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Document-ID:69327091

Patron :Williams, Brian

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Pages :23

Printed: 09-27-10 15:43:49

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## The CIA's Covert Predator Drone War in Pakistan, 2004–2010: The History of an Assassination Campaign

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*This article provides the first overview of the CIA's secret drone campaign against Al Qaeda and the Taliban in Pakistan's tribal areas from its origins in 2001's Operation Enduring Freedom to the end of 2010. In the process it addresses the spatial dimensions of the campaign (where are the strikes being directed and where do the drones fly from), Pakistani reactions to this threat to both their sovereignty and an internal Taliban enemy, technological developments and Taliban and Al Qaeda responses to this unprecedented airborne assassination campaign. While the debate on this issue has often been driven by the extremes which either support the campaign as the most effective tool in killing terrorists or condemn it for driving Pakistanis to new levels of anti-Americanism, this article points out a third path. Namely, that many Pakistani Pashtun tribesmen living in the targeted areas support the strikes against the Taliban who have terrorized them in recent years.*

The political consensus in support of the drone program, its antiseptic, high-tech appeal and its secrecy have obscured just how radical it is. For the first time in history, a civilian intelligence agency is using robots to carry out a military mission, selecting people for killing in a country where the United States is not officially at war.

—*New York Times*, 3 December 2009

### Background

For American intelligence agencies “the most dangerous region on earth” is the Pashtun tribal areas of north-western Pakistan.<sup>1</sup> U.S. National Intelligence Estimates have repeatedly described the remote tribal region known as the FATA (Federally Administered Tribal Agencies) or Pakhtunkhwa (the homeland of Pakistan's Pashtun tribes) as one of the greatest threats to American domestic security. In the inaccessible mountains of this lawless, autonomous region, thousands of Taliban militants give sanctuary to Al Qaeda agents who are actively plotting new 9/11s. The Taliban also use this border region to launch attacks on Coalition forces across the frontier in neighboring Afghanistan.

Received 16 December 2009; accepted 15 March 2010.

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Frustratingly, the Pakistanis seem to have little will to go after Taliban and Al Qaeda in this region that is only nominally under Pakistani control<sup>2</sup> Until 2004, Al Qaeda and the Taliban were able to operate with impunity in this de facto Taliban amirate that was increasingly known as “Talibanistan.”

That began to change in 2004 when the CIA began to send armed Predator drones (also known as UAVs, Unmanned Aerial Vehicles) into this previously untouchable region to hunt the enemy. Since then dozens of high value targets have been killed by the robotic hunters from the skies. In all, more than 600 people have been summarily executed in what amounts to America’s most extensive assassination campaign since the Vietnam era. Two thirds of these have been militants according to a recent study.<sup>3</sup>

Not all the victims have, however, been terrorists. Hundreds of Pakistani civilians have been killed as “collateral damage” in the aerial strikes and this has led to a backlash of anti-Americanism in Pakistan. After many strikes there have been protests with hundreds of Pakistanis burning U.S. flags and chanting anti-American slogans. This has led many to question whether the killing of a few hundred Taliban and Al Qaeda leaders is worth the setback in what is arguably one of the greatest battles of the War on Terror, the battle for the hearts and minds of 160 million Pakistanis.

This article aims to weigh in on this issue by providing a history of the predator drone campaign that will assess its tactical successes and its public relations fallout as well as secret deals between the CIA and Pakistani government that have made the campaign possible. It will also explore the pros and cons of this campaign and come to a conclusion on whether the campaign is beneficial to the War on Terror or a detriment. Most importantly, it will demonstrate that not all Pakistanis are opposed to the drone campaign as has long been assumed. In the process of addressing these issues, the CIA’s murky drone war in Pakistan will be pieced together from its inception in 2004 to the winter of 2010.

### **Origins: The Background to the Drone War**

The primary weapon of the drone campaign in Afghanistan is the MQ-1 Predator drone built by California’s General Atomics Aeronautical. The Predator UAV was developed in conjunction with a DARPA (the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency) team led by a former chief designer of the Israeli Air Force named Abraham Karem.<sup>4</sup> An unarmed surveillance version of the drone was first introduced in June 1994. This spy plane version of the Predator saw action in the 1995 bombing campaign against Republika Srpska forces in Bosnia known as Operation Deliberate Force and in 1999’s Operation Allied Force against Serbia. The spy Predators were distantly piloted for the CIA by the Eleventh Reconnaissance Squadron operating from Nellis Air Base in Nevada and were based in Hungary and Albania.<sup>5</sup> While the Predator surveillance drones were able to loiter for hours providing real-time monitoring of Serbian troops and positions from afar, they were not able to fire on them at the time. The pilots flying the planes from trailers in Nevada or CIA agents monitoring the screens in Langley, Virginia were in effect forced to be spectators to events on the ground.<sup>6</sup>

The decision to arm the Predator and use it as an air-borne assassination platform came in late 2000 at the behest of Cofer Black, the head of the CIA’s Counter Terrorism Center and Richard Clarke, the Chief Counter Terrorism Advisor for the National Security Council. The CIA was already flying unarmed Predators over Afghanistan from Uzbekistan in search of Osama bin Laden at this time.<sup>7</sup> On one occasion, CIA agents in Langley appear to have seen bin Laden on a screen image provided by a Predator drone flying over his compound at Tarnak Farms in southern Afghanistan.<sup>8</sup> But they could not be sure if

“the man in white” was bin Laden, and besides, the Predator was not yet armed. The best the CIA could hope for was to order a cruise missile strike from a submarine operating in the Indian Ocean and this might allow bin Laden to escape.

Now Black sought the means to kill bin Laden and other members of the Al Qaeda leadership living beyond America’s reach in the Taliban Amirate of Afghanistan via armed drones. In response, by February 2001 General Atomics added a laser turret to the nose of the Predator and equipped its wings to fire U.S. Army Hellfire AGM-114 laser-guided missiles. These were originally helicopter-borne antitank weapons and had to be modified to be used against clay-walled buildings and SUVs. The armed version of the Predator was now ready to fly over Afghanistan as soon as the winter weather passed. But CIA head George Tenet had serious questions about the new killing technology and the ethics and legality behind its use. At one time he stated “This was new ground” and asked what the chain of command would be should it be used, who would take the shots, and were America’s leaders comfortable with the CIA doing this outside the military’s normal command and control?<sup>9</sup> Such questions remained unanswered on the fateful day of 11 September 2001.

The armed version of the Predator was quickly put into use after the 9/11 attacks. The new climate was captured by Bush’s pledge to get bin Laden “dead or alive.” Soon after 9/11 President George W. Bush approved a “presidential finding” that sanctioned CIA hits on Al Qaeda as a defensive measure in the global War on Terrorism.<sup>10</sup> With little or no debate, Bush essentially overturned President Gerald Ford’s 1976 prohibition on assassinations by U.S. intelligence agencies. Those who defend Bush’s decision point out that in war time, the U.S. intelligence services do have the right to execute enemies.

The armed Predator first saw combat in October 2001 when it fired missiles at Taliban troops surrounding an anti-Taliban Northern Alliance commander named Abdul Haq. On this occasion the mission was not successful and the commander was captured and executed by the Taliban.<sup>11</sup> A Predator drone was used with more success in November 2001 to track fleeing Al Qaeda leaders to a hotel south of Kabul during Operation Enduring Freedom. There it launched its missiles in coordination with several F-15 Eagles and killed close to a hundred Al Qaeda supporters. CIA agents monitoring the attacks were delighted when they later found that among those slain was the number three in Al Qaeda and head of its military operations, Muhammad Atef.<sup>12</sup> A Predator also attempted to kill the pro-Taliban warlord, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, near Kabul in May 2002 but only succeeded in killing several of his followers.<sup>13</sup>

By this time the majority of the hard-core Taliban fighters had fled across the borders of Pakistan into the FATA tribal area. There they were allowed to carve out a sanctuary by Pakistani officials who arrested Al Qaeda terrorists in the cities but largely left the Taliban (whom they had previously supported) unmolested in the Pashtun tribal areas. The Taliban took advantage of the Pakistani blind eye to carve out a state-within-a-state in the FATA. Such Taliban commanders as Jalaludin Haqqani, Mullah Nazir, Gul Bahadur Hafez, and a bold leader named Nek Muhammad killed off moderate *maliks* (Pashtun tribal heads) and gained total control of the FATA provinces of North and South Waziristan in particular. While these various Pakistani Taliban leaders were hardly united, they all agreed to support *jihād* against the U.S.–NATO occupation of neighboring Afghanistan.

From his tribal sanctuary, Nek Muhammad boldly offered to protect Al Qaeda and related Uzbek militants and began to launch raids on U.S. and Coalition troops in neighboring Afghanistan. While the Pakistanis made several half-hearted attempts to invade North and South Waziristan, this ungoverned area was effectively lost to the Pakistani state. Here the Taliban enforced strict *Sharia* law, closed girls schools and movie theaters, forcefully

recruited young men into their ranks, and welcomed Al Qaeda agents in their *hujras* (guest houses) and *madrassas* (seminaries).

Safe in their untouchable sanctuary, Al Qaeda began to plot further mass casualty attacks against the United States and its allies. Several subsequent terrorist attacks including the 7/7 bombings in London and the Heathrow Airport plot to use liquid explosives to blow up passenger planes were traced to the region.<sup>14</sup> Most recently in September 2009 the FBI broke up an Al Qaeda bombing cell in America whose chief suspect had trained in terrorist camps in FATA.<sup>15</sup>

Al Qaeda also used its sanctuary to build dozens of training camps where terrorist-fighters trained for military *jihād* against the U.S. forces in neighboring Afghanistan. Videos from the tribal areas of Pakistan, such as the surprisingly sophisticated “Winds of Paradise,” which is posted online at Live Leak, show Al Qaeda openly training in the safety of their FATA camps.<sup>16</sup> As Al Qaeda’s *al Sahab* (the Clouds) media production began to make the war in Afghanistan a *cause célèbre*, hundreds of extremists flocked into the tribal regions to partake in military or terrorist *jihād* against the Americans and their NATO allies.<sup>17</sup> These Al Qaeda militants carried out several spectacular terrorist strikes including several attempts on Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf’s life and a suicide bombing on Bagram Air Base when Vice President Dick Cheney was visiting.

To compound matters, FATA-based Taliban leaders such as Jalaludin Haqqani, Nek Muhammad, Mullah Dadullah, and Mullah Nazir began to launch cross-border attacks on Coalition forces in Afghanistan. As in the 1980s *mujahideen jihād* against the Soviets, the Taliban insurgents’ rear area staging grounds in the FATA border regions gave them a cross-border sanctuary to train, rest, equip, and regroup for combat. In the FATA regions of North and South Waziristan in particular, black-turbaned Taliban blatantly held mass rallies, trained for war, and acted as a law unto themselves in tribal lands that had never been fully incorporated into the Pakistani state (Pakistan consists of four provinces: Baluchistan, Sindh, Punjab, and the Northwest Frontier Province. The FATA region is considered an autonomous tribal region).<sup>18</sup>

As these events were unfolding, numerous reports began to appear in the Pakistani press of mysterious spy planes flying over the region, including one article about a drone that crashed. At the time the BBC, *New York Times*, and CNN reported that the drones, which were identified as Predators, were based not in Afghanistan, but in a Pakistani airbase that had earlier been leased to the Americans at Jacobabad, Baluchistan.<sup>19</sup> Strangely, the Pakistani press, which tends to be anti-American, did not seem to pick up on these reports and instead reported that the drones were “invading” Pakistani air space from bases in neighboring Afghanistan.<sup>20</sup>

From 2002 to June 2004 the Predator drones simply monitored events in Pakistan, but events in distant Yemen were to set a precedent that would eventually change things. In November 2002 a Predator drone fired a Hellfire missile into a car carrying Abu Ali al Harithi, an Al Qaeda terrorist involved in the 2000 bombing of the U.S.S. *Cole*. The success of this assassination in Yemen sparked discussions on using the Predators in a similar capacity to kill high value targets on Pakistani soil.

Then, on 18 June 2004, Nek Muhammad, the brazen Pakistani Taliban commander who had just two months before vowed to continue his *jihād* against the United States and his support of Al Qaeda, was killed in a mysterious explosion in South Waziristan. At the time Pakistan’s *Dawn* newspaper reported that witnesses had seen a spy drone flying overhead minutes before the missile attack.<sup>21</sup> Nek Muhammad was also said to have been talking on his cell phone at the time, thus allowing himself to be traced and located by the CIA.

But in the same article a Pakistani general rejected the claim of CIA involvement as “absurd” and insisted that Pakistani forces had actually carried out the attack. Clearly the Pakistani government did not want the negative public relations fallout that would come from a public acknowledgment of the fact that a foreign power was acting in its own interests to kill Pakistani citizens on Pakistani soil. This denial of U.S. involvement by Pakistani officials would set a precedent for future strikes even though it was an open secret that the Predators were operating not from Afghanistan, but from Pakistani soil. In essence the Americans were given permission to carry out an assassination in the Pashtun tribal areas and the Pakistani authorities would officially protest the drone attacks.

The successful killing of Nek Muhammad seems to have given the CIA confidence to try killing Al Qaeda operatives in the tribal areas and the decision was made to launch further strikes. On 14 May 2005 a Predator drone operating in North Waziristan killed Haitham al Yemeni, a high-ranking Al Qaeda weapons expert. Following his death, the Pakistani Information Minister issued a bizarre statement that “No such incident took place near the Pakistan-Afghanistan border.”<sup>22</sup>

Then, on 3 December 2005 the CIA struck again, this time against the Egyptian-born number three in Al Qaeda, Abu Hamza Rabia. He and four of his accomplices were killed in a North Waziristan attack that was officially denied by several Pakistani officials. One senior Pakistani intelligence official stated, “Here is what I can tell you. Our troops were not involved in the operation, but this is one of the areas where our intelligence and operational cooperation with U.S. services is most intense. Comments on media reports that it was a Predator strike would invoke sovereignty issues. Let’s enjoy the fact that al Qaeda has lost another key person.”<sup>23</sup>

But such artifice flew in the face of clear evidence of a U.S. predator drone strike in the form of pieces of Hellfire missiles found at the target site by local villagers.<sup>24</sup> When a Pakistani journalist working for PBS’s Frontline filmed the missile pieces and exposed the cover up, he was subsequently abducted by Pakistani intelligence services and executed.<sup>25</sup> It seemed the Pakistani authorities were prepared to go to great lengths, even to murder, in order to hide the fact that the CIA was involved in killing suspected terrorists in Pakistan in collusion with the Pakistani authorities.

Despite the clear evidence of U.S. involvement, the previous three strikes did not cause much of an uproar in Pakistan. The next one on a mud-walled compound in the village of Damadola, in the Bajaur Agency, however, created a storm of protest. The 13 January 2006 strike which aimed to kill Ayman al-Zawaheri, Al Qaeda’s number two, destroyed three buildings described as safe houses two hours after he had left them. Eighteen civilians, including five women and five children, were killed in the barrage of ten missiles that missed al-Zawaheri completely. One villager who lost his house and two sons and a daughter in the attack was quoted by the media as saying “I ran out and saw planes. I ran towards a nearby mountain with my wife. When we were running we heard three more explosions and I saw my home being hit.”<sup>26</sup> Another claimed “My entire family was killed, and I don’t know whom should I blame for it. I only seek justice from God.”<sup>27</sup>

In a country where 64 percent of the population views America as an enemy, the reports of the murder of Pakistani civilians by American robotic planes proved to be incendiary.<sup>28</sup> An estimated 8,000 Pashtun tribesmen from the region marched in protest after the burials of the victims and anti-American sentiment flared across the land.<sup>29</sup>

Perhaps as a result of the rise in anti-Americanism, the CIA did not launch another drone attack until eight months later on 30 October 2006. On this occasion it attacked a *madrassa* filled with followers of a pro-Al Qaeda leader named Mullah Liaquatullah in

the Bajaur Agency town of Chenagai. As many as eighty Islamic students/militants were killed in this multiple drone strike. Only on this occasion there were no civilians killed, only followers of a well known pro-Taliban leader. While the Islamist parties tried to paint a picture of the victims of the strike as being innocent *madrassa* students, the Pakistani government showed the media infra-red images obtained from the sky of extremists engaged in military training at the facility. The students had also recently attended a rally where they vowed allegiance to bin Laden and were, in the Pakistanis' words, "no way innocent students."<sup>30</sup>

Still, the mass killing infuriated Pakistan's anti-American Islamist parties and led thousands of locals to protest and chant "Down with Bush," "Down with America," and "Down with Musharraf."<sup>31</sup> While Pakistan's *Dawn* newspaper initially carried a report based on government sources that the attack had been carried out by Pakistani helicopters, it was later acknowledged that the attack was in fact carried out by an American drone.<sup>32</sup>

The CIA followed this up by launching five drone strikes on Taliban and Al Qaeda targets in 2007, predominantly in North Waziristan. At the time leaflets warning local tribesmen in Pashto that they would be bombed if they harbored Al Qaeda or the Taliban began to appear in the tribal agencies.<sup>33</sup> It was also around this time that the U.S. Army's Joint Special Operations Command began to operate its own drones in Pakistan. This parallel operation is even murkier than the CIA's wider campaign and the Pentagon has officially denied it exists stating "There are no US military strike operations being conducted in Pakistan."<sup>34</sup>

In the following year the United States seemed to take advantage of the Pakistani government's nod and wink policy to dramatically pick up the pace of the strikes. As many as 36 strikes were carried out in that year, 6 times as much as the previous year.<sup>35</sup> By the end of 2009 more than 51 strikes had been carried out in Pakistan by U.S. drones.<sup>36</sup>

The pace of the attacks picked up notably in August 2008 after the Bush administration made a unilateral decision to carry out attacks without seeking Pakistani permission first.<sup>37</sup> This diminished the risk of the Taliban or Al Qaeda being tipped off by sympathizers in the Pakistani military, as had happened on several occasions.

According to an extensive study carried out by the *Long War Journal*, approximately 50 percent of the strikes have been in South Waziristan, with 38 percent being in North Waziristan.<sup>38</sup> There have also been a few strikes in the tribal agencies of Bajaur, Kurram, and Orakzai. Most importantly there have also been three strikes outside of the FATA in Pakistan proper. These took place in the district of Bannu, which is located in the predominantly Pashtun province of North West Frontier Province, and represent the deepest strikes into Pakistan thus far.<sup>39</sup>

In the spring of 2009 there was talk of President Obama extending the campaign to Taliban hideouts in the province of Baluchistan, also part of Pakistan proper.<sup>40</sup> The calls for attacking Baluchistan were focused on the provincial capital of Quetta, the site of one of two Taliban *shuras* (councils) and purported headquarters of Taliban leader, Mullah Omar. The Taliban operated with impunity in Quetta and this infuriated American leaders. At the time it was, however, decided not to extend the strikes from the Pashtun-dominated tribal lands into Baluchistan's capital for fear of inciting a widespread reaction among Pakistanis. Interestingly, Ahmed Mukhtar, the Defense Minister, dismissed any talks of extending the attacks to Baluchistan and said "They (the drones) are not flying from here (Pakistan) any more."<sup>41</sup>

The CIA thus confined its attacks to territory controlled by Taliban commanders in the Pashtun tribal lands, predominately in FATA. Interestingly enough, the majority of the strikes (20) were against Baitullah Mehsud, the head of the Pakistani Taliban and

heir to Nek Muhammad, and Mullah Nazir (19), a Taliban leader in the South Waziristan who has been linked to numerous attacks on the Coalition in Afghanistan.<sup>42</sup> Mullah Nazir was, however, seen by the Pakistani government as a relative moderate and had concluded several peace treaties with Islamabad. Fifteen attacks were also against the network of the North Waziristan-based pro-Taliban warlord, Jalaludin Haqqani. Haqqani's semi-independent militant network was responsible for wreaking havoc in eastern Afghanistan, but he was rarely bothered by the Pakistanis. Further strikes were against Hakimullah Mehsud, an ally of (and later heir to) Baitiullah Mehsud, and against Gul Hafez Bahadur, a pro-Pakistani government Taliban commander who has nonetheless attacked U.S. troops in Afghanistan.<sup>43</sup>

On average the drones killed approximately 9 people per strike in 2008 and 12 per strike in 2009.<sup>44</sup> Although there have been strikes by swarms of drones that have killed far more (most recently when a drone fired on Taliban funeral procession and killed 60 in June 2009 and an attack by five drones that killed 15 in December 2009).<sup>45</sup>

The effectiveness of the drone strikes was improved somewhat by the introduction of a new more lethal drone known as the MQ-9 Reaper, also built by General Atomics. The twelve million dollar Reaper, which was introduced into service in 2007, has a much larger engine and is thus able to travel three times the speed of the Predator, carry fifteen times as much ordinance, and remain aloft for 16 hours.<sup>46</sup> The Reaper packs a real punch including such ordinance as GBU-12 Paveway II laser guided bombs and Sidewinder missiles.<sup>47</sup>

The precision of both the Reaper and the Predator is remarkable due to their ability to loiter over their targets at slow speeds providing real time, high resolution images back to their handlers at Langley, Creech, Nellis, March, Hector, Davis-Monthan, and Hancock Airfields.<sup>48</sup> It would also appear that the CIA drones are run by operatives based in Pakistan working in conjunction with Blackwater (now known as Xe) contractors.<sup>49</sup> Their precision has been improved further by the use of secret microchips known as "pathrai" in Pashto that reveal the location of suspected targets to the drones' laser designators.<sup>50</sup> These small transmitter chips have been given to Pashtun tribesmen—who for money or out of conviction are spying on the Taliban—to be placed in or near the enemies' houses, convoys, *hujras*, *madrassas*, or compounds. The drones then home in on them with their lasers and deliver their missiles from miles away with incredible precision.

The drones have proven to be America's most effective tool in getting at a variety of enemies operating in some of the world's most inaccessible terrain. Needless to say the CIA is thrilled with their ability to kill dozens of Taliban and Al Qaeda leaders without putting U.S. pilots at risk. While there was some talk that the Obama administration would end the strikes, it has continued them at the urging of the CIA. In fact a drone attack was launched just three days after Obama's inauguration.

A survey of some of the remarkable success of the drones in killing high value targets helps explain why the image conscious Obama administration continued to rely on this controversial weapon despite the inevitable public relations fallout that comes from the drone strikes.

### **Hypotheses A: Drones—"The Only Game in Town" for Taking the War to Al Qaeda and Taliban in the FATA**

In May of 2009, CIA Director Leon Panetta claimed of the Predator drone campaign in Pakistan: "Very frankly, it's the only game in town in terms of confronting or trying to disrupt the al Qaeda leadership."<sup>51</sup> Those who argue for the benefits of the air-borne assassination campaign claim that it is killing large numbers of Taliban/Al Qaeda leaders



and foot soldiers, hampering their military and terrorist operations, and creating a climate of fear among the enemy. Under the airborne assault former CIA Chief Michael Hayden claimed Al Qaeda had come to see its former sanctuary in the FATA as “neither safe nor a haven.”<sup>52</sup> The *Wall Street Journal* summed up the benefits of the Predator drone campaign in an opinion piece as follows:

The case is easy. Not even the critics deny its success against terrorists. Able to go where American soldiers can't, the Predator and Reaper have since 9/11 killed more than half of the 20 most wanted al Qaeda suspects, the Uzbek, Yemeni and Pakistani heads of allied groups and hundreds of militants. Most of those hits were in the last four years. . . . The civilian toll is relatively low, especially if compared with previous conflicts. Never before in the history of air warfare have we been able to distinguish as well between combatants and civilians as we can with drones. Even if al Qaeda does not issue uniforms, the remote pilots can carefully identify targets, and then use Hellfire missiles that cause far less damage than older bombs or missiles. Smarter weapons like the Predator make for a more moral campaign. . . . International law also allows states to kill their enemies in a conflict, and to operate in “neutral” countries if the hosts allow bombing on their territory. Pakistan and Yemen have both given their permission to the U.S., albeit quietly. Even if they hadn't, the U.S. would be justified in attacking enemy sanctuaries there as a matter of self-defense.<sup>53</sup>

The list of high value Al Qaeda targets assassinated in Pakistan is nothing short of impressive and is clear evidence of the precision of the deadly robotic drones. It also testifies to the fact the CIA or its Pakistani allies have infiltrated spies into the tribal region. Among other high value targets killed by drones, the list of slain high value targets includes:

- Saad bin Laden, Osama bin Laden's third son who was involved in Al Qaeda attacks in North Africa.
- Abu Laith al Libi the new number three in Al Qaeda who was responsible for a suicide bombing at Bagram Airbase that targeted Vice President Dick Cheney.
- Osama al Kini, Al Qaeda's external operations chief who was wanted for the 1998 bombings against the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania.
- Khalid Habib, the commander of the Lashkar al Zil or the Shadow Army, Al Qaeda's fighting force.
- Abu Khabab al Masri, the chief of al Qaeda's weapons of mass destruction program.
- Rashid Rauf, the suspected mastermind of the 2006 Heathrow airliner plot who had escaped from a Pakistan jail the previous year.
- Saleh al Somali, head of Al Qaeda's operations outside of Afghanistan.

But the greatest success was the August 2009 killing of Baitullah Mehsud, Pakistan's most wanted man. Mehsud was the notorious head of the Pakistani Taliban who was responsible for numerous suicide bombing outrages including the killing of former Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto. Mehsud had tormented the Pakistanis for years and, under Pakistani pressure, he was finally tracked down and killed by a Predator while visiting his father-in-law's house. His death was considered a gift to the Pakistanis and a way to ameliorate the negative repercussions of the drone strikes.

The most obvious negative repercussion has of course been the Pakistani media's claims of high numbers of civilian deaths in the drone attacks. While Pakistani media

sources have made claims of hundreds of civilian deaths in the strikes, the Pentagon has reported that about 80 missile attacks from drones in less than two years killed “more than 400” enemy fighters and put civilian deaths in low double digits.<sup>54</sup> It is difficult to assess the exact number of dead from the drone strikes as the Taliban cordon of the strike zones after they have been targeted and few outsiders have access to the remote FATA tribal lands (discussion of the civilian casualty issue continues below).

Regardless of the exact numbers, the death of dozens of Taliban and Al Qaeda operatives and the constant threat of further strikes has certainly shaken the enemy. One senior counterterrorism official claimed, “the enemy is really, really struggling. These attacks have produced the broadest, deepest and most rapid reduction in al-Qaida senior leadership that we’ve seen in several years.”<sup>55</sup> Another referred to the growing insecurity and distrust among Al Qaeda stemming from the attacks stating, “They have started hunting down people who they think are responsible. People are showing up dead or disappearing.”<sup>56</sup> A third counterterrorism official said, “This last year has been a very hard year for them. They’re losing a bunch of their better leaders. But more importantly, at this point they’re wondering who’s next.”<sup>57</sup>

The militants and terrorists would seem to agree with the CIA’s assessment and have taken to calling the drones *machays* (wasps) for the deadly stings they have inflicted or *bangana* (thunder) for their ability to strike out of the blue. One militant claimed that the Taliban were constantly on the alert for the sound of approaching drones and said “We now often sleep in the river beds or under the eucalyptus trees.”<sup>58</sup> An Al Qaeda website bemoaned the impact of the strikes saying, “the harm is alarming, the matter is very grave. So many brave commanders have been snatched away by the hands of the enemies. So many homes have been leveled with their people inside them by planes that are unheard, unseen and unknown.”<sup>59</sup> Another Al Qaeda publication spoke of the drones in fearful terms and claimed, “Their effects are seen: carnage, destruction, arrest, and pursuit, but they themselves remain unseen, just like Satan and his ilk who see us while remaining unseen.”<sup>60</sup>

The terrorists, especially the foreign element, also bemoan the fact that local tribesmen are now less willing to associate with militants who have become magnets for drone strikes. One tribesman claimed “Before, the common people used to sit with the militants. Now they are also afraid.”<sup>61</sup> Local Pashtun tribesmen stay away from the Taliban who are known to be lightning rods for drone strikes and this has made the Taliban’s sanctuary less secure. Many Taliban leaders fearing local spies have fled from the tribal areas to cities in non-Pashtun urban areas seeking a safer sanctuary. This has put them farther from the field of operations in Afghanistan and the FATA.<sup>62</sup>

The constant threat of attack or surveillance has forced the Taliban and Al Qaeda to dismantle their training camps in favor of hidden classrooms. Al Qaeda in particular has also given up on using cell phones as a means of communication for fear that they will be tracked by signal and killed as Nek Muhammad was. The deaths of so many high level Al Qaeda leaders has also meant that many mid-level operatives who are inexperienced and lacking direct ties to bin Laden have been elevated to higher positions in the organization.

Both the Taliban and Al Qaeda have launched what have been described as “witch hunts” to try to kill real or imagined spies. Mullah Nazir has proclaimed “We are taking measures to catch spies. . . . This sedition has been pioneered by the government of Pakistan. They have put men into deceit by making them do their dirty work for them, and they do it for the return of a few rupees.”<sup>63</sup> And most importantly, the constant deaths and ever present threat of drone strikes has put the pressure on the Taliban and Al Qaeda and moved

them from the offensive to the defensive stance. Simply put, it is harder to plan military or terrorist offenses when it is too dangerous to have large gatherings or open training.

But such success has indisputably come at a price in the form of numerous civilian bystanders who have been killed in the drone strikes. The aerial strikes may have turned many Pakistanis into enemies and may thus potentially represent a strategic defeat in the greatest battle in this front-line country, the battle for the hearts and minds of the Pakistani people.

### **Hypotheses B: Drones—A Form of “Execution Without Trial” of Innocent Pakistani Citizens**

During her October 2009 visit to Pakistan, U.S. Secretary of State, Hilary Clinton, was frequently attacked in conferences by Pakistanis who strongly resented the killing of fellow Pakistanis on Pakistani soil by Americans prosecuting their “War on Terror.” On one occasion Clinton was told by a frustrated Pakistani that the drone strikes were a form of “execution without trial.”<sup>64</sup> Critics of the drone campaign decry the dehumanization of the war by turning it over to remote-controlled drones. From a more tactical perspective they also claim it can drive Pashtun tribesmen who suffer “collateral damage” from the strikes and millions of average Pakistanis not living in the FATA to anti-Americanism. The death of a few dozen Al Qaeda and Taliban leaders cannot compensate for the destabilizing impact this assassination campaign has on this weak democracy.

For all their popularity among counterterrorism officials in the United States, no fact more eloquently speaks to their down side than a recent poll that shows that 82 percent of Pakistanis find the drone missile strikes to be unjustified.<sup>65</sup> In April 2009, the Pakistani newspaper *The News*, published figures given by Pakistani officials that showed that 687 civilians have been killed along with 14 Al Qaeda leaders by American drones “stationed in Afghanistan” since January 2008.<sup>66</sup> The newspaper reported that this is translated to over 50 civilians killed for every Al Qaeda target. Another Pakistani source raised the ante for the following year and claimed that “For each Al Qaeda and Taliban terrorist killed by the American drones, 140 civilian Pakistanis also had to die. Over 90 percent of those killed in the deadly missile strikes were innocent civilians.”<sup>67</sup> An October 2009 report by the U.S.-based researchers Peter Bergen and Katherine Tiedeman paints a much lower number, giving a total of 760 to 1,000 deaths (including Taliban and civilians) over *three years* from 2006 to 2009.<sup>68</sup> But few in Pakistan read American studies; it is the reports by the Pakistani media that resonate most with them.

While the Pakistani media tends to have an anti-American bias and to report Taliban pronouncements as “facts” (no outsiders can get into the region to ascertain the facts), the drone attacks would nonetheless seem to be handing Pakistani journalists material to excite the Pakistani public’s opinion against the United States. There can be no doubt that the killings, especially of innocent Pakistani women and children, have caused tremendous outrage among average Pakistanis who already are pre-disposed to anti-Americanism (although it can be argued that families that house Al Qaeda and Taliban are not innocent civilians in the strictest of definitions). One popular song captured the frustration with the strikes when the singer abruptly “dies” at the end after having been hit by a drone missile.

Well aware of the unpopularity of the drone strikes, the Pakistani government has loudly and repeatedly condemned them. The Pakistanis, for example, complained about the strikes to the U.S. ambassador to Pakistan and Central Commander head General David Petraeus during a 2008 visit. After a meeting with Petraeus, Pakistani President Asif Ali, for example, said “continuing drone attacks on our territory, which result in

loss of precious lives and property, are counterproductive and difficult to explain by a democratically elected government. It is creating a credibility gap.”<sup>69</sup> The Pakistani Defense Minister claimed the strikes were generating “anti-American sentiments” and creating “outrage and uproar among the people.” Another military official said the missile strikes were “counterproductive” and “driving a wedge between the government and the tribal people.”<sup>70</sup>

Pakistani Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani described the strikes as “disastrous” and said, “such actions are proving counter-productive to efforts to isolate the extremists and militants from the tribal population.”<sup>71</sup> And Abdul Basit, a Pakistan foreign office spokesman, expressed his opposition to the strikes saying “As we have been saying all along, we believe such attacks are counter-productive. They involve collateral damage and they are not helpful in our efforts to win hearts and minds.”<sup>72</sup>

The various Pakistani political parties have been even more vocal in their criticisms of the drone attacks. Ashan Iqbal, a lawmaker from the Muslim League N Party, stated “We need at this time to make it clear to foreign countries that Pakistan will not tolerate such actions. If it continues, then Pakistan can consider pulling out completely from this war on terror.”<sup>73</sup>

Not surprisingly, the Islamist parties have used the drone strikes to mobilize thousands of followers throughout the country in large protests in Punjab, North West Frontier Province, and Sindh. The media has also been loud in its protests. A typical media account reads “Instead of tactical gains or strategic advantage, the daily slaughter of some militants, heavy collateral damage of civilian lives, homes and property will leave long lasting scars, which will never heal.”<sup>74</sup>

Criticism has not been limited to Pakistan. One American critic, Nathaniel Fick of the Center for a New American Security, wrote “Drone strikes excite visceral opposition across a broad spectrum of Pakistani opinion. The persistence of these attacks on Pakistani territory offends people’s deepest sensibilities, alienates them from their government, and contributes to Pakistan’s instability.”<sup>75</sup> Fears that collateral damage deaths will radicalize Pakistanis have also been expressed by advisors to the U.S. military, such as David Kilcullen. In a recent *New York Times* article he wrote “every one of these dead noncombatants represents an alienated family, a new desire for revenge, and more recruits for a militant movement that has grown exponentially even as drone strikes have increased.”<sup>76</sup>

The issue of the drones killing civilians has excited an intense ethics debate in the United States. When the 174th Fighter Wing began remotely flying drones in Afghanistan from Hancock Airfield near Syracuse, New York, for example, one blogger wrote:

To sit at a console 7,000 miles away with life and death control over people whose land you’ve never walked on is too much power for any human being. It makes killing virtual and is a virtual license to kill. It can only corrupt.

I call on every pastor and minister in the Syracuse area to begin each service with an apology to the children of South Waziristan for the terror we have inflicted in their skies. And I invite them at the end of every service to lead their communities in a conscious confessional pledge to carry out acts of compassion and forgiveness as gracious counter-witness to each Reaper flight guided from our local airfield.<sup>77</sup>

Amnesty International similarly warned “Anything that dehumanizes the process makes it easier to pull the trigger.”<sup>78</sup> The UN Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial Killings, Philip

Alston, also condemned the drone campaign and called for greater “accountability” to prevent what he called a “slippery slope” of killing.<sup>79</sup>

It is the concern over inadvertent civilian deaths that several of the above sources mentioned that is most important for the Pakistani government. The fear is that the collateral damage in the form of dead civilians could lead to a propaganda coup for the Taliban and Al Qaeda. This could drive Pashtun tribes that are on the fence to declare *badal* (revenge) against the United States or the weak Pakistani government. The alienation resulting from the deaths of a few dozen Taliban and Al Qaeda leaders could drive tens of thousands of armed tribesmen into militancy. As Pakistani Prime Minister Yusuf Gilani put it, “We are trying to separate militants from tribesmen, but the drone attacks are doing exactly the opposite.”<sup>80</sup>

The fears of Gilani and others are perhaps not misplaced. There have been several retaliatory suicide bombings by the Taliban or enraged Pashtun tribesmen following air strikes. One account of this sort of trend reads, “My neighbor was so furious when a drone killed his mother, two sisters and his 7-year-old brother last September that he filled his car with explosives and rammed it into a Pakistani army convoy. He had to avenge the death of his loved ones.”<sup>81</sup>

The U.S. strikes have also driven whole Pakistani Taliban factions that had previously agreed to peace treaties with the Pakistani government, most notably those of Mullah Nazir and Hafiz Gul Bahadur (both of whom have nonetheless been involved in attacks on the United States in Afghanistan), to temporarily break their truces and attack Pakistani troops. Bahadur’s spokesman claimed “The Pakistani government is clearly involved in these attacks by American spy planes so we will target government interests as well as foreigners.”<sup>82</sup>

While Bahadur could not prove it at the time, his charges of collaboration between the Pakistani military and the CIA would soon be vindicated. For it would become clear that, for all of their public howls of protest, both the Musharraf and Zardari governments were covertly working with the CIA to support the strikes.

### **Hypotheses C: Drones—The Only “Cure” for the Taliban and Al Qaeda and Unexpected Pakistani Support for Drone Strikes**

While many in Pakistan suspected that the government was covertly supporting the drone strikes “from Afghanistan,” even as it publicly condemned them, there seemed to be little official evidence of this until early 2009. The Pakistani government’s double game was finally exposed on 12 February 2009 when Senator Dianne Feinstein, Chair of the Senate Intelligence Committee, dropped a bombshell in a conference when she claimed “As I understand it, these (drones) are flown out of a Pakistani base.”<sup>83</sup>

American journalists treated the incident as if Feinstein had revealed a state secret but, as previously mentioned, such media sources as the BBC, *New York Times*, and CNN had long before reported that the drones were based in Jacobabad, Pakistan.<sup>84</sup> But for all the fact that the Western media had previously reported on the Pakistani bases, Feinstein’s public acknowledgment brought them to the attention of the Pakistani public for the first time.

To compound the Pakistani government’s embarrassment, five days later Britain’s *Times* published an article that featured satellite images obtained from google.earth that showed Predator drones on a runway in Shamsi, an airbase in the Pakistani province of Baluchistan.<sup>85</sup> Pakistan’s *Dawn* newspaper subsequently reported the news and claimed “The existence of drone bases inside Pakistan suggests a much deeper relationship with

the United States on counter-terrorism than has been publicly acknowledged.”<sup>86</sup> Clearly it seemed that powerful figures in the Pakistani military, intelligence and government saw the Taliban and Al Qaeda as a threat and were secretly supportive of the drone strikes.

A Pakistani blogger captured the sentiment of many of his countrymen when he wrote “now the cat is out of the bag . . . it is once more proved that how much regard American and our own government has for the people who reside in Pakistan. Their lives are of no value and our own government is involved in the killings. What a shame and what a sorry state of affairs. Another lie of our president has been caught and nobody knows how many more are on the way.”<sup>87</sup> The cynicism was not limited to Pakistan, U.S.-based Afghanistan experts Peter Bergen and Katherine Tiedeman for example wrote:

For Pakistani politicians, the drone program is a dream come true. They get to posture to their constituents about the perfidious Americans even as they reap the benefits from the U.S. strikes. They are well-aware that neither the Pakistani Army's ineffective military operations nor the various peace agreements with the militants have done anything to halt the steady Talibanization of their country, while the U.S. drones are the one surefire way to put significant pressure on the leaders of the Taliban and Al Qaeda. This is called getting to have your chapati and eat it too.<sup>88</sup>

Senator Carl Levin, chair of the Senate Armed Services Committee, summed up U.S. frustrations with the Pakistanis' double dealing 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.”<sup>89</sup> But this seems to be the price the Americans have to pay to launch the drone attacks that many in the Pakistani government can only secretly support. President Zardari, who is weakened by charges of corruption, is fearful of being portrayed as a stooge of the Obama administration.

But in the spring of 2009 a poll was carried out in the targeted FATA tribal area by the Pakistani-based Aryana Institute for Regional Research and Advocacy that was to change the debate.<sup>90</sup> The responses were extraordinary and not what the pollsters expected. They clearly demonstrated that those who live in areas where the Taliban have closed girls schools and cinemas, executed “adulterers” and “spies,” killed local chieftains, and enforced strict *Sharia* law are more inclined to support the American drone strikes. Among other unexpected results, the poll found that:

- Only 45 percent of those Pashtuns questioned felt that drone strikes brought fear and terror to the common people.
- 52 percent of those questioned felt the strikes were accurate.
- 58 percent said the strikes did *not* cause anti-Americanism.
- 60 percent felt the militants were damaged by the strikes.
- 70 percent felt the Pakistanis should carry out strikes of their own against the militants.

The pollsters also found that “The popular notion outside the Pakhtun (Pashtun) belt that a large majority of the local population supports the Taliban movement lacks substance.” Most importantly the study rejected the notion that the drone strikes are seen as a violation of Pashtun lands or Pakistani sovereignty. On the contrary, one of the authors claimed “I asked almost all those people if they see the US drone attacks on FATA as violation of Pakistan's sovereignty. More than two-third said they did not. . . . The US is violating the

sovereignty of the Taliban and Al-Qaeda, not of Pakistan." An anthropologist involved in the study claimed of the local Pashtuns, "they feel powerless toward the militants and they see the drones as their liberator."<sup>91</sup>

The results of the poll, the first of its kind carried out in this region that has borne the brunt of the strikes, would seem to indicate that many Pashtun tribesmen welcomed the strikes even if the rest of their countrymen did not. A similar study carried out by World Public Opinion found that a whopping 86 percent of residents in the Pashtun-dominated North West Frontier Province (NWFP) supported the Pakistani government while only six percent supported the Taliban.<sup>92</sup> This report also found that "NWFP respondents were more likely than others to see local Taliban and Islamist militants as critical threats to Pakistan. They were more inclined to see the Pakistani Taliban as holding a nationwide takeover as an objective, and to see this as a real possibility."<sup>93</sup>

Such opinions are reflected on an individual basis as well. A Pashtun policeman, for example, could not contain his admiration for the drones when he described the strikes as "very precise, very effective, and the Taliban and al-Qaida dread them."<sup>94</sup> One Pashtun even wrote in the Pakistani newspaper the *News*:

Hatred against the Taliban in the Pakhtun (Pashtun) areas is at an all-time high and so is disappointment, even resentment, about the Pakistani army for its failure to stop the Taliban. Many people in the Taliban-occupied territories of the NWFP and FATA told me they constantly pray for the US drones to bomb the Taliban headquarters in their areas since the Pakistani army is unwilling to do so. Many people of Waziristan told me they are satisfied with the US drone attacks on militants in Waziristan and they want the Americans to keep it up till all the militants, local Pakhtun, the Punjabis and the foreigners, are eliminated.<sup>95</sup>

In December 2009, a coalition of FATA-based political parties and civil organizations opposed to terrorism issued the "Peshawar Declaration." Among other provisions, it stated:

- The conference demands that targeted and immediate operations against all centers and networks of terrorism should be initiated.
- This conference also demands the elimination of all foreign, non-local and local terrorists in FATA.

The declaration also dealt with the drone attacks in detail and stated:

The issue of Drone attacks is the most important one. If the people of the war-affected areas are satisfied with any counter-militancy strategy, it is the Drone attacks which they support the most. According to the people of Waziristan, Drones have never killed any civilian. Even some people in Waziristan compare Drones with Ababels (The holy swallows sent by God to avenge Abraham, the intended conqueror of the Khana Kaaba). A component of the Pakistani media, some retired generals, a few journalists/analysts and pro-Taliban political parties never tire in their baseless propaganda against Drone attacks.<sup>96</sup>

One frustrated Pashtun reader wrote to the Pakistani *Daily Times* to say:

They (the Pashtuns of FATA) want al-Qaeda along with the Taliban burnt to ashes on the soil of Waziristan through relentless drone attacks. The drone

attacks, they believe, are the one and only “cure” for these anti-civilization creatures and the U.S. must robustly administer them the “cure” until their existence is annihilated from the world. The people of Waziristan, including tribal leaders, women and religious people, asked me to convey in categorical terms to the U.S. the following in my column. Your new drone attack strategy is brilliant, i.e. one attack closely followed by another. After the first attack the terrorists cordon off the area and none but the terrorists are allowed on the spot. Another attack at that point kills so many of them. Excellent! Keep it up!<sup>97</sup>

Interestingly, revulsion toward the Taliban seems to have finally spread from the Pashtun-dominated FATA and NWFP since the beginning of 2009 when the militants moved into the scenic resort valley of Swat just to north of the Pakistani capital of Islamabad. There they closed girls schools, executed local policemen and those they deemed to be spies or informers, enforced strict sharia law and filmed themselves whipping local females for daring to go outside without male escorts. As a result, a poll carried out in March 2009 by the International Republican Institute found that 74 percent of Pakistanis saw terrorism as a serious problem in Pakistan.<sup>98</sup> The same survey found 69 percent found Taliban and Al Qaeda operating in Pakistan to be a problem.<sup>99</sup>

For a Pakistani population that had previously given the Taliban a certain leeway out of a reflexive anti-Americanism and Islamic solidarity, the extremists had finally come too close to home. The local media was suddenly full of condemnations of the Taliban. One person wrote, “These handful of people have taken the population hostage, and the government is trying to patronize them. If the state surrenders, what will happen next?” In a televised briefing, another Pakistani human rights activists claimed “This is an eye-opener. Terrorism has seeped into every corner of the country. It is time that every patriotic Pakistani should raise a voice against such atrocities.”<sup>100</sup>

A survey of Pakistanis by World Public Opinion found that “A sea change has occurred in Pakistani public opinion. The tactics and undemocratic bent of militant groups—in tribal areas as well as Swat—have brought widespread revulsion and turned Pakistanis against them.”<sup>101</sup> One scholar in the Pashtun-dominated city of Peshawar captured this sentiment when he claimed “Earlier there may have been some sympathies toward these Taliban or Al Qaeda, but . . . a reaction against them has been emerging. There is a general view coming forth—one that isn’t properly represented yet—where people simply ask, ‘How do we get rid of these people?’”<sup>102</sup>

Tellingly, when a CIA drone killed Baitullah Mehsud, the notorious head of the Pakistani Taliban who had sent numerous suicide bombers into Pakistani cities, there was no outcry in Pakistan. On the contrary, many Pakistanis celebrated. One blogger from Karachi claimed “If (his death is) true, it would be good news and shows the value of drone attacks” while another claimed “The mass murderer has met his fate. He was responsible for the death of thousands of innocent Pakistanis. May he burn in hell for eternity.”<sup>103</sup> When Tahir Yuldushev, the head of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, a FATA-based terrorist group tied to Al Qaeda and the Taliban, was killed by a missile strike in the fall of 2009, the Pakistani newspaper the Daily Times reported, “The death of Tahir Yuldushev at the hands of the Americans has, as in the case of Baitullah Mehsud, provided relief to Pakistan.”<sup>104</sup>

One person sent in a letter to Pakistan’s *Dawn* newspaper that opined “Seen neutrally, it will dawn on critics of the drone attacks that the Americans are assisting Pakistan by annihilating the masterminds that sit in the tribal areas and plan and prepare and dispatch



suicide attackers who play havoc with life and property in the urban Pakistan."<sup>105</sup> A former member of the Musharraf government was most candid when he claimed "Quite frankly, if Pakistan has the desire to carry out an action (assassination) but doesn't have the capability, asking someone else to help makes sense."<sup>106</sup>

Clearly the simplistic paradigm that Predator drones drive Pakistanis into the arms of the militants and infuriate and undermine the Pakistani government needs to be reevaluated. The average man on the street in Pakistan, especially in the Pashtun areas, seems to have less tolerance for the targets of the U.S. drone strikes than previously thought and the government is clearly working hand in glove with the CIA to help kill them. There are obviously many people in Pakistan who are happy to see the Taliban and Al Qaeda "burnt to ashes" . . . even at the hands of Americans. Many of them are clearly members of the government who publicly proclaim their outrage at the strikes, but secretly support them. The view that *all* Pakistanis are united against the strikes seems to be largely drawn from Westerners' uncritical use of Pakistani media sources that all too often inflate the number of dead civilians and exaggerate the negative reaction from drone strikes.

The Pakistani military's desire to kill the Taliban who are dissecting their country, beheading their troops,<sup>107</sup> and overrunning their posts,<sup>108</sup> is best demonstrated by their desire to deploy drones of their own in their conflict with the Taliban. In addition to their reliance on regular air force F-16s that have been used extensively to bomb Taliban in the Swat region and in FATA, the Pakistanis have been using Italian-manufactured unarmed drones known as Selex Galileo Falcos to carry out surveillance of the enemy.<sup>109</sup> In January 2010 the U.S. government also offered the Pakistanis twelve RQ-7 unarmed Shadow surveillance drones to be used in their offensives against the Taliban.

Most interestingly, the Pakistanis have also begun manufacturing drones of their own including the Burraq, Bazz, Ababeel, and Uqaab models.<sup>110</sup> Pakistan (which has not been entrusted with Predators of its own by the United States for fear that pro-Taliban elements in the army may leak details of their flight patterns and weaknesses to the enemy) has also been working with the Turkish company Roketsan to arm their drones with laser-guided antitank missiles.<sup>111</sup> There have also been calls from Pakistani officials ranging from members of the military to former President Pervez Musharraf for the United States to give Predator drones to Pakistan.<sup>112</sup>

Clearly, for all their public remonstrations with the Bush and Obama administrations for deploying Predators and Reapers in Pakistan, the Pakistani military would like to have killer drones of their own to use against the militants who have wreaked havoc in their country. The Pakistani government and military clearly feel that it might be more palatable for Pakistani public to have the Taliban and Al Qaeda killed by the Pakistani military drones instead of those of a foreign power.

In an effort to hide the current policy of relying on the Americans for drone strikes, a senior Pakistani military official also said in October 2009 that the Americans had "shifted" their main drone air base from the controversial base in Shamsi, Baluchistan to Afghanistan.<sup>113</sup> The majority of Predators and Reapers would now appear to be flying from a CIA base located near Jalalabad, an Afghan city located near the Pakistani border.<sup>114</sup> This might make the assassination campaign more palatable for Pakistanis.

Also, under Pakistani pressure, the CIA stopped using the unpopular U.S. contractor Blackwater (Xe) to load missiles onto the drones still remaining in Pakistan.<sup>115</sup> Thus the Pakistani government is continuing to make public efforts to distance itself from the drone strikes that are unpopular outside of the tribal regions even as it has come to offer the CIA continuing support in its air-borne assassination campaign.

## Conclusion

It is abundantly clear that the drone strikes against the Taliban and Al Qaeda have seriously disrupted their ability to operate with impunity in their sanctuary in the FATA region of Pakistan. Dozens of top Al Qaeda and Taliban leaders have been killed in the deadly barrage of strikes and both terrorist groups appear to be reeling from the loss of key personnel. The targets of the strikes worry about who is next and are under pressure that did not exist just a few years ago. This may have disrupted future terrorist plots against the U.S. mainland and has certainly put pressure on Taliban insurgents operating against the United States and its International Security and Assistance Force allies in Afghanistan. In tactical terms then the drones are the most effective tool in the CIA's arsenal for disrupting terrorist and insurgent threats emanating from this hard to reach region.

This must, however, be weighed against the fact that the drone strikes have led to a backlash against America in Pakistan. Many average Pakistanis see the drones as a humiliating insult to their sovereignty and worry about innocent civilians dying as "collateral damage" in the strikes carried out by a distrusted foreign superpower. America's standing, which was already low in this country, has fallen further as a result of the assassination campaign. The Pakistani media and religious parties have used the strikes to galvanize anti-American sentiment in this unstable democracy.

Having acknowledged this fact, it would seem that the Pakistanis' tolerance for Al Qaeda and the Taliban has also plummeted in the last two years. Many have come to see these twin terrorist forces as an existential threat to their state. While this does not automatically translate to support for the drone strikes, there seems to be a growing acceptance of their effectiveness in killing terrorists like Baitullah Mehsud who have directly targeted the Pakistani people. This certainly applies to the Zadari government whose interests are aligned with the West. Clearly the formulaic criticisms of the drone strikes by Pakistani officials should be taken with a grain of salt. These criticisms are no more than public posturing meant to hide the government's collusion with the Americans in running the drone campaign. Many Pakistani leaders, including the president who has spoken out against the drone strikes, clearly see them as a necessary evil.

Most importantly, the notion that the strikes are driving Pashtun tribesmen *en masse* into the arms of the Taliban seem to be contradicted by direct reports from this inaccessible region. It would seem that the Pashtuns of FATA who have been misruled and terrorized by the Taliban and Al Qaeda have a greater tolerance for the drone strikes than Pakistanis living in other regions such as Sindh or Punjab. Many of these long-suffering Pashtuns actually support the drone strikes against those who have terrorized them for years.

In summary, it would appear that the Pakistani public (outside of FATA), which is already prone to anti-Americanism, will continue to be opposed to the strikes, just not as strongly as before. Pashtuns living in the targeted region who are not affiliated with the Taliban on the other hand will continue to tolerate them as a means for eradicating those who misrule them. It would thus seem that that, for all their liabilities as lightning rods for anti-Americanism among non-Pashtun Pakistanis, the drone strikes are the best "worst option" for dealing with a hard to reach enemy that is actively planning terrorist and insurgent attacks on Americans in Afghanistan and in their homeland.

## The Future

Regardless of the perceived benefits or liability of the drone assassination program, the pace of killings accelerated to several per week in the winter of 2009–2010 and General

Atomics Aeronautical cannot keep up with the military's request for new Predators and Reapers.<sup>116</sup> The demand for the aerial drones is only set to increase and the White House's defense-budget request for the coming year includes about \$3.5 billion for drones. These will include payments for a new jet powered drone (the Predator and Reaper are propeller driven) being developed by General Atomics known as the Avenger or Predator C that can fly to targets even faster than the earlier drone models.<sup>117</sup>

In addition, discussions in the Obama White House on alternatives to General Stanley McChrystal's call for 30,000 more troops to fight in Afghanistan may one day increase the reliance on drones. There has been considerable talk of waging a more limited counterterrorism campaign using drones and special forces instead of fighting a full-scale counterinsurgency.<sup>118</sup> This approach would rely upon the air-borne killers to hunt and disrupt Taliban and Al Qaeda while withdrawing U.S. troops to major population centers.<sup>119</sup> If such a policy was one day inaugurated in lieu of a more traditional counterinsurgency strategy it would increase the reliance on drones and make them a primary component of the war on terror and counter insurgency.

Meanwhile, in August 2009 the Pakistani Taliban elected a new leader named Hakimullah Mehsud who vowed vengeance against America for the drone killing of his predecessor, Baitullah Mehsud.<sup>120</sup> In early January 2010 he carried out just such a revenge strike by sending a Jordanian suicide bomber into a CIA base in Afghanistan that was running intel operations for drone strikes on the Afghan-Pakistani border.<sup>121</sup> Seven CIA operatives were killed in that suicide bombing, which was said to be in retaliation for Baitullah Mehsud's death. Afterward Hakimullah released a tape to the media that featured him sitting alongside the Jordanian suicide bomber prior to the attack on the CIA base.

In response, the CIA launched an unprecedented blitz of drone strikes on Taliban *hujra* guest houses, convoys, and compounds thought to be hiding places for Hakimullah Mehsud. One CIA operative described his organization's search for vengeance saying "Last week's attack will be avenged. Some very bad people will eventually have a bad day."<sup>122</sup> A 16 January 2010 drone attack on a *madrassa* Hakimullah was visiting reportedly wounded him seriously in the neck, but did not kill him.<sup>123</sup> But a later strike a few days later on a location where he was thought to be hiding may have succeeded in killing him.<sup>124</sup> In February a drone also killed Mohammad Haqqani, the son of the notorious Taliban leader Jalaludin Haqqani, who had helped facilitate the Jordanian suicide bombers insertion into the CIA's base in the Khost Province that he controls.<sup>125</sup>

The drone war therefore continues apace and has even become personal as the CIA and Taliban carry out their revenge strikes. It can be assumed that somewhere even now over the forested mountains of Pakistan's tribal agencies an aerial drone is hunting Hakimullah Mehsud's reported successor Qari Hussein as he plots further acts of vengeance. Thus the CIA's drone war against the Taliban and Al Qaeda will likely continue and perhaps gain increasing acceptance from an anti-American Pakistani public that is increasingly coming to see the Taliban extremists as a threat to their country.

## Notes

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