

Covert Drone War in Pakistan: The Return of Double-Tap Drone Strikes

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File image of an armed MQ-9 Reaper drone (Photo: General Atomics Aeronautical)

Between May 24 and July 23 2012, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) was reported by multiple media sources to have carried out a number of controversial drone strikes in the FATA region of northwest Pakistan.

Related article - [Bureau investigation finds fresh evidence of strikes on rescuers](#)

Across seven attacks, reports suggested the agency had deliberately targeted a mosque with worshippers inside; to have targeted funeral prayers for a victim of a previous strike; and on six occasions, to have deliberately targeted people going to rescue victims and retrieve the dead from the scene of an earlier attack – a tactic also known as a ‘double-tap’ strike.

Last year, the Bureau [reported](#) that between 2009 and 2011 the CIA carried out a number of similar attacks on rescuers and funeral-goers, reportedly killing a significant number of civilians, along with alleged militants. Those findings were described by two UN rapporteurs as potential war crimes.

But reports of attacks on rescuers ceased in July 2011. So when prominent media outlets suggested the tactic was being used again, the Bureau commissioned Pakistan-based reporter Mushtaq Yusufzai to investigate. Yusufzai works from Peshawar, on the edge of FATA, and his contacts in Waziristan include local officials, village residents and Taliban representatives. He spoke to a number of sources about the seven attacks. Here is what he found.

May 24 2012

The Bureau’s field research finds that a CIA-controlled armed drone hit a small mosque in the village of Hasukhel in North Waziristan, killing a number of worshippers inside, as was widely reported at the time. In addition six others were reported killed in a so-called ‘double-tap’ drone strike shortly afterwards as they took part in rescue work.

Yusufzai report: Hasukhel is a small village 4km south of Mir Ali, North Waziristan’s second town. Mir Ali in general – and Hasukhel village in particular – are known for the presence of foreign fighters, mostly Arabs and Uzbeks.

The high temperatures in the summer mean early morning *Fajr* prayers are often held in

fields. At around 4.45am on May 24 a number of people had gathered in a small makeshift mosque. Some had already prayed and were sitting outside, while others were busy reciting the holy Qur'an.

Drones attacked the gathering and fired two missiles, hitting the small mosque and killing four people, thought to be Arabs and Turkmen. Some 10 or 20 minutes later, a group of six or seven people including men from the local Dawar tribe arrived to rescue the injured. While they were pulling out bodies from the rubble and putting the dead and injured people on *charpais* or beds to take them to the hospital, the drones returned. They fired four more missiles at those involved in the rescue work.

In this second attack, according to Taliban and tribal sources, six people were killed on the spot and around 12 others were seriously injured. Two later died of their injuries at a private medical facility in Mir Ali.

Locals were laid to rest in a nearby graveyard while the foreigners were taken to Deegano village in Dattakhel. Most foreigners, especially Arabs, are buried in a graveyard in Deegano village whenever they are killed in North Waziristan or in nearby areas of Afghanistan.

May 28 2012

No evidence can be found for a claimed attack on rescuers. Instead, Yusufzai's sources said that two separate linked strikes took place.

An initial attempt to destroy a truck failed. The vehicle was then pursued and destroyed 10 minutes later as it passed through Hasukhel village, killing seven alleged militants. Four civilians including three children were also injured when a nearby house was damaged. [CBS](#) reported that a CIA attack on this date unsuccessfully targeted Yahya al-Libi, al Qaeda's second-in-command.

Yusufzai report: The first drone attack took place around 4am, targeting a double-cabin pickup truck coming from the Afghan border towards Hasukhel village in North Waziristan. The drone fired two missiles but missed the target. It then pursued the vehicle, firing two more missiles almost 10 minutes later. It hit the pickup truck as it passed near a house in Hasukhel on the Khaisura road.

Seven people on the pickup truck were killed immediately. The pickup truck was completely destroyed and the bodies of those on board were blown to pieces. All of those killed were Yemeni Arabs, according to Taliban sources. They were secretly laid to rest in a graveyard in Miranshah. There are no further details of their names and ages. Foreign militants usually use different code names.

The house was also slightly damaged and four people were injured, three children and a woman. All were taken to the public Tehsil Hospital in Mir Ali where they were given treatment and survived. The house was located close to the same mosque where drones struck on May 24.

June 3 2012

Two Taliban commanders and their men were targeted as they visited the village of Gangikhel in North Waziristan to attend ritual funeral prayers for a relative killed in an earlier drone strike. CIA drone operators may not have been aware of the planned prayers,

which had not yet begun. Despite early claims that the two commanders were killed, the Bureau's research finds that both men survived with serious injuries. Nobody was killed, Yusufzai found.

Yusufzai report: At 9.30am on June 2, two men identified as Amanullah and Jalil Mahsud were on their way to Wana's Rustam bazaar by motorbike when a drone attacked. One missile missed but the second hit, killing both men. They were laid to rest in the Gangikhel tribal graveyard.

Amanullah, who belonged to the Gangikhel sub-tribe of Ahmadzai Wazir, was a senior Taliban commander affiliated with Maulvi Nazir's group, operating in South Waziristan's administrative town of Wana, in Azam Warsak and in the Shakai valley. He was also the brother of Commander Malang, a senior figure in Nazir's group.

The following day Commander Malang travelled to Gangikhel village to offer *fateha* or condolence for his brother. Tribal elders and well-wishers advised Malang not to stay in the village as it was dangerous to both him and to other people coming to pay their condolences, since they believed there was a risk of further drone strikes. Malang moved instead to the nearby village of Wocha Dana. Some of his close friends, including fellow commander Ghulam Khan, still wished to see him and offer *fateha* to him. When Khan arrived, Malang came out to receive him and other guests.

Just as they met on the bank of a dry seasonal stream a drone fired two missiles at them, striking two cars and a double-cabin pickup truck. Both Malang and Khan immediately jumped into a pool in the seasonal stream. Each suffered injuries to his legs and face while four other fighters (two from the Ahmadzai Wazir tribe and two Mahsud tribesmen) were seriously injured.

The four fighters – three named as Dawa Khan Wazir, Nek Amal Khan Wazir and Said Rasool Wazir – were taken to the Agency Headquarters Hospital in Wana, while Malang and Ghulam Khan were brought to a private health facility in the same town due to security concerns, according to a prominent tribal elder of the Ahmadzai Wazir, speaking on condition of anonymity.

June 4 2012

What appears to have been a complex CIA attack ultimately resulted in the death of al Qaeda's second-in-command, Yahya al-Libi. Despite US claims that only al-Libi died in the attack, Bureau research appears to corroborate multiple accounts indicating that at as many as 16 people, all alleged militants, died in several linked strikes. The attack is also reported to have targeted rescuers. Yet according to a report in the Los Angeles Times, Congressional oversight committee staffers were [only shown video](#) of al-Libi's death. A CIA spokesman told the Bureau: 'The CIA takes its commitment to Congressional oversight with the utmost seriousness. The Agency provides accurate and timely information consistent with our obligation to the oversight Committees. Any accusation alleging otherwise is baseless.'

Yusufzai report: Once again drones targeted a suspected militant hideout in Hasukhel village, 4km west of Mir Ali. It was around 4am when a drone fired two missiles at a mud-built house, comprising of two small rooms and a verandah. Five people were killed and four others injured in the first attack. A car and two motorbikes parked inside the house compound were also damaged.

About 10 minutes later around 12 people, including Arabs, Turkmen and local tribesmen, arrived to start rescue work. They were collecting body parts of slain people and pulling out the injured from the debris when two drones arrived and started flying over the village.

After 20 minutes a drone fired two more missiles and targeted those helping the victims. Ten more people involved in the rescue work died. These included Arabs, Turkmen and displaced members of the Mahsud tribe, only some of them confirmed militants.

Al-Qaeda's number two Abu Yahya al-Libi was observing the rescue operation when he too came under missile attack. He was standing along with four others a little distance away when a drone missile hit them.

Tribal sources also said six people were seriously injured. They were taken to Mir Ali hospital but were shifted to Peshawar for advanced treatment. Local villagers say only four of those killed were laid to rest in the local graveyard and they were not aware of where the remaining victims were buried.

June 14 2012

The Bureau can find no evidence to support a claimed double-tap strike in Miranshah. Instead, one individual died on the building's roof, in what Yusufzai's sources describe as a highly precise attack that caused minimal structural damage.

Yusufzai report: As usual in summer, there was a severe power outage in Miranshah town and other parts of North Waziristan. A senior Arab commander, commonly known as the Sheikh among foreign fighters for his age and experience in making improvised explosive devices (IEDs), arrived from Quetta, the capital of Balochistan. He arrived in the evening, along with four other colleagues, two Arabs and two Punjabi militants belonging to Lashkar-e-Jhangvi.

The men were tired and wanted to go to bed early. After eating dinner on the ground floor, his four colleagues decided to sleep in the first floor, while the Sheikh decided to sleep on the third floor in the open air since it was so hot. Taliban sources said that at around 2am (on June 15), a drone fired two missiles and hit him while he slept.

'It was one of the strangest attacks so far carried out by drones here. The entire building remained safe and it didn't even cause damage to the rooftop where he was sleeping,' according to the tribal elder who owned the building. He had rented it out to tribal militants to use as a *hujra* or male guesthouse.

Other tribal sources and Pakistani Taliban close to foreign fighters said body parts of the slain man were later recovered from adjoining buildings. The site where he was targeted is close to the Agency Headquarters Hospital in Miranshah.

Despite claims by others of multiple deaths and a destroyed building, I am adamant of my findings. I went back to my sources among the Taliban, tribesmen and security officials. All are unanimous that only one person, believed to be an Arab national, was killed in the attack. The building remains intact.

July 6 2012

A group of alleged militants was targeted and killed as they ate dinner with local tribesmen

(another nearby mixed group who were praying were not attacked). After waiting 30 minutes, rescue work commenced. CIA drones then returned to the attack, killing 12 additional men, including three local brothers. In sharp contrast, an anonymous US official claimed that the target was an explosives-laden truck. (A separate investigation by legal charity [Reprieve](#) also found evidence that rescuers were targeted, with indications that civilians may have died.)

Yusufzai report: At around 7.40pm some people believed to be militants were invited by local tribesmen to dinner. Zeewai village near Dattakhel in North Waziristan is home to militant leader Hafiz Gul Bahadur. He is considered 'good Taliban' for his pledge not to attack Pakistani security forces. But he also sends fighters across the border in Afghanistan to kill US and Nato troops, and is regularly targeted by the CIA.

As a group of men sat eating their dinner in the open air in the walled building they were attacked by a drone. Another nearby group offering their *Magreb* or evening prayers were not attacked.

About 30 minutes later when they could no longer hear any drones, they and some other tribesmen went back and started rescue work. Twenty minutes after they began their rescue work they heard the sound of a drone. They were discussing what to do when they were attacked again. Twelve more people, including two Arabs, four Wazir tribesmen and six Dawar tribesmen were killed, while five others sustained serious injuries.

The bodies of the local tribesmen were taken to Miranshah and Mir Ali the next day and laid to rest in ancestral graveyards. Three were real brothers of the Dawar tribe and came from Naurak village. They were buried in the village graveyard on the Bannu-Miranshah road on July 7.

The injured were taken to the Agency Headquarters Hospital in Miranshah. A senior doctor managing the casualty department said that all of the wounded had suffered multiple burn injuries and required specialised treatment and plastic surgery. Pleading anonymity, he said most drone victims don't survive, as the hospital lacks proper facilities and qualified surgeons.

Reprieve findings: Independently of the Bureau, legal charity Reprieve also carried out a field investigation into the two reported strikes on rescuers in July 2012. Based on eyewitness reports, Reprieve named eight civilians it said were killed in the July 6 attack. It names them as:

- 1) Salay Khan
- 2) Mir Jahan Gul
- 3) Allah Mir Khan
- 4) Noor Bhadshah Khan
- 5) Mir Gull Jan
- 6) Batkai Jan
- 7) Gallop Haji Jan
- 8) Gull Saeed Khan

July 23 2012

An initial attack on a house in Dre Nishtar in the Shawal valley killed five alleged militants. Local villagers may have refused to assist in aid work because they feared an attack. Those involved in the rescue were then deliberately targeted, with a further seven killed and eight injured. (A separate investigation by legal charity Reprieve also found evidence that rescuers were targeted, with indications that civilians may have died.)

Yusufzai report: Dre Nashtar village is located in the remote and mountainous Shawal Valley, which is mostly covered by dense forests. It's about 110km southwest of Miranshah, where militants from all over the world as well as Pakistan and Afghanistan have established sanctuaries. At 8.20 in the evening a drone fired two missiles and struck a small house. Militants from Punjab province in Pakistan, usually known as Punjabi Taliban, were residing there. Five people were killed and three others were injured.

About 20 minutes later, other Punjabis arrived to carry out rescue work. 'Some of them said they should not go there for the rescue work because drones were still flying over the area, but others told them if they had to wait for the drones to disappear it would take hours and the injured would die of their injuries', Pakistani Taliban present in the Shawal valley told this correspondent during the investigation. They began their rescue work, but drones then fired two more missiles. Seven more people were killed and eight others were injured in this second attack.

'Instead of saving the injured of the first attack, they lost their own lives. All of them belonged to the Punjab but were laid to rest the next day in Shawal. One of the rescuers left behind a widow and four children – three daughters and a son,' the Taliban commander said.

Original sources

International news agencies, along with credible Pakistani media, initially reported the strikes, indicating the targeting of worshippers and rescuers. These were the starting point for the Bureau's own investigation.

Date	Original claim	Sources	Bureau finding
May 24 2012	Permanent mosque bombed in Kassokhel, North Waziristan, killing worshippers. Nearby house may have been intended target.	AFP , Channel 4 News , The News , Kuna , Pakistan Today , BBC	Confirms attack on mosque and reports targeting of rescuers at scene
May 28 2012	Reported as two attacks 30 minutes apart on house in Kassokhel.	AFP , Express Tribune	Attack appears to have been on moving vehicle which was pursued. Civilians injured when nearby house struck.

June 3 2012	Reported as fatal attack on Pakistan Taliban commanders attending ritual funeral prayers for relative killed in prior drone strike.	Daily Mail , Express Tribune , The News , The Nation (Pakistan) , Associated Press , AFP	Confirms gathering was for funeral prayers. No deaths indicated.
June 4 2012	Complex strike which ultimately killed Al Qaeda's number two but which also reportedly targeted rescuers. Anonymous US official insists only Yahya al-Libi died.	BBC , Washington Post , PTI , New York Times , CNN , ABC News , Guardian , New York Times , Los Angeles Times , The News ,	Confirmed. Triple strike kills Yahya al Libi but also targets rescuers at the scene - evidence possibly withheld from Congress.
June 14 2012	Reported as rescuer strike on destroyed building in Miran Shah, North Waziristan.	AFP , Xinhua , The News	Not supported. Only one individual killed; building intact. No rescuer strike.
July 6 2012	Reported as high-casualty attack on building. Some sources reported rescuers were targeted. But anonymous US official said strike was on a truck packed with explosives.	Al Jazeera (AFP) , The News , Dawn , CNN , TIME	Confirms attack also struck rescuers at the scene, killing 16 people in total. Two 'Arabs' among dead.
July 23 2012	An attack on the Shawal valley aimed at Taliban commander Sadiq Noor reportedly killed up to 14 people, including possibly civilians. One source reports rescuer attack.	The News	Confirmed as an attack on rescuers

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