

Manipulating the Data on CIA Drone Strikes against Civilians: Leaked Pakistani Document contradicts US Accounts

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A secret Pakistani government document contradicts several of the US's rare public statements on the CIA's drone strikes in Pakistan.

The document outlines over 300 drone strikes dating between 2006 and September 2013. It is compiled by local officials using a network of on-the-ground agents and informants reporting to the FATA Secretariat, the tribal administration.

It is the fullest official record of the covert campaign yet to emerge, providing the dates, precise times and exact locations of drone strikes, as well as casualty estimates. The document abruptly stops routinely recording civilian casualties after the start of 2009, but overall casualty estimates continue to be comparable to independent estimates such as those compiled by the Bureau.



The US description of Yahya al Libi's death differs from the version in the Pakistani document.

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Neither US nor Pakistani officials routinely acknowledge strikes or provide estimates of casualties. But occasionally the US's view of individual strikes emerges - usually through an anonymous official quoted in a mainstream media outlet.

The secret document shows that Pakistani officials sometimes filed a rather different assessment from the US's occasional public statements.

For example, in June 2012, the CIA launched the latest in a series of attempts to kill Abu Yahya al Libi, al Qaeda's second-in-command. Congressional aides [told Los Angeles Times reporter Ken Dilanian](#) that after the strike, the CIA showed video of the strike to politicians who are charged with overseeing the drone programme. This showed a missile killing 'just one person' - al Libi.

But contemporaneous media reports, as well as later field investigations by [Amnesty International](#) and the [Bureau](#), found a far higher casualty toll. These found that the attack was a sequence of three strikes, including an [attack on rescuers](#). Amnesty found that 10-16

died in total. Six were civilians who had come to rescue the injured after the initial blast.

A named CIA spokesman strongly rejected the allegation that lawmakers might have been shown only partial footage of the strike, calling the claim 'baseless'. But the Pakistan government document records 10 deaths.

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The Pakistani document also contradicts the US account of a strike in 2011. Drones attacked a large gathering of men who had gathered in a public space in Dattakhel one morning in March 2011. The Pakistani government was quick to protest that the attack had killed tribal elders who had gathered for a jirga – a traditional form of mediation.

US officials speaking on condition of anonymity have poured scorn on this claim. 'These people weren't gathering for a bake sale. They were terrorists,' one [told the New York Times](#) the day after the strike.

The New York Times later [published](#) the results of the Bureau's first [field investigation](#) into drones, naming 19 individuals killed in this strike. An unnamed US official who briefed the paper continued to insist the dead men were legitimate targets.

'The fact is that a large group of heavily armed men, some of whom were clearly connected to al Qaeda and all of whom acted in a manner consistent with AQ-linked militants, were killed,' he said.

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The leaked Pakistani document stops regularly recording civilian casualties in January 2009, but occasionally uses ambiguous language that suggests non-combatants were among the dead. For this strike, the document appears to privately echo what the Pakistani government was already saying in public: 'The attack was carried out on a jirga and it is feared that all the killed were local tribesmen.'

A US official, speaking on condition of anonymity, told the Bureau yesterday: 'While we will not be commenting on the details or locations of purported counterterrorism operations, there is a wide gap between US assessments of civilian casualties and non-governmental assessments.'

He added: 'There is no credible information to substantiate claims that US counterterrorism actions have resulted in the deaths of hundreds of innocent civilians, but there are parties interested in spreading such disinformation.'

In the case of the jirga strike, multiple [international organisations](#) – including a field investigation by [Associated Press](#) – have identified civilian casualties, and Pakistan's army chief [complained](#) about a high civilian death toll. The case has been used as a basis for a [complaint](#) to the UN Human Rights Council and a [legal challenge](#) in England.

The US government has protested over the claims of civilian casualties but has never indicated who it was targeting.

The same New York Times article contains a third example. The anonymous official rejected the Bureau's description of a separate strike, on December 6 2010.

Journalists reported that a drone fired on a vehicle carrying three alleged militants as it drove through the village of Khushali. 'The sources say one militant was able to escape from the car and hide inside a nearby shop. The drone then fired two more missiles at the shop killing the militant, as well as two civilians inside,' CNN [reported](#).

Presented with this finding, the unnamed official told the New York Times: 'There were two strikes that day, and neither matches the claim. One targeted a car, killing two militants who had visited several Al Qaeda compounds that day; the other killed a handful of militants, including a top AQ [al Qaeda] terrorist.'

But again the document appears to contradict this, noting: 'At about 1840 hours US Drone carried out missile strike at a shop in village Khushali Tori Khel, Tehsil Mirali, North Waziristan Agency'.

Chris Woods, who ran the Bureau's drones project at the time and is now writing a book about armed drones, said: 'When the Bureau first challenged CIA claims of zero drone civilian casualties in 2011, anonymous US officials used the New York Times to disparage some of its findings. An official denied, for example, that a shop had deliberately been targeted in December 2010. This secret FATA document, never intended for public release, indicates that a shop was indeed hit that day.'

He continued: 'The CIA's ongoing role in the Pakistan drone campaign appears to be the greatest obstacle to much-needed transparency in cases such as this.'

The US official told the Bureau: 'US counter-terrorism operations are precise, lawful, and effective. The United States takes extraordinary care to make sure that its counterterrorism actions are in accordance with all applicable domestic and international law, and that they are consistent with US values and policy.'

But other observers criticised the US policy of releasing information through selective leaks rather than a more routine disclosure policy.

Mustafa Qadri, the Amnesty International researcher who investigated strikes for the organisation's report, Will I Be Next?, said: 'Ultimately the US bears primary responsibility for disclosing the full extent of its drone program, the facts about how many have been killed and the factual and legal basis for these deaths.'

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