Unpopular but Effective? The Drone Strike Dilemma

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Introduction

In the mountainous region of northwestern Pakistan known as Waziristan, local tribesmen have grown accustomed to living in a state of constant vigilance. Death from above can come at virtually any time in the form of laser-guided missile strikes launched by U.S. predator and reaper drones. The drones are controlled remotely by pilots thousands of miles away at bases in the U.S. and can hover for hours before delivering their deadly payload. Advanced cameras allow drone operators to see their targets from distances that are impossible for the targets to see them, and the missiles launched by drones exhibit astounding accuracy and precision. Drone attacks constitute an understandably terrifying prospect to residents of Waziristan, and locals have nicknamed the drones “wasps” for the ominous buzzing sound they make (Bergen and Tiedemann 2012, 12). There is something disconcerting about the video game-like ease with which drone strikes can deal out death. Within the U.S. and throughout the world, debates have raged over the morality and legality of drone strikes. Even though drones strikes are designed to discriminate between terrorist targets and innocent civilians, there have been many instances of drone strikes causing tragic collateral damage.

This analysis will shy away from legal and ethical debates about drone strikes and will instead focus on the effectiveness of drone strikes as a counterterrorism strategy. President George W. Bush and President Barack Obama have strongly supported the use of drones to combat the international terrorist threat. In a June 2011 speech, John Brennan, Obama’s former counterterrorism advisor and current CIA director, declared that “Going forward, we will be mindful that if our nation is threatened, our best offense won’t always be deploying large armies abroad but delivering tar-
geted, surgical pressure to the groups that threaten us” (Dilanian 2011). Proponents of drone strikes argue that drones are cost-effective and less invasive than traditional counterterrorism efforts involving ground troops or Special Forces (Obama 2013). In addition, drone strikes avoid casualties involving American military personnel. Critics argue that drone strikes alone are incapable of defeating major terrorist organizations, that they isolate potential allies, and that the strikes often do more harm than good by enraging local populations and providing terrorists with a steady supply of new recruits (Kilcullen and Exum 2009).

For the purposes of this paper, the “effectiveness” of the drone strike campaign in Pakistan will be measured using three criteria: Do drone strikes correlate with a reduction in the number of attacks successfully carried out by the organization being targeted? To what extent are drone strikes successful in eliminating key terrorist leaders whose skills cannot easily be replaced by the terrorist organization? And does the animosity generated by drone strikes facilitate terrorist recruitment? Many have argued that this is the case, but it is also plausible that the threat of drone strikes deters potential terrorists from joining a terrorist organization out of fear for their lives. In order to examine the answers to these questions, I performed a case study of the drone strike campaign against the Taliban and the al Qaeda core in Pakistan. My analysis shows that drone strikes correspond with a slight, short-term reduction in terrorist activity and that drone strikes have resulted in the deaths of key terrorist leaders. The loss of leadership and the threat of drone strikes have significantly decreased the threat posed by the al Qaeda core. The operational capacity of the Taliban remains high, however, and the number of terrorist attacks in Pakistan has increased over the past several years. Furthermore, drone strikes have caused outrage amongst Pakistanis, but this outrage is matched, or perhaps even exceeded, by the disapproval that Pakistanis feel toward al Qaeda, the Taliban, and terrorist activity in general. In spite of their unpopularity, there is little substantial evidence to indicate that drone strikes have bolstered terrorist recruitment. It is worth noting that information on terrorist funding, recruitment, morale, and operational capacity is limited and at times nonexistent. The challenge of obtaining accurate information makes it difficult to arrive at any definitive conclusions. Hopefully, the insights gained from this analysis will inform the ongoing debate about the efficacy of drone strikes as a counterterrorism strategy.

This paper begins with a brief discussion of several theories about terrorist motivation and appropriate counterterrorism strategies. Next, I justify my case selection and then provide an overview of the U.S. drone strike campaign in Pakistan. The following three sections present my analysis of the three criteria I used to determine the overall effectiveness of drone strikes. I will finish by offering some tentative conclusions as well as recommendations for further research.

**Strategic Considerations of Counterterrorism Policy**

American political and military leaders have little hope of designing an effective counterterrorism strategy without a firm understanding of terrorists' motivations. In
their article, "Strategies of Terrorism," Andrew Kydd and Barbara Walter (2006) outline five rational strategies of terrorism: attrition, intimidation, outbidding, spoiling, and provocation. The "provocation" strategy has garnered a significant amount of attention in the wake of the devastating attacks of 9/11. Many experts feel that the primary goal behind the 9/11 attacks was to incite the U.S. into engaging in a drawn-out war in the Middle East, thereby draining U.S. resources (Cullison 2004, 58). Furthermore, goading the U.S. into war would engender a powerful anti-American sentiment among Middle Eastern Muslims, which sentiment would help al Qaeda accomplish its goal of overthrowing secularized regimes with Western sympathies (such as the Saudi monarchy in Saudi Arabia) and replacing them with theocratic regimes governed by Sharia law (Doran 2002). While it is often difficult to ascertain the motives of terrorists with complete certainty, statements by Osama bin Laden and other key al Qaeda leaders provide evidence to support the notion that al Qaeda has carried out attacks in order to provoke punitive reactions by the U.S. and other foreign governments (Blanchard 2007, 5).

David Lake (2002) provides additional insight into terrorist strategies. Lake argues that terrorists engage in acts of terrorism in order to create a favorable bargaining range in the future. In addition, he points out that terrorist groups generally seek to represent a broader, more moderate community, so counterterrorism actions must discriminate between actual terrorists and moderates to avoid radicalizing a greater proportion of the larger group. In both Pakistan and Yemen, al Qaeda seeks to represent the broader Muslim community or ummah and hopes to galvanize more moderate individuals in these areas into joining the jihad against the West. Therefore, it is imperative that U.S. responses to terrorism in these regions avoid engendering feelings of hatred against the U.S. that would facilitate al Qaeda recruitment and operations. Lake summarizes this point nicely as follows:

At each step toward expanding the conflict, the United States increases the probability of success [i.e. destroying the terrorist group] and, simultaneously, the risk that it will drive moderates into the arms of the extremists. The danger is that in seeking the first it may lose track of the importance of the second. (Lake 2002, 23)

Members of the national security community share this understanding, and drone strike campaigns were designed in an effort to avoid larger-scale responses involving ground troops or traditional aerial bombardments. When asked about the U.S. drone strikes in Pakistan, General David Petraeus claimed that "the collateral damage in such strikes is minimal" (Aslam 2011, 315). This is a hotly disputed claim, and people have argued that the number of civilian deaths from drone strikes is much higher than U.S. military and intelligence leaders acknowledge (Wood and Hall 2016). Amidst the controversy, the question remains whether or not the drone strikes are successful in targeting terrorists without driving moderates into their open arms.

Another strategic consideration is whether drone strikes are capable of defeating terrorist organizations or if they only serve to wound terrorist groups without depriving them of the ability to retaliate. This concern is magnified when dealing
with groups such as al Qaeda and its various affiliates, which have adopted a loose network structure since the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 (Cronin 2006). Scholars have argued that network organizations like al Qaeda and other terrorist groups exhibit greater resiliency and adaptability than hierarchical organizations, and these advantages could prove crucial in terms of a terrorist organization's ability to withstand a sustained drone strike campaign.

A review of the existing literature on drone strikes illustrates the divergent opinions on whether or not drone strikes constitute an effective counterterrorism strategy. The debate has raged among scholars, and a call has been made for "a thorough study of the effect of these drone strikes on the population in Pakistan" (Callam 2013). My study may not settle the debate over the efficacy of drone strikes, but it should help to inform it. A greater understanding of the effectiveness of drone strikes in Pakistan will also shed light on the use of drones in other critical areas (like Yemen) as well as the implications for the use of drone strikes in the future.

Case Selection

Journalists and academics have paid considerable attention to drone strikes, and particular emphasis has been directed toward the drone strike campaign in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan. The U.S. has carried out more drone strikes in Pakistan and along the Afghan border than in any other region of the world, and drone strikes in Pakistan have been ongoing since 2004 (Roggio 2016). The frequency of drone strikes in Pakistan, along with the prolonged nature of the campaign there, make it a compelling case to study. In addition, more information about the drone campaign in Pakistan has been compiled than for other areas, which situation makes hypothesis testing easier and more accurate.

The drone strike campaign in Pakistan also exhibits variance on key variables, such as the makeup of the terrorist organizations targeted and the frequency of strikes, which provides additional insight into the effectiveness of drone strikes. An analysis of the drone strike campaign in Pakistan may help determine whether drone strikes are more effective versus particular types of terrorist organizations. The campaign in Pakistan has targeted both the Taliban and the al Qaeda core. These two groups share similarities, but differ with respect to their size and primary targets (al Qaeda has striven to attack the U.S. homeland and other Western nations while the Taliban have focused their attacks within Pakistan). Also, the number of drone strikes has fluctuated widely over the years, which allows for a comparison between the frequency of drone strikes and the frequency of terrorist attacks. Lessons from the analysis of the drone strike campaign in Pakistan should help inform policymakers about the usefulness of drone strikes in other countries, such as Yemen or Somalia, which share many similarities with the Pakistan case (remote areas with little government control, threats from Salafi jihadist groups, etc.).

The inherent difficulties associated with gathering information about drone strikes and terrorist groups in general, and particularly with gathering information about al Qaeda and the Taliban in the FATA, impose a number of limitations on the results of
this case study. The FATA are virtually inaccessible to foreigners, especially Western journalists and scholars. This makes gathering reliable data extremely difficult. Information about the number of drone strikes and their resulting casualties is controversial and often relies solely on partially verifiable estimates. Furthermore, Pakistani media outlets often inflate the number of civilian casualties, and U.S. officials have denied that drone strikes result in significant collateral damage despite evidence to the contrary.\textsuperscript{7}

The data on drone strike casualties I refer to come from the New America Foundation, which employed a methodology designed to ensure the most accurate results possible given the circumstances. Information was gathered from international, Western, and regional media outlets, and figures on terrorist/civilian casualties represent an average of the high and low estimates from all the most widely reputable sources. In addition, an effort was made to confirm all data on drone strikes using information from at least two sources.

I utilized the \textit{Long War Journal} for statistics on the number of drone strikes that have occurred in Pakistan since the onset of the drone strike campaign there. The journal is an online publication providing regularly updated information on drone strikes and other U.S. counterterrorism efforts. It is published by Public Multimedia Inc., a nonprofit media company, and it is a project of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, a nonpartisan policy institute. The journal employs reporters on the ground to obtain information on drone strikes, and it also gathers information from other Western and regional media outlets (\textit{The Long War Journal} 2016).

While I used data from accurate sources, the relative scarcity of reliable data makes it difficult to analyze drone strike effectiveness solely through statistical methods. This difficulty is compounded by the fact that there are so many potential variables that could affect the operational capacity of a terrorist group that it becomes nearly impossible to adequately control for all of the variables in a purely quantitative study. Because of these challenges, I chose to employ a case study approach to analyze the effectiveness of drone strikes, since a case study allows for an analysis of both quantitative and qualitative evidence. Indeed, my case study relies heavily on statistical results from previous studies, but I seek to place these results in greater context and compare them with qualitative indications of the effectiveness of the drone campaign in Pakistan as well.

\textbf{An Overview of the U.S. Drone Strike Campaign in Pakistan}

After the 2001 U.S. invasion of Afghanistan overthrew the Taliban regime, many al Qaeda operatives and Taliban members took refuge across the border in the FATA of Pakistan. The FATA are extremely remote, mountainous areas that are only nominally controlled by the Pakistani government.

North and South Waziristan compose a large portion of the FATA, and these areas have provided a safe haven for Taliban leaders and al Qaeda operatives. This region has been the focus of a U.S. drone strike campaign since June 2004 (Bergen and Tiedemann 2011). Drone strikes have been launched in coordination with the Pakistani military, but Pakistani leaders have decried the attacks in public (Bergen
and Tiedemann 2011, 15). Furthermore, the U.S. has received harsh criticism internationally over the use of drones, and many have accused the U.S. of asserting too much autonomy in deciding when and where to attack. There were relatively few drone strikes in Pakistan during the Bush administration, but the rate of drone strikes increased significantly in 2009 when President Obama took office. Since its peak in 2010, the number of drone strikes has decreased substantially (see Figure 1), leading some to speculate that the drone campaign in Pakistan is nearing its close (Yamin 2012).

Drone strikes have primarily targeted high-level operatives within al Qaeda and the Taliban. Al Qaeda leadership remains the focus of drone strikes, but in 2010, the scope of drone strikes expanded to include unnamed, lower-level members of terrorist organizations as well (Cronin 2013). These so-called "signature strikes" target individuals engaging in terrorist behavior rather than focus on specific terrorist leaders (Byman 2013). Signature strikes allow the U.S. greater leeway in deciding when and where to carry out attacks (which could increase the ability of drone strikes to disrupt terrorist networks), but they also increase the risk of collateral damage. This in turn leads to greater resentment from Pakistanis and the international community.

The Relationship between Drone Strikes and Terrorist Attacks in Pakistan

In an unpublished paper completed in 2013, Patrick Johnston and Anoop Sarbahi explore the impact of the U.S. drone campaign in Pakistan on the frequency of terrorist attacks. They used a fixed-effects regression with time-series data to examine the correlation between U.S. drone strikes and the number and lethality of terrorist
attacks in the FATA from 2007-11. The fixed-effects regression helps control for potential omitted variables to reduce bias in the results of the regression. In addition, they employed a geospatial analysis to test whether a concentration of drone strikes in one particular region caused terrorists to shift their attacks to neighboring regions. Their results indicate that drone strikes significantly reduced terrorist attacks in northwestern Pakistan. The probability of a terrorist attack occurring the week following a drone strike was 24 percent lower according to their estimates, and the lethality of attacks fell from 2.77 casualties per week to 2.33 casualties per week with an increase of one drone strike per week (Johnston and Sarbahi 2013, 29). These results were all statistically significant and provide strong evidence that drone strikes increase the difficulty of planning and carrying out successful terrorist attacks.

There are issues with Johnson and Sarbahi's study, however. Because the authors only looked at the number of attacks, drone strikes, and fatalities per week, it is uncertain whether drone strikes lead to a long-term reduction in terrorist attacks and terrorism-related casualties or if drone strikes simply force terrorists to lie low for a short period of time before continuing their attacks. Johnson and Sarbahi also reported the following:

Drone strikes have a violence-reducing effect only for nearby areas. . . . Militants operating further from these areas are less likely to be concerned in the aftermath of a drone strike that their activities are likely to be detected by loitering drones, and may even believe that these platforms are being focused on those areas where strikes are taking place, leaving them confident of having enough breathing room to conduct business as usual. (25–6)

A similar study was performed by David A. Jaegar and Zahra Siddique in 2011, and they found that

Insofar as the incapacitation effect of the drone strikes comes from targeted killing of Taliban leaders, we find that such an incapacitation effect (in the sense of reducing Taliban violence) is minimal but that there is some deterrent effect of drone strikes on Taliban violence. (13)
The assertion that drone strikes have had little success in incapacitating the Taliban is consistent with the fact that the number of terrorist attacks perpetrated by the Taliban increased significantly from 2007–10 as the rate of drone strikes intensified (see Figure 3). This evidence does not imply that drone strikes cause more terrorist attacks; indeed, the causal logic likely runs in reverse. An increase in terrorism motivates a greater number of drone strikes. There are many other factors that help account for the dramatic increase in Taliban attacks, including the fact that in July 2007, a treaty between the Pakistani government and the Taliban broke down after the government besieged Islamic militants who had taken refuge within the “Red Mosque” in Islamabad (Jaeger and Siddique 2011, 3). Conflict between the Taliban and the Pakistani government has continued since that time. While the data from Figure 3 does not provide a causal link between drone strikes and an increase in the number of terrorist attacks, it does demonstrate that drone strikes failed to cripple the Taliban and reduce their long-term ability to carry out attacks.

On the other hand, al Qaeda has struggled to carry out recent attacks, and since 2007, the attacks that have been attributed to the al Qaeda core resulted in fewer casualties than previous al Qaeda attacks. Admittedly, the decline in al Qaeda attacks cannot be attributed entirely to drone strikes since the U.S. government has employed a variety of counterterrorism measures against al Qaeda, but drone strikes seem to have played an important role in al Qaeda’s demise. Overall, statistical analyses suggest that drone strikes have had a slight reduction effect on terrorist activity in the short term and that drone strikes have had greater success in debilitating al Qaeda than the Taliban.

The Effect of Drone Strikes on Terrorist Leadership and Operational Capacity

The second component involved in gauging the effectiveness of drone strikes is determining whether drone strikes have succeeded in eliminating key terrorist leaders. Data compiled by the New America Foundation (2016) lists the names of sixty-five
high-level leaders of the Taliban and al Qaeda who have been killed by U.S. drone strikes since 2005. Among the list are individuals such as Baitullah Mehsud, the overall leader of the Taliban in Pakistan, who was killed by a drone strike in 2009 (Shah, Tavernise, and Mazzetti 2009). Senior leaders also include Atiyah Abd al-Rahman and Abu Yahya al-Libi, who at the time of their respective deaths were considered al Qaeda Central’s “number two.” It is difficult to imagine the Taliban and al Qaeda are capable of continually replacing senior-level commanders without suffering a loss in operational capacity and facing internal strife and power struggles.

Information gleaned from the documents and data drives recovered after the raid on the Abbottabad complex where Osama Bin Laden spent the last several years of his life helps validate this claim. An analysis of the correspondence between Bin Laden and other terrorist leaders reveals that al Qaeda was under considerable strain due in part to the damage caused by drone strikes. According to a U.S. counterterrorism official, a 2010 message from Atiyah Abd al-Rahman (who was at the time the third-highest ranking member of al Qaeda) to Bin Laden “expressed frustration with the CIA drone campaign . . . because many of his predecessors in the third-ranking slot had been killed in strikes by the unmanned aircraft” (Miller 2011). One of these predecessors was Mustafa Abu al-Yazid, who was killed along with his family in a 2010 drone strike. Rahman wrote Bin Laden describing Yazid’s death, and he outlined the continued menace posed by drones saying, “The planes are still circling our skies nearly every day” (Deveraux 2015).

Bin Laden’s own living conditions highlight the complications terrorists face due to the threat of drone strikes. He spent several years living in a specially built compound without an Internet connection or phone line—forced to rely on couriers to transmit messages for him. This severely restricted his ability to communicate with lower-level operatives, plan attacks, recruit new members, and organize fund-raising efforts. Admittedly, this level of security was necessitated by more than just the threat of drone strikes, but drone strikes certainly posed a grave threat to Bin Laden and likely motivated him to flee the FATA in the first place. Other al Qaeda leaders faced similar challenges, and correspondence between Bin Laden and other terrorist leaders reveals that by 2011, al Qaeda Central faced financial difficulties, lacked control over affiliates, such as al Qaeda in Iraq (the forerunner to ISIS), and suffered from a lack of communication and coordination.

There are caveats to the success of drones at eliminating terrorist leaders. While the al Qaeda core appears to have been substantially weakened by the drone strike campaign in Pakistan, the Taliban continue to pose a significant threat to stable governance in Pakistan. The greater level of effectiveness versus al Qaeda is likely due to the fact that al Qaeda is regarded as a greater threat by U.S. policymakers and focuses on carrying out more complicated attacks directed against the U.S. homeland rather than focusing on targets within Pakistan. International terrorist attacks require more sophisticated planning and coordination—the very type of coordination
inhibited by drone strikes, which have forced some terrorists in North Waziristan to resort to living in tunnels (Bergen and Tiedemann 2011, 16-7). In addition, the Taliban have more members than the al Qaeda core, and this may account for the fact that the group has continued to carry out attacks despite facing substantial casualties from drone strikes.

Critics of drone strikes are quick to point out the fact that the sixty-five al Qaeda/Taliban leaders who have been killed represent only about 2 percent of the total number of drone strike casualties (civilian and terrorist) in Pakistan (Boyle 2013, 10). Also, while drone strikes have helped debilitate al Qaeda Central in Pakistan, some scholars have hypothesized that drone strikes in Pakistan have encouraged high-ranking al Qaeda leaders to migrate to other areas where they can expand al Qaeda operations (Cronin 2013, 51-2). This claim is logically intuitive, but it suffers from a paucity of hard evidence to support it. Overall, it appears that drone strikes have been quite successful at eliminating terrorist leaders, but the Taliban, and to a lesser extent the al Qaeda core, remain threats due to the resiliency of their network structures and their ability to adapt to changes in leadership (Zimmerman 2013, 23).

The Effect of Drone Strikes on Terrorist Recruitment

Another question to consider is whether drone strikes result in an anti-American backlash that facilitates radicalization and terrorist recruitment. International opinion is harshly critical of drone strikes. Polling data published by the Pew Research Center in July of 2014 showed that “In 39 of 44 countries surveyed, majorities or pluralities oppose U.S. drone strikes targeting extremists in countries such as Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia.” Furthermore, there were only three countries (including the U.S.) where more than 50 percent of the population supported the use of drone strikes (Pew Research Center 2014). While international opinion does carry some weight, the primary concern for U.S. policymakers should be the sentiments held by Pakistani citizens about U.S. drone strikes and the degree to which Pakistanis sympathize with these groups, such as al Qaeda and the Taliban. It lies within the realm of possibility that virulent opposition to U.S. drone strikes could motivate international al Qaeda and Taliban sympathizers to join those organizations, but the most pressing concern is that Pakistani civilians who face the direct effects of drone strikes will become radicalized and join the jihad against the United States.

There is an overwhelming consensus that drone strikes are extremely unpopular amongst Pakistanis. In 2013, there were several mass protests against drone strikes in major Pakistani cities (Fair, Kaltenthaler and Miller 2014, 2), but data from public opinion surveys in Pakistan show that sympathy for religious-extremist terrorist groups like al Qaeda and the Taliban has decreased since the drone strike campaign began.

The International Republican Institute carried out widespread public opinion polling in Pakistan from 2006-09, and their results provide valuable insight into Pakistani opinion on drone strikes, terrorism, and U.S.-Pakistani cooperation in
combating terrorism. The survey found that a large majority of Pakistanis opposed Pakistani and U.S. joint counterterrorism efforts, with numbers tending to fluctuate between 60 and 75 percent during all the months the question was asked.17 Furthermore, 76 percent of Pakistanis disagreed with the Pakistani government partnering with the U.S. to carry out drone strikes against extremists (2009, 18–9). These results clearly indicate that drone strikes are unpopular, but they provide little support to the hypothesis that drone strikes do more harm than good by encouraging otherwise peaceful citizens to enlist in terrorist organizations. This is true for several reasons. First, there is a substantial difference between simply feeling upset about drone strikes and risking one’s life to join a radical terrorist group that happens to be the target of such strikes. Second, while most Pakistanis oppose drone strikes, they also strongly oppose the activities of the Taliban and al Qaeda.

Those surveyed were also asked whether they thought the Taliban/al Qaeda operating in Pakistan was a serious problem. In September 2007, only 57 percent of respondents viewed the Taliban/al Qaeda as a serious problem, but by July 2009 (the last time the survey was performed) an overwhelming 86 percent of Pakistanis viewed al Qaeda and Taliban operations in Pakistan as a serious problem (International Republican Institute 2009, 15). Eighty percent of Pakistanis indicated they disliked Osama bin Laden in the July 2009 survey, while only 9 percent indicated they liked him (11 percent either did not respond or were unsure). Feelings toward Baitullah Mehsud, the leader of the Pakistani Taliban at the time, were even more negative (2009, 41). A more recent survey performed by the Pew Research Center in 2013 confirms many of the findings from the IRI survey. According to the Pew survey, 93 percent of Pakistanis viewed terrorism as a “very big problem,” and 49 percent saw the Taliban as “a serious threat,” which nearly matches the percentage of respondents who considered India a serious threat (52 percent) (Pew Research Center 2013).18 The survey results also indicate that drone strikes remain highly unpopular, with 68 percent of Pakistanis opposing them. Meanwhile, 72 percent of respondents had an unfavorable opinion of the U.S. in general. Two clear trends emerge from the data on Pakistani public opinion: 1) Pakistanis hate drone strikes, and 2) the majority of Pakistanis hate terrorism just as much if not more. This suggests that while drone strikes certainly will not make the U.S. any more popular, there is little reason to believe that Pakistanis are sympathizing with the Taliban or al Qaeda and rushing to join their ranks in large numbers.19

Due to the instability and danger of the FATA region, no recent public opinion polling has been conducted in the FATA. All the data on Pakistani opinions of terrorism, the U.S., and drone strikes come from surveys conducted in the four main provinces of Pakistan (the Punjab, Balochistan, Sindh, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa). Survey data provide an accurate representation of Pakistani public opinion in general, but individuals living within the FATA region are the most likely to face the adverse consequences of drone strikes, and theoretically they are also the most likely to join the Taliban and al Qaeda. Collecting information about the sentiments of Pakistanis
within the FATA would be extremely difficult, but such information would provide valuable insight into the effectiveness of drone strikes.

There is some anecdotal evidence that points to drone strikes as a catalyst for terrorist recruitment, but this view is more of a popular theory than a well-substantiated fact. One notable case of drone strikes helping to radicalize an individual is that of Faisal Shahzad—the man who attempted to detonate a bomb in Times Square in 2010. In a videotape he recorded before the attempted bombing, Shahzad claimed his attack was motivated by a desire for revenge against the U.S. for carrying out drone strikes (Dolmetsch 2014). Interviews with tribesmen in Yemen also provide evidence that collateral damage from drone strikes has helped increase support for al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and radicalize locals who are now seeking revenge against the U.S. (Raghavan 2012). It is commonly believed that the same phenomenon is occurring in Pakistan, but there is little concrete evidence to confirm such a claim.

Additional information about drone strikes, the Taliban, and al Qaeda almost certainly exists yet remains classified due to its sensitive nature. The lack of open-source information makes it difficult to come to firm conclusions about the effectiveness of drone strikes, and further research should focus on obtaining information from primary sources to the extent possible. Other case studies examining the use of drones in Yemen and Somalia would also help extend our understanding of the implications of drone strikes. These studies could highlight certain situations or factors that may make drone strikes a more or less effective strategy, and they could also help validate or challenge the conclusions from this analysis of the drone strike campaign in Pakistan.

**Conclusion and Recommendations**

Evidence from the U.S. drone strike campaign in Pakistan leads to several conclusions about the effectiveness of drone strikes. First, drone strikes have a deterrent effect on terrorist attacks in the short term, but they do not necessarily cause a long-term reduction in the overall amount of terrorism or the outright defeat of resilient terrorist organizations. Interestingly, the al Qaeda core in Pakistan has seemingly suffered greater disruption than the Taliban since the initiation of the drone campaign in Pakistan. It is somewhat curious why the Taliban has proved more resilient in the face of drone strikes than the al Qaeda core, but the most likely explanation is that the large size of the Taliban’s membership enables the group to continue functioning in spite of hundreds or even thousands of drone-related casualties.

Second, drone strikes have achieved notable success in eliminating key terrorist leaders, and the loss of leadership places a strain on terrorist organizations. This is especially true for small, close-knit groups like the al Qaeda core. The Taliban have shown greater resilience to drone strikes because they have focused their attacks on soft targets within Pakistan, and these attacks require less coordination, making them harder to disrupt.20
A third key takeaway from this study is that the analysis of Pakistani public opinion clearly shows that most Pakistanis have harshly negative views of both the U.S. and extremist terrorist groups. This suggests that while drone strikes may generate animosity toward the U.S., it is unlikely that the strikes are driving significant numbers of Pakistanis into the arms of the Taliban and al Qaeda. Anecdotal evidence lends support to the theory that drone strikes fuel terrorist recruitment, but there is a paucity of systematic evidence to support this notion. This finding supports the continued use of drone strikes albeit in a carefully controlled manner to minimize civilian casualties.

Furthermore, much of the outrage over drone strikes is driven by public criticism and complaints from Pakistani government officials, but it is evident that the Pakistani government privately has been complicit in the strikes. A large proportion of the strikes have been aimed at the Pakistani Taliban, who pose a greater threat to the Pakistani government than they do to the U.S. (State Department 2014), and Pakistani Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani said in a state department cable in 2008, “I don’t care if they [the Americans] do it [i.e. carry out drone strikes]. We’ll complain in the National Assembly and then we’ll ignore it” (Bergen and Tiedemann 2011, 16). There may be an under-the-table agreement between the U.S. and Pakistani governments about official government stances on drone strikes, but the lack of transparency regarding drone strikes is giving the U.S. a figurative black eye in international politics. The U.S. would benefit from increased transparency regarding drone strikes and should pressure the Pakistani government to match its public statements on drone strikes with its private statements. If the Pakistani public, as well as the international community, were better informed about drone strikes and the rationale for their use, the opposition to drone strikes would likely diminish significantly. This in turn would help ameliorate concerns about radicalization and growing sympathy for the Taliban and al Qaeda.

To employ a medical comparison, drone strikes are a counterterrorism prescription that addresses the symptoms rather than the causes of terrorism, and they come with unwanted side effects. In spite of these limitations, it is difficult, if not impossible, to prescribe a strategy that could disrupt and damage the al Qaeda core and the Taliban without risking the lives of many U.S. citizens, increasing the costs of counterterrorism, and infringing on Pakistani sovereignty to an even greater extent. These factors make drone strikes an appealing, albeit imperfect, tactic. Even though drone strikes provide formidable advantages compared to other counterterrorism tactics, U.S. policymakers should be wary of continuing the drone strike campaign unnecessarily in Pakistan. The al Qaeda core has been severely weakened by drone strikes and other counterterrorism efforts, and the likelihood that they can successfully execute a major attack against the U.S. homeland is miniscule at best. Therefore, continued strikes against al Qaeda and the Taliban will likely bring diminishing marginal returns, especially if the attacks are not welcome by the Pakistani public.
The frequency of drone strikes has declined in recent years, and U.S. officials should continue striving to transition to alternative counterterrorism strategies in Pakistan that will help address the root causes of terrorism fueled by religious extremism and radicalization through social networks.

Eventually, the counterterrorism efforts in Pakistan will come to an end, but terrorism itself has existed for hundreds, if not thousands, of years and is a tactic particularly suited to the modern era. The enthusiastic opinion many decision-makers in Washington have toward drone strikes is a strong indicator that drone strikes will continue to play an important role in U.S. counterterrorism efforts. Indeed, the partial success of drone strikes in Pakistan begs the question of whether drone strikes should be used in the fight against ISIS. Drones allow for greater precision and discrimination than traditional air strikes, and they may be a useful alternative to placing boots on the ground. On the flip side, however, the controversy over the use of drones could damage U.S. political interests in the Middle East if drones were deployed to combat ISIS. Questions about the use of drones are not likely to go away in the near future, so it is imperative that scholars and policymakers come to a fuller and more nuanced understanding of the effects of drone strikes. This knowledge will enable military and political leaders to make correct decisions regarding when, where, and how best to employ drone strikes as a counterterrorism strategy.

NOTES
1. A 2010 report published by the George Washington University Elliott School of International Affairs states that “The Predator, the most commonly used [and the least advanced] drone in the American arsenal, can loiter at 25,000 feet for nearly 40 hours, and is equipped with two Hellfire missiles and two cameras—one infrared and one regular—that can read a license plate from two miles up” (Callam 2010).
2. There are several militant/terrorist groups that operate in the FATA region of Pakistan. The term "Taliban" is the generic name used to refer to these groups collectively. The Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) is the main terrorist group in the FATA, but I will refer to them simply as the "Taliban." For more information on the origins and history of the Tehrik-i-Taliban see Abbas 2008.
3. See Figure 3.
5. For an illustration of the contrasting opinions about drone strikes, see Cronin 2013 and Byman 2013. Statements made by U.S. government officials have tended to exhibit an extremely favorable view of drone strikes while the opinions of journalists and academics are more mixed.
6. See the Global Terrorism Database provided by the National Consortium for Terrorism to see the locations of all recorded al Qaeda and Taliban attacks: www.start.umd.edu/gtd.
8. For a complete breakdown of the methodology employed by the scholars at the New America Foundation, see http://securitydata.newamerica.net/drones/methodology.html.
9. Some members of the Haqqani militant network, a terrorist/insurgency group allied with both al Qaeda and the Taliban, have also been targeted, but these strikes are far less common. For a breakdown of the targets of drone strikes, see http://securitydata.newamerica.net/drones/pakistan/analysis.
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10. While the manuscript remains unpublished, earlier versions of the paper were presented at the 2011 Annual Meetings of the American Political Science Association, the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at Harvard University’s Kennedy School of Government, and the New America Foundation.

11. See pages 12–39 of their paper for a full discussion of the empirical methods and results of the study. Also, see the appendix of their report to see the regression output tables used to obtain the results.

12. Note that the overall number of attacks carried out by the al Qaeda core is dramatically lower than the number of terrorist attacks carried out by the Taliban. Al Qaeda has gained notoriety for its ability to execute high-casualty attacks like the 9/11 attacks, the Bali night club bombings, and the Madrid subway bombings, however. The vast majority of terrorist attacks in Pakistan are carried out by groups like the TTP that have been targeted by U.S. drone strikes. These attacks are generally small and result in few if any casualties (National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism).


14. Both were killed after the death of Bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri’s assumption of the role of Emir of the al Qaeda core.


16. For example, Cronin suggests that drone strikes may be a driving force behind the spread of al Qaeda, but the only validation she offers for this claim is that repressive counterinsurgency efforts by Russia in Chechnya (which didn’t involve drones) led to a spread of violence throughout the Caucasus region.

17. The precise question was, “Do you think that Pakistan should cooperate with the U.S. on its war against terror?”

18. India and Pakistan have gone to war within the last several decades, and because both countries possess nuclear missiles, the possibility of further conflict between them is a major concern.

19. The possibility exists that citizens from other countries may be motivated to join al Qaeda or the Taliban due to their indignation over drone strikes, and this could be an interesting topic for further study.

20. The Taliban also benefit from a number of cultural factors unique to the Pashtun tribes that live in the FATA and surrounding areas. See Asfar et al., 2008.

21. The TTP has carried out a couple of attacks against U.S. citizens in Pakistan such as the 2010 suicide bombing of the U.S. consulate in Peshawar.

REFERENCES


