

America's unmanned aerial vehicles used to kill civilians

Transcript and audio report

By [Global Research](#)

In-depth Report: [AFGHANISTAN](#)

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US President Barack Obama may have taken his time to decide on his Afghanistan policy, but he's also now become more of an enthusiast for drone missile strikes than his predecessor. Washington's New America Foundation says the US has increased the number of missile strikes from unmanned drones in the Afghan-Pakistan border region by about 50 per cent since President Obama took office. US analysts say the drone campaign has taken out key Al Qaeda and Taliban leaders but has come at the cost of increasing civilian deaths and can't be relied on to defeat the insurgents.

Presenter: Washington Correspondent Kim Landers

Speakers: Thomas Sanderson, U-S Centre for Strategic and International Studies; Bill Roggio, editor of the Long War Journal

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KIM LANDERS: America's unmanned aerial vehicles, often called drones, are used in Iraq, Afghanistan, the tribal regions of Pakistan, Yemen and off the coast of Somalia.

A Washington think tank, the New America Foundation says there've been 64 strikes since President Barack Obama took office and there were 45 such strikes during the Bush administration.

THOMAS SANDERSON: I do see an increase, of course, in the number of drone attacks on targets in Pakistan, Afghanistan and from what I can see out of that, it's been successful.

KIM LANDERS: Thomas Sanderson is the deputy director of transnational threats at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies. He says there are many reasons for the increased number of attacks.

THOMAS SANDERSON: I think partly because we have better cooperation with the Pakistanis on the one hand. Number two, simply because we are learning more about how to do these attacks and we are gaining knowledge and experience so I think just as time goes on, as with any operation whether war time or not, we gain experience from it and do a better job.

KIM LANDERS: When you say better cooperation from the Pakistanis, do you mean better intelligence so that the US knows where to send these drones?

THOMAS SANDERSON: I think it is better freedom of operation with the Pakistanis' consent, better intelligence and simply Pakistani cooperation over all and recognition that one, the threat in their country is greater than they were willing to admit or could see and so therefore I think they have been more inclined to allow us to conduct additional unmanned drone attacks.

And also, we have shown an increased willingness I believe to target individuals who threaten Pakistan.

KIM LANDERS: The US drones flying over Afghanistan and Pakistan are operated from half a world away. Many of the pilots sit at a military base in the US desert.

Bill Roggio is the editor of the Long War Journal, an online publication that keeps a close track of the US drone campaign. He says there is an average five to seven strikes a month although in January there were 11.

The main drone is the "predator" which carries the "hellfire" anti-tank missile.

BILL ROGGIO: It is a plane that could stay up in the air for somewhere around 24 hours. The pilot is in Nevada, in the desert of the United States and they are basically flying them via a joy stick, you know, and some video cameras.

The "reaper", the older brother of the predator, they made that so it could carry larger hellfire missiles as well as it can carry, again, the 500 pound GPS (global position system)-guided bombs. So they're very, you know, this is sort of a revolution in air warfare.

KIM LANDERS: Drone strikes in Pakistan have killed more than two dozen senior Al Qaeda and Taliban figures, including two leaders of Pakistan's Taliban in the past six months.

There have also been concerns about civilian casualties from drone missile strikes.

The New America Foundation's study estimates about one third of all deaths involve civilians.

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