

Hell on Earth:

The Use of Drones in Pakistan and the Socio-economic and Psychological Issues

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The debate over the effectiveness of drone strikes usually focuses on their ability to target and eliminate “militants”. However, it fails to consider its impact on the everyday life of broader populations that live through the trauma of drones.¹ Two recent publications are worth mentioning in this regard: a report by Christopher Rogers for Campaign for Innocent Victims in Conflict (CIVIC),² and a report by The Stanford International Human Rights and Conflict Resolution Clinic and the Global Justice Clinic at the New York University School of Law.³ Both these reports provide useful insights into the mental states of the civilians living under drones. This article primarily reviews the firsthand testimonies of these two reports and focused on the impacts of drone strikes on local communities in FATA. According to these reports the impacts felt in these communities are in many respects similar to those reported in conflict zones.

Double Tap

Death of innocent people and a concomitant loss of faith in human decency is a common theme among both the reports. They frequently become target in so-called “double tap” strikes that target everyone who tries to help the wounded in the aftermath of an attack. In February 2012, the Bureau of Investigative Journalism reported that follow-up strikes in Pakistan killed at least 50 civilians who were trying to rescue victims of an earlier drone strike. The TBIJ counted more than 20 other civilians killed in strikes on funerals.⁴ These ‘double tap’ strikes have resulted in rescue services that are hesitant to go to the aid of those wounded fearing that they might become victims of a follow-on attack and, as a result, these injured often die. Faheem Qureshi, one of the survivors of a drone strike in North Waziristan, stated that nobody comes near the victims of drone strike for as much as half an hour fearing that they might become a victim of the subsequent drone strike.⁵ These double tap strikes become so frequent that, according to researchers at New York University, a humanitarian organization has made this a part of their policy to wait at least six hours after a drone strike before visiting the site.⁶

Like other religious and non-religious traditions, Islam accords significant respect to the dead. In Muslim-majority FATA, many consider it their religious duty to hold a communal funeral service – an event involving recitations of prayer for the departed souls – and bury the dead as soon as possible.⁷ The US drone campaign in tribal areas of Pakistan has caused great damage to the cultural and religious practices concerning the burial to such a degree that even the family members are scared to attend funerals.

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According to TBIJ data, the US drone campaign has killed dozens of civilians who were attending funerals in Pakistan.⁸

The second finding that can be drawn from the aforementioned reports is that the constant hovering of drones has resulted in psychological disquiet and painful trauma amongst civilians. Many of them now keep away from social gatherings that include traditional jirga meetings as well as funerals. Some parents even keep their children away from attending schools. Dawood Ishaq, who became physically paralyzed in one of the drone strikes, confirmed this, saying that people are reluctant to attend funerals of those killed in drone strikes fearing they themselves might become target of the double tap strike.⁹ Moreover, since, the missiles fired from drones often destroy the victims to pieces makes identification difficult and the traditional burial processes even more difficult. Medical professionals, who treated drone victims, described the skin of victims are often burned to the extent that it is hard to tell cattle from human.¹⁰

Damage to Property

In most parts of the FATA, where extended families live together in compounds usually made of mud and that often contain several smaller individual structures, drone strikes often not only obliterate the targeted house, but also inflict considerable damage to the surrounding houses.¹¹ Destruction of such magnitude has a significant impact on communities, especially in places where poverty and underdevelopment are particularly on high end such as the case of FATA, Pakistan.¹²

In Pashtun society, especially in FATA, men are the primary bread-winners. The death of a family member is not only emotionally and psychologically devastating but can create long-lasting instability. Drone strikes often result in depriving families of its key member, and perhaps the only source of income.¹³ Most survivors lack personal savings and substantial state support.¹⁴ They struggle to compensate for the lost income and become marginalized and vulnerable, often forcing their children or other younger relatives to discontinue education and enter the workforce at a very young age.¹⁵

Psychological Trauma

Medically diagnosed as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder” (PTSD) and “anticipatory anxiety” cases of psychological and emotional trauma are frequently reported among civilians.

David Rohde, who was kidnapped by the Taliban and remained in their custody for several months in FATA, described that drones were terrifying for the effected because it is almost impossible for them to know who are they tracking. The buzz of drone as it circles overhead is a constant reminder of imminent death for them.¹⁶ According to him, living under drones is just like a ‘hell on earth’, He further said that even people living in

areas that are least effected of drone strikes, also fear to become targets of future attacks.¹⁷

Safdar Dawar, President of the Tribal Union of Journalists – the association working in the affected areas – described how local people make everyday decisions while living in the effected tribal region. They always have this fear of drones even if they walk to the market, are standing on the road, or even praying in mosques as a person standing nearby may be a drone target. As a result, people are careful and scared all the time.¹⁸

It has also been reported that some people complain they wake up at night screaming because of the fear from drones.¹⁹ Lack of health infrastructure and insufficient number of mental health professionals in FATA further exacerbates the illnesses cited before.²⁰

Community Trust

US drone strikes have greatly exacerbated local tensions by undermining the community trust in tribal areas of Pakistan. It is widely believed that US paid informants help identify potential targets by placing tiny tracking devices (‘chips’) in houses or vehicles.²¹ Samina Ahmed of International Crisis Group believes this to be true, explaining that many locals have reported to her that Americans have hired people who place chips at the side of a house or into a vehicle, which attract the drone to attack the target.”²²

As a result, these perceptions have contributed to breed mistrust within the local community, where neighbors suspect neighbors of spying for United States or trying to settle feuds by using drone strikes against each other. One resident described the situation where people who have conflicts with others, can get revenge by putting chips on their houses, identifying them as drone targets.²³

Education

It is also widely reported that drone strikes have deeply affected taccess to education, which is very unfortunate keeping in mind the impact of threats and violence given by the militants against schools, especially in FATA region and where the literacy rate is already low.²⁴ Education has always been a problem in FATA, however, with the induction of drone attacks in the area, the situation got even worse. A large number of children have opted out to go to school either to compensate for the income after the death or injury of its primary wage earner or due to fear that they might become the victim of drone strike.²⁵ On the other hand, those who were injured in drone strikes have deeply affected their physical and financial access to education. These fears has legitimate basis, because in the past drones strikes have reportedly targeted schools that resulted in deaths of dozens of children and caused great damage to educational infrastructure.²⁶ People in these effected tribal area lament the deterioration in education and are concerned about their future. They want their children to get proper education, but because of drone strikes they are reluctant to take them to school.²⁷ Safia who lost

husband and son in a drone strike hopes that the all the Taliban are killed. But at the same time is more concerned with drone strikes that needed to be stopped immediately. She believes that drone policy is not effective at all against the Taliban. United States should realize that drone strikes have been taking place for almost a decade now but none of Taliban has left extremism.²⁸

Both these reports pose challenge to the legitimacy of drone warfare, however, the situation is further exacerbated by a recent ABC News poll wherein 83 percent of Americans now “approve” of the use of drones against suspected militants abroad.²⁹ The near-impossibility to visit FATA by independent researchers in and around Pakistan implies that such reports give only a glimpse of life on this part of the world. The drone warfare in Pakistan, is not a universal experience, while not wanting to overstate the case, these reports are important for re-humanising the conduct of war against the ill-defined enemies and abstract objectives of national security.

Conclusion

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Notes and References

¹ Ian G. R. Shaw, "Predator Empire: The Geopolitics of U.S. Drone Warfare", *Geopolitics*, Volume 18, Issue 2, (2013)

² Chris Rogers, "Civilian Harm and Conflict in Northwest Pakistan, Center for Civilians in Conflict", (2010). Available at: http://civiliansinconflict.org/uploads/files/publications/Pak_Report_Online.pdf

³ Stanford Law School and NYU School of Law, *Living under drones*, op.cit.

⁴ Chris Woods, "Get the Data: Obama's Terror Drones", The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, 4 February, 2012. Available at: <http://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/2012/02/04/get-the-data-obamas-terror-drones/>. See also Chris Woods and Christina Lamb, "CIA tactics in Pakistan include targeting rescuers and funerals", The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, 4 February, 2012. Available at: <http://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/2012/02/04/obama-terror-drones-cia-tactics-in-pakistan-include-targeting-rescuers-and-funerals/>. See also Scott Shane, "US said to target rescuers at drone strike sites", *New York Times*, 5 Feb. 2012. Available at: http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/06/world/asia/us-drone-strikes-are-said-to-target-rescuers.html?_r=0

⁵ "He believes that he would likely not have survived if he had not managed to walk out of the smoking rubble of his hujra on his own, because his neighbors would have waited too long in coming to rescue him". See Stanford Law School and NYU School of Law, *Living under drones*, op.cit., p. 75

⁶ Scott Shane, "Report cites high civilian toll in Pakistan drone strikes", *New York Times*, 25 September, 2012. Available at: <http://atwar.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/09/25/report-cites-high-civilian-toll-in-pakistan-drone-strikes/>

⁷ Often the dead is buried within 24 hours and a funeral prayer is held in the local mosque, and family and community members follow the funeral.

⁸ Chris Woods and Christina Lamb, "CIA tactics in Pakistan include targeting rescuers and funerals", op.cit.

⁹ See Stanford Law School and NYU School of Law, *Living under drones*, op.cit., pp. 133-134

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 95

¹¹ Report estimates that seven or eight houses around a house hit by a drone strike were affected. See Stanford Law School and NYU School of Law, *Living under drones*, op.cit., p. 77

¹² FATA has 2.4% of Pakistan's population and contributes only 1.5% to country's economy, making it the smallest provincial economy in terms of GDP. See Shahid Javed Burki, "Economics and extremism", *Dawn*, 5 January, 2010.

¹³ Chris Rogers, *Civilian Harm and Conflict in Northwest Pakistan*, Center for Civilians in Conflict, (2010). Available at:

http://civiliansinconflict.org/uploads/files/publications/civilian_harm_in_nw_pakistan_oct_2010.pdf

¹⁴ Pakistani authorities have offered limited compensation in some instances, but these offers, rejected by many Waziris on principle, fail to address adequately the damage and loss of income the victims have sustained. See "Civilian Harm and Conflict in Northwest Pakistan", Center for Civilians in Conflict, (2010). pp. 51-57

¹⁵ Stanford Law School and NYU School of Law, *Living under drones*, op.cit., 78

¹⁶ David Rohde, "The drone war", *Reuters Magazine*, 17 January, 2012. Available at:

<http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/01/17/davos-reutersmagazine-dronewar-idAFL1E8CHCXX20120117>

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Stanford Law School and NYU School of Law, *Living under drones*, op.cit., 98

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.84. "Interview with parliamentarian Akhunzada Chitan"

²⁰ According to an April 2008 report by the US Government Accountability Office (GAO), FATA has 41 hospitals for a population of 3.1 million, and a doctor to population ratio of 1 to 6,762. See, "Combating Terrorism: The United States Lacks Comprehensive Plan to Destroy the Terrorist Threat and Close the Safe Haven in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas", United States Government Accountability Office (2008). Available at <http://www.gao.gov/assets/280/274592.pdf>

²¹ Stories about the use of these chips are widely reported. See Carol Grisanti and Mushtaq Yusufzai, Taliban-style justice for alleged U.S. spies, *NBC News*, 17 April, 2009. Available at: http://worldblog.nbcnews.com/_news/2009/04/17/4376383-taliban-style-justice-for-alleged-us-spies?lite

²² Samina Ahmed quoted in Stanford Law School and NYU School of Law, *Living under drones*, op.cit., 100

²³ *ibid.*

²⁴ Schools in the conflict affected areas of FATA and Khyber Pakhtunhwa were subjected to persistent attacks by militant forces. Countless schools were blown up causing extensive damage to educational infrastructure. See State of Pakistan's Children 2012, Society for the Protection of the Rights of the Child (2012)

²⁵ *ibid.*, pp. 88-92

²⁶ Chris Woods, "Over 160 children reported among drone deaths", The Bureau of Investigative Journalism 11 August, 2011. Available at: <http://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/2011/08/11/more-than-160-children-killed-in-us-strikes/>

²⁷ Stanford Law School and NYU School of Law, *Living under drones*, *op.cit.*, p.92

²⁸ Chris Rogers, "Civilian Harm and Conflict in Northwest Pakistan, Center for Civilians in Conflict", *op.cit.*, p. 60

²⁹ "Washington Post-ABC News Poll". 1-4 February, 2012. Available at:

http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/polls/postabcpoll_020412.html

³⁰ "Washington Post-ABC News Poll". 1-4 February, 2012. Available at:

http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/polls/postabcpoll_020412.html

³¹ Joseph Butler, *Fifteen Sermons* (Cambridge: Hilliard and Brown, 1827)