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Targeted Killings of Civilians: Media and Public Perceptions on the Use of Armed Drones

Flawed questions undermine new UK drone poll data

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[Drone Wars UK](#)

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Today the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) and the University of Surrey's Centre for International Intervention (cii) have published [Hitting the Target? How New Capabilities are Shaping International Intervention](#). The report examines the technological, ethical and legal issues of unmanned warfare; a detailed assessment of targeted killing as a strategy as well as issues of media and public perceptions of the use of armed drones. I shall write more on this report after I have had the chance to read it properly.

What requires an immediate response however is the new polling data examining the attitude of the British public towards the use of armed drones. While some of the data is useful, unfortunately some of it is also skewed because of badly worded questions.   For example, the poll asks:

> ["It was recently reported that the UK Government might be passing information to US authorities to help them carry out missile strikes from unmanned aircraft called "drones" to kill known terrorists overseas in countries like Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia. To what extent, if at all, would you support or oppose the UK Government assisting in a drone missile strike to kill a known terrorist overseas?"](#)

The response is that 55% of those polled either strongly supported or tended towards supporting such strikes. The reality however is that strikes in Pakistan are taking place not against "known terrorist" but against "suspected" militants or insurgents. The use of the word 'terrorist' and 'known' rather than 'suspected' hugely undermines the resulting data from this question.

Elsewhere the poll asks

> "To what extent, if at all, would you support or oppose the UK Government assisting in a drone missile strike to kill a known terrorist overseas if it were guaranteed that no innocent civilians would be killed by that drone strike?"

67% of those polled either strongly supported or tended to support such strikes. The reality of course, is that it is simply not possible to guarantee that such airstrikes will not kill civilians.

Unfortunately news headlines are already proclaiming that the British public supports drone strikes and leaving out the crucial nuances.

Elsewhere as RUSI accepts, the polling shows there are serious matters with regard to the use of drones that the public is sharply divided over, including whether drone strikes are making the West "more safe overall" or "less safe overall" (32% vs. 31%).

Perhaps the most eye-opening result of the poll shows that 47% thought that "drones make it too easy for Western governments to conduct military strikes in foreign countries" with only 13% disagreeing.

The unease that surrounds the growing use of armed drones means that gauging public opinion on this issue is vital. It is therefore very disappointing that some of the questions RUSI asked in this poll were so flawed. An opportunity for proper discussion on the vital issue of public support – or lack of – has been lost.

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