Droning On: An Examination of the Implications for American Counter-Terrorism of the Obama Administration’s Use of Drones

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Introduction

A momentous moment in the United States’ efforts against Islamist terrorism occurred on 3 November 2002, 100 miles east of Sanaa, the capital of Yemen. A car carrying 6 alleged terrorists, including a suspect in the December 2000 attack on the U.S.S. Cole and an American citizen, exploded, killing all inside. The cause of the explosion was not immediately known.¹ Within a few days it emerged that the United States had employed a new weapon in its global struggle against terrorism: weaponised unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), more commonly known as drones.

This paper seeks to examine the use by the government of the United States, specifically the administration of Barack Obama, of targeted killings/assassinations by drones not from the perspective of law or ethics—there is already considerable scholarship that does this²—but in


relation to its effectiveness as a form of counter-terrorism. The main argument of this paper is that targeted killings by drones represent the pursuit of short-term goals, but, as a result, the long-term strategic implications of this tactic have not been fully considered. As a tactical weapon in the counter-terrorism arsenal of the United States they clearly have had some successes. This has come not only in the form of dead al-Qaeda and Taliban members but also in the impact on the morale and operations of these organizations. The mere threat of drone strikes has from several accounts sown division within the rank of terrorists and insurgents who fear human and/or technological intelligence is helping pinpoint targets for the strikes and increasingly the focus has been on survival instead of terrorist plotting, organizing, and training. One of the main reasons that Osama bin Laden appears to have relocated to Abbotabad, for instance, was out of the belief, accurate as it turned out, that the location of both the city and his house within the city mitigated against drone or air strikes.


The evidence that targeted killings by drones represent a clear tactical success is, however, not undisputed: a recent New America Foundation study has found that major plots against the West are still disproportionately connected to Pakistan and, if the drones are having a true impact, this should become apparent over the next year. Nevertheless, their expanded use is evidence that the Obama administration has deemed them a success. Although it was the George W. Bush administration which began using drones to carry out assassinations and it was 2008 that the tactic became much more widespread (See Graph 1), it is the presidency of Barack Obama which has embraced the drones as an essential component of its approach to counterterrorism policy in Asia and Africa (see Graphs 1-4). Certainly, drone attacks situate well within a counter-terrorist narrative that emphasizes short-term goals connected to both domestic political imperatives and public demands for a response to previous terrorist atrocities.

Even if the drones do represent a short-term tactical success, their impact with respect to long-term strategic counter-terrorism is much more problematic, both in terms of the use of drones and the use of targeted killings which are interconnected but not one in the same. This point is applicable within the geographic zones where the drones are being used but, in an aspect largely ignored in the literature on drones, also in the United States in terms of terrorism and counter-terrorism. The adaptation of the targeted killing model from its use by Israel for a number of years presupposes a concrete terrorist threat involving a clear hierarchical

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organization, with clear leaders and goals. While al-Qaeda might still, although debatably, fit this model, the increasingly diffused terrorist threat of Marc Sageman’s “leaderless Jihad” does not. Nor does it work with a more complex model of “deterritorialized” and “glocalized” forms of terrorism in which threats potentially come from a fusion of the “leaderless jihad” and a more dedicated and professional terrorist organization.

**DRONES AND TARGETED KILLINGS: THE BACKGROUND**

Drones first appeared in the region in the 1990s as a surveillance tool for the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). It was through the efforts of two men, however, Director of the CIA’s Counterterrorism Center Cofer Black and counter-terrorism official Richard Clarke, that the decision was made to mount Hellfire missiles on the Predator version of the drone so that it could be used as a counter-terrorism weapon. Allegedly, this decision was taken against the pre-9/11 wishes of CIA Director George Tenet; that it was equipped with the missiles before 9/11 but

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not used until over a year after 9/11 would seem to indicate some reluctance to use the new weapon.¹¹

As significant as the decision to transform a tool of surveillance into a tool of attack was the reason why it occurred. The U.S. government had opted to pursue the path of assassination, somewhat euphemistically known as “targeted killings.” Another country had already embraced such a counter-terrorist strategy for decades: Israel. Famously in the 1970s, Israel’s intelligence agency had targeted Palestinian terrorists for death, including in retaliation for the 1972 murder of Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympics.¹² The Israeli use of targeted killings escalated, however, in response to the terrorism associated with the al-Aqsa Intifada. Between 2000 and 2004, using a variety of methods, Israeli forces killed 159 people, including Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, the spiritual leader of Hamas.¹³ The approach represented a rejection of counter-terrorism through criminal justice in favour of a militarized approach, reflecting the Israeli government’s belief that the threat to the nation represented, in the words of Clive Jones, “existential threat [which] overrode the normative legal principles adhered to by democratic states.”¹⁴ In turn, these tactics sparked widespread international criticism, including from Israel’s closest ally. "The United States government is very clearly on record as against targeted assassinations. . . . They are extrajudicial killings, and we do not support that," declared the


¹³Jones, “Israel and the al-Aqsa intifada,” 133.

¹⁴Ibid., 130.
American Ambassador to Israel, Martin Indyk, in July 2001.\textsuperscript{15} Even as late as September 2002, State Department spokesman Richard Boucher criticized Israel for attacks the type of which the U.S. would soon be carrying out as well: "We are against targeted killings. We are against the use [by the Israelis] of heavy weaponry in urban areas, even when it comes to people … who have been responsible for the deaths of American citizens. We do think these people need to be brought to justice."\textsuperscript{16}

This position on “targeted assassinations” by the CIA clearly altered as a result of 11 September 2001. Even then, drone strikes occurred infrequently for several years after the initial one in Yemen in November 2002. Not until June 2004 did the first drone attack occur in Pakistan and between then and the end of 2007, the CIA would carry out only eight more (see Graph 1). It changed in 2008, however, while the Bush administration remained in charge. The number of overall drone attacks more than tripled in that year with 33 compared to nine in the previous years (see Graph 1).

THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION EMBRACES DRONES

“We will kill bin Laden. We will crush al-Qaida. That has to be our biggest national security priority.”

-Barack Obama, presidential debate, 7 October 2008\textsuperscript{17}

The growth of drone strikes under the Bush administration set the stage for their dramatic expansion with the arrival of Barack Obama in the White House. Obama made it clear during the

\textsuperscript{15}Mayer, “The Predator War.”


election campaign that focusing on al-Qaeda would be a top priority of his administration. Three days after taking office, the first drone killings in Pakistan occurred. Over the next year, 58 more attacks would take place, easily more than under the entire period of the Bush administration. The numbers only grew in subsequent years with 118 attacks in 2010 and 50 through the first seven months of 2011 (See Graphs One to Four). One recent estimate is that the drone strikes in Pakistan have killed between roughly 1600 and 2500 people over seven years with, according to the same source, the “non-militant fatality rate” being approximately 20 per cent although other estimates have the latter figure either higher or lower.  

The numbers aside, there is other evidence of how extensively the Obama administration has embraced drone attacks as a counter-terrorism (and, to a large extent, a counter-insurgency) tactic against the Taliban in Pakistan. In December 2009, the President made a long-awaited strategic speech about Afghanistan. Missing from his verbiage was any reference to the CIA-operated drones, especially since the U.S. government has never officially confirmed their existence. Instead, administration officials briefed the New York Times that part of the new effort in Afghanistan would involve a substantial increase in CIA covert operations within Pakistan, including through drone strikes. Part of the expansion consisted of using the drones not just against al-Qaeda targets, the original justification for “targeted killings” by the CIA, but against the Taliban and other Pakistani insurgents. These new targets allegedly involve the Pakistani

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government providing input into American targeting. Over the course of the drone campaign a greater number of identifiable Taliban than al-Qaeda targets have been hit as have been, perhaps not surprisingly, lower level targets as opposed to the leaders of these groups. Despite tensions with Pakistan over a CIA contractor and the U.S. military mission that killed Osama bin Laden, there is no sign of the Obama administration moving away from its death by drone approach. The opposite appears to be the case with some U.S. officials suggesting to the Washington Post that al-Qaeda could be destroyed with the continued application of the tactics that had weakened it since 9-11, including targeted killings by UAVs.

For the Obama administration in a very real sense then that targeted killings by drones in Pakistan of al-Qaeda and Taliban members represent the perfect tool since they can simultaneously fulfil two foreign policy promises: to go after al-Qaeda and to make Afghanistan the priority war. The pre-emptive nature of sudden death and destruction from the sky also readily provides the image of a proactive United States savaging its enemies instead of passively waiting for them to strike. By its very nature, privileging this war model of counter-terrorism

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21 Bergen and Tiedemann, “The Year of the Drone (update).”

over a criminal-justice approach equates with quick achievements while demonstrating
toughness and placating demands from the public to act.  

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF DRONE STRIKES

The controversy associated with the use of drones to carry out assassinations of alleged
terrorists has centred on the legality of their use under international law, the deaths they cause to
non-combatants, and the remote control nature of the killing technology. Debate has ensued
around these questions; in the case of non-combatant casualties, there are a number of different
estimates. Less attention has been paid to this tactic as a tool of American counter-terrorism
and its long-term strategic impact. Certainly, the U.S. government believes UAV strikes to be
successful, hence their increased use.

The Israeli experience with targeted killings serves as a cautionary tale. Some high
profile attacks in the past have gone awry leading to the deaths of innocents and damage to
relations with Israeli allies. In the case of the extensive use of assassinations between 2000 and
2004, the evidence as to their success is mixed. They, particularly attacks on senior terrorist

23 Ronald Crelinsten, Counterterrorism (London: Polity, 2009), 72-77; Paul R. Pillar and
Christopher A. Preble, "Don't You Know There's a War On? Assessing the Military's Role in
Counterterrorism." in Benjamin H. Friedman, Jim Harper, and Christopher A. Preble, eds.,
Terrorizing Ourselves: Why U.S. Counterterrorism Policy Is Failing and How to Fix It,
(Washington: Cato Institute, 2010), 65, 69.


25 Such as the mistaken killing of a Moroccan waiter in the pursuit of those connected to the
Munich Olympics attack, the failed assassination of the political head of Hamas, Khaled
Meshaal, and the capture of the Mossad agents involved who were carrying Canadian passports,
and the deaths of civilians during assassinations in Gaza and elsewhere. Hewitt, “‘Strangely Easy
to Obtain.’”
leaders, may have had an impact on a decline in Palestinian suicide attacks although that is far from certain. On the other hand, targeted killings contributed to further radicalization of Palestinian opinion, had little impact on decentralized terrorist organizations, and were arguably counterproductive at times through a more dangerous opponent replacing the assassinated one.  

Some of the Israeli pattern appears to be replicated with American drone attacks. Certainly, they appear to be a short-term tactical success in terms of putting al-Qaeda’s leadership on the defensive as it focuses on surviving instead of plotting. Nevertheless, even that success is not without its limitations. A dead terrorist in the ruins of a destroyed hideout yields no intelligence as to wider organizational activities, particularly future plots.

Then arise the wider strategic issues connected with targeted killings by drones. First of all, there is the impact on Pakistan. Conflicting evidence exists as to how the attacks are perceived within the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). However, the drone attacks are far from popular in the rest of Pakistan with an opinion poll finding 82 per cent of Pakistanis believing the attacks are not justified in a country where 75 per cent of the population has an unfavourable view of the United States. U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton encountered

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26Jones, 134; Pillar and Preble, "Don't You Know There's a War On?,” 69-70.


first hand these attitudes on a visit to Pakistan, hearing complaints about the attacks from Pakistani students, one even calling the tactic terrorism.\textsuperscript{30} Anything that fuels anti-Americanism and grievance, particularly a perception, accurate or not, that innocents are being slaughtered from the sky by the United States, will not help the United States. As Pillar and Preble argue, “[a]nti-American sentiment impairs counterterrorism. It affects the willingness of a civilian population to cooperate with U.S. counterterrorist efforts, its willingness to support its own government’s efforts, and the inclination of individual civilians to condone, support, or even join the efforts of anti-American terrorist groups.”\textsuperscript{31}

Thanks to Wikileaks it is now known that reservations about drone attacks, particularly in terms of the future stability of Pakistan, have been held by at least one senior U.S. diplomat. Ambassador Anne Patterson, who served in Islamabad from July 2007 to October 2010, warned in a September 2009 cable that while “[u]nilateral targeting of al-Qaeda operatives and assets in these regions is an important component of dealing with the overall threat,” it would not force al-Qaeda out of tribal areas and increased attacks ran the risk of “destabilizing the Pakistani state, alienating both the civilian government and military leadership, and provoking a broader governance crisis in Pakistan without finally achieving the goal.”\textsuperscript{32} She added that success


\textsuperscript{31}Pillar and Preble, 72.

would only come through a long-term comprehensive strategy that addressed stability in
Afghanistan and Pakistani concerns about India.  

Then there are the implications for the domestic security of the United States itself. The
al-Qaeda-inspired/Islamist terrorist threat is neither solely foreign nor domestic, homegrown nor
international, leaderless nor centrally directed; it is a hybridity of all of these. It is both global
and local or “glocal” in nature. This has been true of violent movements in the past, such as
anarchism, but developments in communications and the advent of mass migration have only
heightened and formalized this process so that foreign policy activities abroad have domestic
consequences. There is no longer a division between the two in a deterritorialized world where
multiple and virtual identities can be maintained. Nations such as the United States have
become microcosms of the world and the implications of this are being experienced in a number
of areas, including espionage increasingly being carried out since the end of the Cold War by
people with dual citizenship. The same issue applies to terrorism. Some diaspora communities
have historically supported ethno-nationalist terrorist movements. Now individuals may
become radicalized for a mixture of foreign and domestic reasons, travel elsewhere in the world

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33 Ibid.
34 Lia, Globalisation and the Future of Terrorism, 154; Sanger, Globalization, 14
35 Katherine L. Herbig, “Changes in Espionage by Americans: 1947-2007,” Department of
September 2010).
36 Lia, Globalisation and the Future of Terrorism, 148, 154-5.
to get involved in the terrorist struggle, make contact with professional terrorists and receive training, and then return home to carry out attacks.\textsuperscript{37}

There has already been one example of the drone killings sparking an effort at retaliation in a glocalized context. Faisal Shahzad, a Pakistani immigrant to the United States who became an American citizen with a wife, job and home, attempted to detonate an improvised explosive device within a vehicle that he parked in New York’s Times Square. It failed to explode and he was apprehended and convicted.\textsuperscript{38} At his trial, he specifically cited attacks by UAVS against his native Pakistan as a prime motivator for his plot:

Well, the drone hits in Afghanistan and Iraq, they don't see children, they don't see anybody. They kill women, children, they kill everybody. It's a war, and in war, they kill people. ... I am part of the answer to the U.S. terrorizing the Muslim nations and the Muslim people. And, on behalf of that, I'm avenging the attack. Living in the United States, Americans only care about their own people, but they don't care about the people elsewhere in the world when they die.\textsuperscript{39}

The glocalized and deterritorialized nature of some current terrorism means that targeted killings which are perceived to kill civilians in Pakistan increase the chance of blowback against the United States through attacks within the United States. This threat is only heightened by the nature of the instrument that is administering death. Although the drones are physically present in the region being flown out of bases in Pakistan and Afghanistan, the individuals actually

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{37}The 7 July 2005 plot is the best example of this. See Steve Hewitt, \textit{The British War on Terror: Terrorism and Counterterrorism on the Home Front since 9-11} (London and New York: Continuum, 2008).


\textsuperscript{39}Shahzad, as quoted in Berger, \textit{Jihad Joe}, 161.
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pulling the triggers reside thousands of miles away in the United States. The lack of a target to hit back against for drone attacks where they are occurring raises the likelihood of retaliatory attacks against the United States. A member of the U.S. Air Force calls this “third order effects” which will see “increased long term efforts to counter attack against interests on U.S. soil.” In his study of new technology and war, P.W. Singer notes, “[u]nmanned systems … are the ultimate means of avoiding sacrifice. But what seems so logical and reasonable to the side using them may strike other societies as weak and contemptible. Using robots in war can create fear, but also unintentionally reveal it.” He quotes a troubling warning from a South Asian journalist about the implications for the United States of increased drone strikes: "It will be seen as a sign of American unwillingness to face death. Therefore, new ways to hit America will have to be devised. ... The rest of the world is learning that the only way to defeat America will have to be to bleed her on both ends.”

CONCLUSION

Although the drone attacks began under the Bush administration, it is under his successor that UAVs have been fully embraced as a key cornerstone of American counter-terrorism policy, not just in crucially significant Pakistan, but potentially elsewhere, such as the Arabian Peninsula.

40Singer, Wired for War, 312.


42M.J. Akbar, as quoted in Singer, Wired for War, 313.
and East Africa. In doing so and embracing a policy that emphasizes a war model of counter-terrorism with its concomitant short-term results, there appears to be a lack of long-range strategic consideration of the implications of both targeted killings and targeted killings by UAVs. This lack of strategic consideration applies not only to American interests in Pakistan but for the domestic security of the United States itself. Targeted killings outside of the law that are perceived to lead to the deaths of innocents invariably will increase resentment and anger toward the United States while potentially destabilizing the country where the attacks are taking place. Coupled with the killings in effect being carried out by individuals located in the United States will inevitably invited retaliation within the country UAV “operators” are based in. In that respect, there is an eerie parallel between Obama administration’s rush to embrace killings by drones and the preceding administration’s journey to the “dark side” of “enhanced interrogations” and secret prisons in the aftermath of 9-11. For both the words of Audrey Kurth Cronin are apt: "Policymakers who become caught up in the short-term goals and spectacle of terrorist attacks relinquish the broader historical perspective that is crucial to the reassertion of state power and legitimacy.”


Graph 1: Drone Strikes by Year in Pakistan

Graph 2: Yearly Drone Attacks in Pakistan by Overall Percentage, 2004-2011\textsuperscript{46}

\textsuperscript{46}Ibid.
Graph 3: Bush versus Obama (number of drone strikes)\textsuperscript{47}

\textsuperscript{47}Ibid.
Graph 4: Obama Drone Strikes in Pakistan during his first year in office (23 January 2009 to 20 January 2010)\textsuperscript{48}

\textsuperscript{48}Ibid.