly to public pressure questioning whether they are doing everything they can to prevent drone strikes. And facing this pressure they did, Pakistan’s prime minister publicly called for the US to stop the drone strikes within their borders.<sup>49</sup> Yemen has dealt with similar issues, and just as Pakistan it has never been able to fully control its vast territories.

However the issue of public resentment over the strikes has grown amid increased frequency of drone strikes. The people of Pakistan have begun to petition their government to call for a halt to US drone strikes. In Northern Waziristan (Pakistan’s tribal region) tribesman gathered in protest declaring that they would attack Pakistani forces if the US did not stop all attacks.<sup>50</sup> The reactions made by the tribesman are not uncommon in Pakistan and many countries in the MENA region. Dozens of Yemeni’s gathered to protest drones back in January of 2013.<sup>51</sup> Tensions in Pakistan reached a boiling point in November 2013, when tens thousands of protestors flocked to the streets of Peshawar,

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45. Quoted in Glyn Williams, ‘The CIA’s covert predator drone war in Pakistan 2004–2010’, p. 881.

46. Ibid 21.

47. The White House, ‘National Strategy for Counterterrorism’, Washington DC, June 2011, [http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/counterterrorism\\_strategy.pdf](http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/counterterrorism_strategy.pdf).

48. Solana, J. “A Secure Europe in a Better World.” (European Security Strategy 2003) European Union Institute For Security Studies (December 12, 2003) <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cmsUpload/78367.pdf>.

49. Declan Walsh “Pakistan’s New Premier, Again Calls for an End to Drone Strikes”, New York Times, June 13, 2013. <http://>

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[www.nytimes.com/2013/06/06/world/asia/pakistan-nawaz-sharif-election-drone-strikes.html?pagewanted=all](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/06/world/asia/pakistan-nawaz-sharif-election-drone-strikes.html?pagewanted=all).

50. Rob Crilly, “Protest against American Drone Attacks in Northern Pakistan”, The Telegraph, June 28, 2011. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/northamerica/usa/8586658/Protests-against-American-drone-attacks-in-northern-Pakistan.html>.

51. Mohammed Ghobari, “Yemeni tribesman protest drone strikes”, Reuters January 4, 2013. <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2013/01/04/uk-yemen-drones-protest-idUKBRE9030J920130104>.





Pakistan to protest the American drone program.<sup>52</sup> The United States should use the situation in Pakistan and Yemen as examples of what they must avoid in Iraq and Syria where public opinion is so divided. Drone strikes have been reported most notably in Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, and Afghanistan.<sup>53</sup> All of these regions have been plagued with revolts and instability. The fact that anti-Americanism seems to be a value held by many in these regions, goes to show that United States is actually crippling their ability as “security maximizers” within the defensive realist ideal.

Unfortunately those affected by drone warfare cannot hold the United States accountable for their actions; therefore they turn to their own governments to halt the attacks. Despite the protests there is little action taken, and this comes down to economic incentives. While governments publicly condemn the American drone program, they are supporting the efforts in private. Why is this case? The United States pumps mass amounts of money into these foreign governments, since November 2011, US assistance to Yemen has totaled more than \$800 million,<sup>54</sup>

even more astonishing is another \$7.5 billion went to Pakistan over a five year period from 2010 to 2014.<sup>55</sup> These governments are left with no option but compliance with American policy. Nevertheless this comes at an unforeseen cost, a weakened state and heightened conflict, which leads to extremism.

When faced with this predicament, where can the local populace turn to for support? Right into the hands of anti-American militant groups such as the Islamic State and the Levant, who are on the forefront of American opposition. These two countries serve as ideal case studies for the negative after-effects of drone warfare. If the program expands broadly in the Arab region the consequence could be dire, and counterproductive. The United States aggressively trying to heal the ‘occupational’ image abroad and halt the spread of ISIL to other Arab regions. Yet the drone strikes establish precedence for moral outrage aimed at the perpetrator, in this case the US. This sets the precedent for a loss in legitimacy, control over the people, and potentially increased recruits for the ISIL; all which can seriously erode American security in the long run.

52. Salman Masood, “Thousands in Pakistan Protest American Drone Strikes”, New York Times. November 23, 2013 [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/24/world/asia/in-pakistan-rally-protests-drone-strikes.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/24/world/asia/in-pakistan-rally-protests-drone-strikes.html?_r=0).

53. “Drone Warfare”, The Bureau of Investigative Journalism (2014). <http://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/category/projects/drones/drones-war-drones/>.

54. State Department report on economic assistance given to Yemen released on August 14, 2014. “Support for Yemen”. <http://www.state.gov/p/nea/rls/2014/222781.htm>.

55. “Aid To Pakistan By the Numbers.” Center for Global Development. (2013)

## Implications of America's Drone Program

Contrary to conventional wisdom and the belief among the Obama administration that drones are ethical and effective foreign policy tools. This closer examination reveals that America's drone program is crossing moral and legal boundaries resulting in the death over one thousand civilians in total.<sup>56</sup> This has shown too often cross the moral boundaries, prompting some people move towards being an active member in congruence with the fluidity of this ever changing 'blob' of terrorism and turning towards violence. Blowback against the persons who have been affected by these strikes is now a certainty. These strikes that intend to make America safe from terrorism are in fact doing the antithesis. As previously cited, blowback has become an imminent threat well beyond mere speculation. If the Khost Bombing and Times Square Bomber attempt is any indication, the latent consequences of drones are sure to persist.

While the paper focuses on the regions' most afflicted by drone strikes, they serve as case studies that have broader implications on how the strikes motivate people to commit acts of terror. Drone strikes also serve as a recruiting vessel, whereby if a person has been afflicted by these strikes they are likely to join an opposition movement given their governments are unlikely to stand up against the United States. With the ISIL insurgency growing to a possible 31,500 fighters and millions are living under its rule. In ISIL occupied territories there is a deep hatred for non-believers and notably the United States. If American drone strikes are significantly reduced, it would serve to undermine misperceptions of America and hinder part of ISIL's recruiting base.

Currently these drone strikes only reinforce the negative misconception that many Middle Easterners share of an "Anti-Islamic America," as well as a general carelessness for the value of human life. In

such a critical period with the rise of ISIL and similar insurgent groups, the US cannot accept a failure to maintain human rights in the Middle East, it only reaffirms ISIL anti-American message with civilian casualties serving as a sounding board for effective recruitment.

*Title: The United States Drone Program: Ethics and Blowback*

*Policy Recommendation: Scale Back the Use of Weaponized Drones in Non-Combat Zones*

*Author: Casey Higginbotham*

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56. \*Totals published using the high estimate of civilians killed in Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia from the start of the drone program until 2014. The Bureau of Investigative Journalism (2014)<http://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/category/projects/drones/drones-graphs/>