

Accuracy of the U.S. Drone Campaign: The Views of a Pakistani General

By Brian Glyn Williams

ONE OF THE most contentious issues related to the Central Intelligence Agency's covert drone campaign in Pakistan is the estimated number of civilians killed. Those against drone strikes in Pakistan have emphasized that the attacks kill a disproportionate number of civilians. Others, however, argue that the number of civilian casualties is small, and that the operations have led to the deaths of many senior Taliban and al-Qa`ida leaders. Finding evidence to confirm either argument has proved difficult. Journalists rarely enter the tribal areas where the strikes occur, so analysts are left to rely on government statements when trying to assess militant and civilian casualties.

Recently, however, the Pakistani general in command of forces in the embattled North Waziristan tribal agency told reporters that "a majority of those eliminated [in drone strikes] are terrorists, including foreign terrorist elements." This article explains the significance of the general's comments, which should serve to temper what appear to be broad misconceptions about the accuracy of the U.S. drone campaign.

Negative Views on Drones in Pakistan

Typical of the negative view on drone strikes in Pakistan are the recent words of Maulvana Sami ul-Haq of Jamiat Ulema e Islam (the Community of Islamic Scholars), a Pakistani Islamist party. On March 8, 2011, Sami ul-Haq said in a conference in Lahore that U.S. drone strikes kill "dozens of innocent people daily."¹ Muhammad Ahmed of the popular Buzz Pakistan website similarly wrote that the "USA did more than 100 Drone attacks in Pakistan in the past 3 years, if you read news about these drone attack you will see that in these drone attack only 1% terrorists was killed and other 99% people who died in these attack was innocent civilians of Pakistan. 75% of them were

10 to 15 year old teenagers."² The *Pakistan Observer* reported, "The US drones or the predator planes which have been on the killing spree in Pakistan's northern belt since August 2008 and have so far killed over fourteen hundreds people with the big majority as the innocent civilians (as admitted by the international watch dogs)."³

On the ground in Pakistan, civilians believe the conventional wisdom that the drones are indeed uniquely adept at killing droves of civilians and missing their actual terrorist targets.⁴ Such perceptions are fed by Pakistani journalists, 67% of whom consider drone strikes in and of themselves to be "terrorist acts" on par with suicide bombings.⁵ Pakistanis are clearly influenced by media reports, such as Amir Mir's April 2009 story in the Pakistani newspaper *TheNewsInternational*, where he claimed that U.S. drone strikes killed 687 civilians yet only 14 al-Qa`ida leaders between January 14, 2006 and April 8, 2009.⁶ The newspaper reported that this translated to over 50 civilians killed for every slain al-Qa`ida member. Mir cited private "figures compiled by the Pakistani authorities" in his article.

In January 2010, another Pakistani daily described an increased death toll for the year 2009 and claimed, "Of the 44 Predator strikes carried out by U.S. drones in the tribal areas of Pakistan over the past 12 months, 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...for each al-Qaeda and Taliban terrorist killed by the American drones, 140 civilian Pakistanis also had to die."⁷

2 "Drone Attacks in Pakistan," Buzz Pakistan, March 17, 2010. Buzz Pakistan is one of the most widely visited Pakistani blog sites that deals with political issues in that country. Many Pakistanis get their news and have their opinions shaped by Buzz Pakistan and similar sites, which often pass off opinions as facts.

3 "Drone Strikes Kill 6 in NWA," *Pakistan Observer*, March 12, 2011.

4 Personal interviews, Pakistani civilians in Lahore, Rawalpindi, Islamabad, Peshawar, Swat Valley and Chitral, Summer 2010.

5 "Fallout of the Davis Case," *Dawn*, February 21, 2011.

6 "60 Drone Hits Kill 14 al-Qaeda men, 687 Civilians," *The News International*, April 10, 2009.

7 "Over 700 Killed in 44 Drone Strikes in 2009," *Dawn*, January 2, 2010.

Such reports have been, on occasion, uncritically picked up and passed off as fact by Westerners. In May 2009, David Kilcullen and Andrew Exum published an opinion piece in the *New York Times* which claimed that "press reports suggest that over the last three years drone strikes have killed about 14 terrorist leaders. But, according to Pakistani sources, they have also killed some 700 civilians. This is 50 civilians for every militant killed, a hit rate of 2 percent—hardly 'precision.'"⁸

Civilian Casualties Exaggerated?

In all of the above cases, those citing high civilian casualties have not explained their methodology for accumulating data, and they have only pointed to confidential Pakistani government statements. Yet a careful analysis of the Pakistani media's own accounts of drone strikes reveals a striking contradiction. In most specific cases when a drone strike occurs, Pakistani sources describe the majority of victims as "militants," not "civilians." A case-by-case analysis of Pakistani and Western reports of drone strikes by this author and two colleagues at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth found that a mere 5% of the victims of drone strikes were described as "civilians" in press accounts.⁹ A study by Peter Bergen and Katherine Tiedemann at the New America Foundation similarly found that in 2010 approximately 6% of those killed in drone strikes were listed as "civilians" in media reports.¹⁰ Research completed by *The Long War Journal* on drone strikes from 2004-2011 indicates that approximately 108 civilians were killed in drone strikes while 1,816 Taliban and al-Qa`ida extremists were killed—their study also relied on press reports.¹¹

Despite studies of this kind in the United States, the Pakistani military and civilian government that cooperate

8 "Death from Above, Outrage Down Below," *New York Times*, May 16, 2009.

9 Avery Plaw, Matthew Fricker and Brian Glyn Williams, "New Light on the Accuracy of the CIA's Predator Drone Campaign in Pakistan," *Terrorism Monitor* 8:41 (2010).

10 Peter Bergen and Katherine Tiedemann, "The Year of the Drone," New America Foundation, accessed March 18, 2011.

11 "Charting the Data for US Airstrikes in Pakistan, 2004 - 2011," *The Long War Journal*, accessed March 18, 2011.

1 "Sami for Greater Alliance to Stop Drones," *The Nation*, March 8, 2011.

in varying degrees with the CIA in carrying out drone strikes have sought to distance themselves from the campaign. Official criticisms of the drone campaign by Pakistani officials lend credence to inflated claims of civilian deaths. Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari, for example, said “continuing drone attacks on our territory, which result

“There are voices in the Pakistani military who support the drone strikes against an enemy that many in Pakistan’s military establishment have come to see as the greatest threat to the Pakistani state.”

in loss of precious lives and property, are counterproductive.”¹² The Pakistani defense minister claimed the strikes were creating “outrage and uproar among the people.”¹³ Pakistani Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani described the strikes as “disastrous.”¹⁴

The Pakistani military and government have done nothing to confront the perception created by Pakistani media and anti-U.S. politicians that U.S. drones target, almost exclusively, civilians. U.S. Senator Carl Levin, chair of the Senate Armed Services Committee, summed up American frustrations with the Pakistanis when he said, “For them to look the other way, or to give us the green light privately, and then to attack us publicly leaves us, it seems to me, at a very severe disadvantage and loss with the Pakistani people.”¹⁵

Pakistani General Suggests Drone Strikes are Accurate

On March 9, 2011, the Pakistani newspaper *Dawn* published an interview with a member of the Pakistani military that seems to inadvertently support the

drone strikes. In the strict hierarchy of the Pakistani military, it is unusual for a general of this rank to speak out on such a sensitive topic without the authorization of his superiors. His statement is all the more remarkable when it becomes clear that the general involved is leading troops in the strategically sensitive and Taliban-dominated North Waziristan Agency in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas. This is the area that has been the main target for drones, many of them targeting members of the pro-Taliban Haqqani network that allegedly has ties to Pakistani intelligence services. As someone serving on the ground in this targeted region, the general has tremendous insight into the drones’ targeting patterns and effectiveness.

Surprisingly, the general’s conclusions seem to support Western scholars whose studies have shown that the drones kill comparatively few civilians. As stated in the *Dawn* article:

In a rather rare move, the Pakistan military for the first time gave the official version of US drone attacks in the tribal region and said that most of those killed were hardcore Al Qaeda and Taliban terrorists and a fairly large number of them were of foreign origin. General Officer Commanding 7-Division Maj-Gen Ghayur Mehmood said in a briefing here: “Myths and rumours about US predator strikes and the casualty figures are many, but it’s a reality that many of those being killed in these strikes are hardcore elements, a sizeable number of them foreigners. Yes there are a few civilian casualties in such precision strikes, but a majority of those eliminated are terrorists, including foreign terrorist elements.”¹⁶

The report further stated that,

the Military’s 7-Division’s official paper on the attacks till Monday said that between 2007 and 2011 about 164 predator strikes had been carried out and over 964 terrorists had been killed. Of those killed, 793 were locals and

171 foreigners, including Arabs, Uzbeks, Tajiks, Chechens, Filipinos and Moroccans. In 2007, one missile strike left one militant dead while the year 2010 was the deadliest when the attacks had left more than 423 terrorists dead. In 2008, 23 drone strikes killed 152 militants, 12 of them were foreigners or affiliated with Al Qaeda. In 2009, around 20 predator strikes were carried out, killing 179 militants, including 20 foreigners, and in the following year 423 militants, including 133 foreigners, were killed in 103 strikes. In attacks till March 7 this year, 39 militants, including five foreigners, were killed.¹⁷

According to the article, “Maj-Gen Ghayur, who is in-charge of troops in North Waziristan, admitted that the drone attacks had negative fallout, scaring the local population and causing their migration to other places. Gen Ghayur said the drone attacks also had social and political repercussions and law-enforcement agencies often felt the heat.”¹⁸

This story created considerable controversy in Pakistan itself where support for the drone strikes is low. The website *Pakistani Patriot*, for example, published an article entitled “Fire Maj. Gen. Ghayur Mehmood,” which stated:

It was disgusting to see Maj. Gen. Ghayur Mehmood espouse the position that is anathema to Pakistani interests, contrary to Islamabad’s policy, belies the facts, and goes against the grain of the wishes of the people of Pakistan... His statement is wrong, dead wrong. General Mehmood doesn’t know the facts if he says that that most of those killed in the aerial attacks by CIA-operated pilot-less planes in north-west Pakistan were “hardcore al-Qaeda and Taliban terrorists”... Major General Mehmood should be stripped of his stars and put in jail for “approving” the attack on civilians in Pakistan, for tolerating the violation of Pakistani sovereignty—and justifying illegal murders.¹⁹

¹² “Petraeus, in Pakistan, Hears Complaints About Missile Strikes,” *New York Times*, November 3, 2008.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ “Bigger Role for US CIA Drones in Pakistan,” *Australian*, October 28, 2008.

¹⁵ “US Officials Working to Sway Hearts and Minds in Islamabad,” *Eurasia Insight*, July 8, 2009.

¹⁶ “Most of Those Killed in Drone Attacks Were Terrorists: Military,” *Dawn*, March 9, 2011.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ “Fire Maj. Gen. Ghayur Mehmood,” *Pakistani Patriot*,

Not all of the voices have condemned General Mehmood. A subsequent article in *Dawn* also supported the new tone set by General Mehmood when it stated:

Is the army hinting that the strikes are a useful and precise tactic in neutralising identified militants and terrorists? If that is the case, then the military and political leaders should publicly change their stated position and matters should move on — the battle against local and foreign terrorists hiding in the country's north-western regions is far from over. Some of the social and political repercussions to which Maj-Gen Mehmood referred would be reduced if the drone strikes were acknowledged as an effective technique and thus legitimised in the public discourse. More importantly, if the army is recognising the utility of such strikes, greater cooperation between Pakistani and US forces could yield success in the long term.²⁰

Implications

In light of their importance, it is not surprising that General Mehmood's comments were widely reported by the Western media. There has been considerable speculation in the press about whether the general spoke on behalf of the Pakistani military establishment, or on his own. Pakistan Army spokesman Major General Athar Abbas called General Mehmood's comments a "personal assessment," which would seem to indicate he was not speaking for the Pakistani military establishment as a whole when he spoke on the drones.²¹

There is, however, little precedent for a general of Mehmood's rank speaking out on such a sensitive topic without the approval of his superiors. To do so would be a grave breach of military decorum, if not a breaking of direct orders, and would certainly lead to the end of an offending officer's career. The fact that no one in the Pakistani military or government has rejected Mehmood's

statements is indicative. Clearly, there are voices in the Pakistani military who support the drone strikes against an enemy that many in Pakistan's military establishment have come to see as the greatest threat to the Pakistani state.²²

In the heated anti-American climate following the recent arrest of CIA agent Raymond Davis, who many suspect of having been tasked with spying in North Waziristan, Mehmood's comments could be an olive branch to the Americans. When combined with the recently announced release of Davis on March 16, Mehmood's unprecedented words of support for the oft-criticized drone strikes serve two purposes. First, they undermine those voices in Pakistan who speak in exaggerated terms of "dozens of innocent people" being killed "daily" in drone strikes by providing a "boots on the ground" rejection of these claims. Second, they serve to alter the Pakistani government and military's official discourse on the drones, which has thus far been characterized by formulaic criticisms of the drones for killing "innocent civilians."

Those making public statements on the drones, both in Pakistan and in the West, must now take General Mehmood's on-the-ground perspective about the effectiveness of the drone's targeting into consideration. It remains to be seen whether the discourse in Pakistan will change after years of reflexive criticism of the drones, but Mehmood's bold words of support for the drone strikes seems to be a start.²³

Brian Glyn Williams is Associate Professor of Islamic History at the University of Massachusetts-Dartmouth. He formerly taught at the University of London, School of Oriental and African Studies.

²² One could make the argument that Pakistan's military and intelligence services do not support drone strikes against Haqqani network members. But it is clear that drone strikes against Pakistani Taliban militants who are targeting the Pakistani state are welcomed by Pakistan.

²³ For an overview of the drone debate, see Brian Glyn Williams, "The CIA's Covert Drone War in Pakistan, 2004-2010: The History of an 'Assassination Campaign,'" *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 33:10 (2010).

Haqqani Network Influence in Kurram and its Implications for Afghanistan

By Jeffrey Dressler

THE HAQQANI NETWORK is one of Afghanistan's most capable insurgent groups. Based in Pakistan's North Waziristan Agency, the Haqqani network's senior leadership directs the insurgency in Afghanistan's southeastern provinces of Khost, Paktika, and Paktia. The network is important not only because of its tactical and operational proficiency, but because it links foreign terrorists, such as al-Qa`ida, to operations inside Afghanistan.

In the last few years, however, the Haqqani network has come under growing pressure in North Waziristan. The Haqqanis have been targeted by repeated drone strikes in Miran Shah, and the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) has severed a number of the network's infiltration routes in southern Khost and eastern Paktika. According to the outgoing commander of U.S. forces in southeastern Afghanistan, this increased pressure has made it difficult for the senior Haqqani leadership to direct and provide resources to the insurgency in the southeast.¹ Meanwhile, the United States has prodded the Pakistani security services to launch full-scale operations in North Waziristan targeting the Haqqanis, as well as the affiliated national and transnational terrorists they harbor.² Thus far, Pakistan's military has largely failed to launch such operations despite international pressure.³

In response to attacks on its North Waziristan bases, the Haqqanis, under the leadership of Sirajuddin and Badruddin Haqqani (sons of the infamous mujahidin commander

¹ U.S. Colonel Viet Luong, news briefing, teleconference from Afghanistan, U.S. Department of Defense, December 28, 2010.

² Jeffrey Dressler, "The Afghan Insurgent Group that Will Not Negotiate," *The Atlantic*, October 25, 2010.

³ Baqir Sajjad Syed, "US Patience on N. Waziristan Wearing Thin, Warns Biden," *The News International*, January 13, 2011.

March 10, 2011.

²⁰ "Drone Attacks," *Dawn*, March 11, 2011.

²¹ "Pakistani General, in Twist, Credits Drone Strikes," *New York Times*, March 9, 2011.