

Living Under Drones

By [Global Research News](#)

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Theme: [Crimes against Humanity](#),
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Executive Summary and Recommendations

In the United States, the dominant narrative about the use of drones in Pakistan is of a surgically precise and effective tool that makes the US safer by enabling “targeted killing” of terrorists, with minimal downsides or collateral impacts.^[1]

This narrative is false.

Following nine months of intensive research—including two investigations in Pakistan, more than 130 interviews with victims, witnesses, and experts, and review of thousands of pages of documentation and media reporting—this report presents evidence of the damaging and counterproductive effects of current US drone strike policies. Based on extensive interviews with Pakistanis living in the regions directly affected, as well as humanitarian and medical workers, this report provides new and firsthand testimony about the negative impacts US policies are having on the civilians living under drones.

Real threats to US security and to Pakistani civilians exist in the Pakistani border areas now targeted by drones. It is crucial that the US be able to protect itself from terrorist threats, and that the great harm caused by terrorists to Pakistani civilians be addressed. However, in light of significant evidence of harmful impacts to Pakistani civilians and to US interests, current policies to address terrorism through targeted killings and drone strikes must be carefully re-evaluated.

It is essential that public debate about US policies take the negative effects of current policies into account.

First, while civilian casualties are rarely acknowledged by the US government, there is significant evidence that US drone strikes have injured and killed civilians. In public statements, the US states that there have been “no” or “single digit” civilian casualties.”^[2] It is difficult to obtain data on strike casualties because of US efforts to shield the drone

program from democratic accountability, compounded by the obstacles to independent investigation of strikes in North Waziristan. The best currently available public aggregate data on drone strikes are provided by *The Bureau of Investigative Journalism (TBIJ)*, an independent journalist organization. *TBIJ* reports that from June 2004 through mid-September 2012, available data indicate that drone strikes killed 2,562-3,325 people in Pakistan, of whom 474-881 were civilians, including 176 children.^[3] *TBIJ* reports that these strikes also injured an additional 1,228-1,362 individuals. Where media accounts do report civilian casualties, rarely is any information provided about the victims or the communities they leave behind. This report includes the harrowing narratives of many survivors, witnesses, and family members who provided evidence of civilian injuries and deaths in drone strikes to our research team. It also presents detailed accounts of three separate strikes, for which there is evidence of civilian deaths and injuries, including a March 2011 strike on a meeting of tribal elders that killed some 40 individuals.

Second, US drone strike policies cause considerable and under-accounted-for harm to the daily lives of ordinary civilians, beyond death and physical injury. Drones hover twenty-four hours a day over communities in northwest Pakistan, striking homes, vehicles, and public spaces without warning. Their presence terrorizes men, women, and children, giving rise to anxiety and psychological trauma among civilian communities. Those living under drones have to face the constant worry that a deadly strike may be fired at any moment, and the knowledge that they are powerless to protect themselves. These fears have affected behavior. The US practice of striking one area multiple times, and evidence that it has killed rescuers, makes both community members and humanitarian workers afraid or unwilling to assist injured victims. Some community members shy away from gathering in groups, including important tribal dispute-resolution bodies, out of fear that they may attract the attention of drone operators. Some parents choose to keep their children home, and children injured or traumatized by strikes have dropped out of school. Waziris told our researchers that the strikes have undermined cultural and religious practices related to burial, and made family members afraid to attend funerals. In addition, families who lost loved ones or their homes in drone strikes now struggle to support themselves.

Third, publicly available evidence that the strikes have made the US safer overall is ambiguous at best. The strikes have certainly killed alleged combatants and disrupted armed actor networks. However, serious concerns about the efficacy and counter-productive nature of drone strikes have been raised. The number of “high-level” targets killed as a percentage of total casualties is extremely low—estimated at just 2%.^[4] Furthermore, evidence suggests that US strikes have facilitated recruitment to violent non-state armed groups, and motivated further violent attacks. As the *New York Times* has reported, “drones have replaced Guantánamo as the recruiting tool of choice for militants.”^[5] Drone strikes have also soured many Pakistanis on cooperation with the US and undermined US-Pakistani relations. One major study shows that 74% of Pakistanis now consider the US an enemy.^[6]

Fourth, current US targeted killings and drone strike practices undermine respect for the rule of law and international legal protections and may set dangerous precedents. This report casts doubt on the legality of strikes on individuals or groups not linked to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2011, and who do not pose imminent threats to the US. The US government’s failure to ensure basic transparency and accountability in its targeted killing policies, to provide necessary details about its targeted killing program, or adequately to set out the legal factors involved in decisions to strike hinders necessary democratic

debate about a key aspect of US foreign and national security policy. US practices may also facilitate recourse to lethal force around the globe by establishing dangerous precedents for other governments. As drone manufacturers and officials successfully reduce export control barriers, and as more countries develop lethal drone technologies, these risks increase.

In light of these concerns, this report recommends that the US conduct a fundamental re-evaluation of current targeted killing practices, taking into account all available evidence, the concerns of various stakeholders, and the short and long-term costs and benefits. A significant rethinking of current US targeted killing and drone strike policies is long overdue. US policy-makers, and the American public, cannot continue to ignore evidence of the civilian harm and counter-productive impacts of US targeted killings and drone strikes in Pakistan.

This report also supports and reiterates the calls consistently made by rights groups and others for legality, accountability, and transparency in US drone strike policies:

- The US should fulfill its international obligations with respect to accountability and transparency, and ensure proper democratic debate about key policies. The US should:
 - Release the US Department of Justice memoranda outlining the legal basis for US targeted killing in Pakistan;
 - Make public critical information concerning US drone strike policies, including as previously and repeatedly requested by various groups and officials:[\[7\]](#) the targeting criteria for so-called “signature” strikes; the mechanisms in place to ensure that targeting complies with international law; which laws are being applied; the nature of investigations into civilian death and injury; and mechanisms in place to track, analyze and publicly recognize civilian casualties;[\[8\]](#)
 - Ensure independent investigations into drone strike deaths, consistent with the call made by Ben Emmerson, UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism in August 2012;[\[9\]](#)
 - In conjunction with robust investigations and, where appropriate, prosecutions, establish compensation programs for civilians harmed by US strikes in Pakistan.
- The US should fulfill its international humanitarian and human rights law obligations with respect to the use of force, including by not using lethal force against individuals who are not members of armed groups with whom the US is in an armed conflict, or otherwise against individuals not posing an imminent threat to life. This includes not double-striking targets as first responders arrive.
 - Journalists and media outlets should cease the common practice of referring simply to “militant” deaths, without further explanation. All reporting of government accounts of “militant” deaths should include acknowledgment that the US government counts all adult males killed by strikes as “militants,” absent exonerating evidence. Media accounts relying on anonymous government sources should also highlight the fact of their single-source information and of the past record of false government reports.

[1] The US publicly describes its drone program in terms of its unprecedented ability to “distinguish ... effectively between an al Qaeda terrorist and innocent civilians,” and touts its missile-armed drones as capable of conducting strikes with “astonishing” and “surgical” precision. See, e.g., John O. Brennan, Assistant to the President for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism, *The Efficacy and Ethics of U.S. Counterterrorism Strategy*, Remarks at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars (Apr. 30, 2012), available at <http://www.wilsoncenter.org/event/the-efficacy-and-ethics-us-counterterrorism-strategy>.

[2] See *Obama Administration Counterterrorism Strategy* (C-Span television broadcast June 29, 2011), <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/AdministrationCo>; see also *Strategic Considerations*, *infra* Chapter 5: *Strategic Considerations*; *Contradictions Chart*, *infra* Appendix C.

[3] *Covert War on Terror*, The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, <http://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/category/projects/drones/> (last visited Sept. 12, 2012).

[4] Peter Bergen & Megan Braun, *Drone is Obama’s Weapon of Choice*, CNN (Sept. 6, 2012), <http://www.cnn.com/2012/09/05/opinion/bergen-obama-drone/index.html>.

[5] Jo Becker & Scott Shane, *Secret ‘Kill List’ Proves a Test of Obama’s Principles and Will*, N.Y. Times (May 29, 2012), <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/29/world/obamas-leadership-in-war-on-al-qaeda.html?pagewanted=all>.

[6] Pew Research Center, *Pakistani Public Opinion Ever More Critical of U.S.: 74% Call America an Enemy* (2012), available at <http://www.pewglobal.org/files/2012/06/Pew-Global-Attitudes-Project-Pakistan-Report-FINAL-Wednesday-June-27-2012.pdf>.

[7] See, e.g., Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, *Study on Targeted Killings*, Human Rights Council, UN Doc. A/HRC/14/24/Add.6 (May 28, 2010) (by Philip Alston), available at <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/docs/14session/A.HRC.14.24.Add6.pdf>; *US: Transfer CIA Drone Strikes to Military*, Human Rights Watch (Apr. 20, 2012), <http://www.hrw.org/news/2012/04/20/us-transfer-cia-drone-strikes-military>; Letter from Amnesty International et al. to Barack Obama, President of the United States (May 31, 2012), available at <http://www.justforeignpolicy.org/node/1242>.

[8] Letter from Amnesty International et al., *supra* note 7.

[9] Terri Judd, *UN ‘Should Hand Over Footage of Drone Strikes or Face UN Inquiry’*, Independent (Aug. 20, 2012), <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/us-should-hand-over-footage-of-drone-strikes-or-face-un-inquiry-8061504.html>.

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