

Drone Warfare in Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia. Surge in CIA Strikes

ANALYSIS Counting the cost of US drones: Local wars killing local people

By [Jack Serle](#)

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As the Bureau revealed recently, the accidental killing of American Warren Weinstein and Italian Giorgio Lo Porto by the CIA in January now means [at least 38 Westerners have been killed](#) by covert US drones in Pakistan, Somalia and Yemen.

Yet, as a major analysis of the nationalities killed by such strikes shows, this figure is just 1.6% of the total dead who the Bureau has established their country or region of origin.

There have now been 515 US drone strikes in Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia since 2002, killing at least 2,887 people. Of those, the Bureau has been able to determine where 2,353 came from. They include Moroccans, Kenyans and Syrians – drawn from 34 countries in all.

The majority however came from the country they died in. More than 60% of those killed in Pakistan were reportedly from Pakistan. More than 80% of those killed in Yemen were reportedly Yemenis. For Somalia, information about the dead is more limited, but where the Bureau has been able to find details, 45% of those killed were Somali.

This data is not in itself surprising - experts have told the Bureau the majority of armed groups in these countries are made up of local people.

But the how much the local populations have been in the drones' firing line had hitherto not been quantified. The Bureau compiled this data in conjunction with [Chris Woods](#) for his new book [Sudden Justice: America's Secret Drone War](#).

This demonstrates the extent to which Pakistan the US has been hitting the insurgents who have used the country's tribal areas as a safe-haven from which to launch attacks on US and allied troops in Afghanistan. In Yemen, the US has been fighting with the government on one side of a complicated civil war.

Pakistan



Pakistan

Yemen



Yemen

The civilian toll from all CIA strikes in Pakistan also falls on the local population. Of the minimum 423 civilians reported killed, three have been clearly identified as coming from outside the Central Asian region. Lo Porto and Weinstein were Westerners, and Umm al Shaymah was the Egyptian wife of al Qaeda terrorist Mustafa Abu Yazid. Al Shaymah's three daughters were also killed in the attack though it is not clear if they were born in Egypt or Pakistan.

Details on many of the dead is difficult to come by. For example, the Bureau's Naming the Dead project has over two years painstakingly pieced together information on the dead in Pakistan – but it has only named 721 of at least 2,449 people killed.

The [CIA itself also has an incomplete understanding of who has been killed](#) in its strikes. Leaked Agency records of its attacks in Pakistan show nearly one in four strikes killed “other militants” whom the CIA could not identify either by name or group affiliation. The data also shows the CIA records estimates of casualties in ranges, reflecting uncertainty in the total number of people killed, not just the identity.

The gaps in the CIA's data could stem from its use of tactics like signature strikes.

Signature strikes kill people not based on their identity but on a pattern of life analysis – an intelligence assessment built up over prolonged surveillance. There is considerable scope for error in these kinds of attacks. [The January 15 attack that killed Lo Porto and Weinstein was a signature strike](#). After days of surveillance of the house they were held in, the CIA determined four unidentified al Qaeda members were inside. The CIA knew it had made a mistake when six bodies were removed from the structure.

Controversial Tactics

The high proportion of Pakistanis among the drone dead could be a consequence of other controversial CIA tactics.

The CIA's targeting policies have taken their toll on the Pakistani population of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (Fata), even when the drones were not aiming at a local target. [On October 30 2006 drones destroyed a madrassa](#) in Bajaur agency. The target was reportedly Ayman al Zawahiri, Osama Bin Laden's Egyptian deputy. The strike missed him but killed at least 79 Pakistani civilians, most of them children.

The high number of Pakistanis and people from Afghanistan and Uzbekistan reportedly killed by drones could also demonstrate how the US has expanded its range of drone targets in the country. The early strikes were intended for two groups: al Qaeda terrorists the CIA was gunning for, and Pakistani terrorists who Islamabad wanted dead.

[According to the New York Times](#), Pakistan and the CIA came to an agreement before the drone campaign began. The US could take out its al Qaeda targets if it also killed Pakistan's enemies.

Since 2004, the strikes appear to have taken their toll on the traditionally Arab membership of al Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan. The Bureau has recorded at least 107 people killed by drones in Pakistan who reportedly came from Middle Eastern, or north and east African

countries such as Egypt, Libya and Sudan. A further 116 people were simply described as “Arabs”.

The first drone strike in June 2004 killed [Nek Mohammed, a Pakistani militant](#) who defied the Pakistani military and forced the army into a humiliating ceasefire two months before his death. [The second strike, in May 2005](#), took out Haitham al Yemeni – an al Qaeda explosives expert from Yemen.

Documents reviewed by [McClatchy news agency confirmed a secret deal between US and Pakistani officials](#) ensured the CIA and its Pakistani counterpart the ISI worked together to kill both countries’ enemies.

The rate of strikes increased during the Obama administration as did the number of casualties and the number of Arabs among them. With the number of veteran al Qaeda fighters dwindling, a “deep bench” of terrorists from Pakistani and Central Asian terrorist groups stepped up to replace them, [an unnamed US intelligence official told the Long War Journal](#) in 2012.

Total killed, and their country or region of origin, from US drone strikes in Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia							
Pakistan	1,370	US	10	China	4	Morocco	2
Yemen	175	Libya	8	Jordan	4	Tunisia	1
Uzbekistan	138	UK	8	Syria	4	Sudan	1
“Pashtun”	136	Germany	7	“Africa”	3	Belgium or Swiss	1
“Arab”	119	Turkey	6	Tajikistan	3	Palestine	1
Afghanistan	90	Kuwait	6	Algeria	3	Lebanon	1
“Foreign”	86	Iraq	6	Australia	3	Russia (Chechen)	1
“Central Asia”	73	Somalia	6	Spain	2	Bahrain	1
Egypt	29	Kenya	5	Iran	2	Italy	1
Saudi Arabia	28	“Western”	4	Canada	2	–	–

The number of Arab fighters fell “dramatically” after around 2009 when US drone strikes and Pakistani military offensives took their toll on al Qaeda’s ranks, Rahimullah Yusufzai, a Pakistani journalist and expert on armed groups in the Fata, told the Bureau

There was a significant population of Arabs in the Fata, Yusufzai continued. “But numbers have gone down drastically... I don’t think that there would be more than 200.”

Fewer young Arab men are following the traditional path to Pakistan to fight in Afghanistan, he said. “It is not easy [to] come here and stay here. There is better security, better controls at the airport [and] on the borders.”

This leaves the veterans “who are living here for years, who can’t go back, who are most wanted. So they are here moving back and forth across the border between [Afghanistan

and Pakistan].”

According to US administration officials from President Obama down, Washington uses its drones to hunt “al Qaeda and associated forces”.

This vague phrasing is believed to include the various factions. These include those Pakistan as a haven while fighting with the insurgency in Afghanistan, such as the Haqqani Network and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, and groups set against the Pakistani state, including the Pakistan Taliban and Lashkar e Jangvi.

The CIA’s own data demonstrates it has targeted a wider array of armed groups than just al Qaeda.

In 2013, the [McClatchy news agency published a leaked section of the CIA’s internal drone strike record](#) of attacks and casualties in a 12-month period leading up to September 2011. It shows that nearly half the strikes in that period “hit groups other than al Qaeda, including the Haqqani network, several Pakistani Taliban factions.” It also shows “the CIA killed people who only were suspected, associated with, or who probably belonged to militant groups.”

These organisations comprise Pakistanis, Afghans and Uzbeks. They are the largest groupings of fighters by nationality, according to Yousufzai, and it is unsurprising there are so many of them listed in the Bureau’s data.

Pakistanis make up nearly two-thirds of those people killed by drones in Pakistan, according to Bureau research. This figure rises to 72% when people from the wider region – those described as Uzbeks, Central Asian or Pashtun – are included.

The lower frequency of strikes in the early years of the drone war demonstrates some constraint on the campaign. However in 2008 President Bush gave the CIA greater freedom in its strikes in Pakistan – including giving them permission to specifically target westerners, as revealed by Woods.

A Surge in CIA Strikes

This leeway from the White House precipitated a surge in CIA strikes in the second half of 2008. This continued in 2009 before the CIA stepped up the intensity again in 2010.

In December 2009 the Pakistan Taliban and al Qaeda sent a suicide bomber to Camp Chapman, a CIA base in Khost province, Afghanistan. The attack left seven CIA personnel dead. After the bombing, the CIA’s “shackles were unleashed” [according to an unnamed intelligence official](#). “The CIA went to war,” another official said, adding: “The White House stood back.”

The US carried out 128 drone strikes in Pakistan that year, 23 in September alone, the peak of the drone war. At least 755 people were killed, 89 of them reportedly civilians. At least 510 of the dead were said to be from Pakistan or elsewhere in Central Asia – at least 72 of them civilians.

In Yemen the US has hit proportionally more local people than in Pakistan. The Bureau however has only managed to determine place of origin for 179 of the minimum 436 people killed by drones there. This partial picture shows more than four fifths of them were Yemeni which fits with the established understanding of the make-up of al Qaeda in the Arabian

Peninsula (AQAP).

It was formed in 2007 from an amalgamation of veterans from al Qaeda groups based in Yemen and Saudi Arabia. It has largely retained this composition, Yemen expert and BuzzFeed's writer-at-large Gregory Johnsen told the Bureau. "They have an international aspect but certainly the vast majority of the organisation continues to be Yemeni and then Saudi."

Who exactly is a member of AQAP has always been hard to determine in Yemen, not least because AQAP has formed alliances of convenience with various Yemeni tribes. In the past, the tribes would side with al Qaeda in their fight against the central government in Sanaa. Now, the tribes have united with fellow Sunnis in AQAP against the Shia Houthi rebels who have swept through Yemen in the past six months, ousting the president into exile.

"Membership in this group, and particularly now given the fluid situation on the ground in Yemen, is really really hard to determine," says Johnsen.

"It is hard to determine who are fighters who are local fighters in Yemen who are joining and affiliating with al Qaeda only as a way to, say, combat the Houthis, and who are members who are joining with the organisation in a way that accepts wholeheartedly their ideology both the national and what al Qaeda would call the transnational Jihad."

Throughout all, the US has supported the government in Sanaa which has strongly supported Washington's counter-terrorism efforts in Yemen. [As one US official said in April 2012](#), this has led the US into a complicated conflict: "I think there is the potential that we would be perceived as taking sides in a civil war."

This was echoed by a former [senior US Department of Defence official who told Woods](#): "I am not convinced that what we are doing in Yemen makes sense either politically or even that we're striking the right people... You get more of a sense that we may be involved in a local conflict more than a global conflict."

The US took sides in a civil war in Somalia when it backed an Ethiopian invasion of Somalia, ostensibly aimed at crushing al Shabaab. The group had become the dominant force in the country. Since 2007 the US has provided air strikes and intelligence support to various African countries that have sent troops to the Horn of Africa to support the government in Mogadishu.

The Bureau's data on drone strikes in Somalia is limited because of the difficulties in obtaining information in a country racked by decades of conflict. The Bureau has the nationality of 12 of at least 23 people killed with drones in Somalia.

Eight are from Somalia or Kenya which is generally consistent with the structure of the group, according to Dr Stig Jarle Hansen, associate professor of international relations at the Norwegian University of Life Science.

It is now 13 years since the US started its covert drone wars and it is clear its targets have expanded beyond al Qaeda. It is also clear that the local men who make up these other targeted entities have been hit more than anyone. The US still fighting the Taliban in Afghanistan and AQAP looks set to exploit the calamitous situation in Yemen. With CIA director [John Brennan warning an audience in Washington](#) the war on terror could continue indefinitely it is inevitable the death toll among local communities will rise.

Data for this investigation came in part from the Bureau's [Naming the Dead project](#) which is supported by [Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust](#).

Visualisation by [Krystina Shveda](#)

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