

Demystifying the drone operations in Pakistan

Zeeshan-ul-Hassan Usmani

Abstract

This paper studies the accuracy of the drone operations in the tribal areas. The author has developed his own unique database, after collecting the data from publicly-available news sources, government's periodic information releases about the drone incidents, summary report on drone strikes in national parliaments, interviews of the locals in drone affected areas of FATA, think tank analyses, personal contacts with the media, law enforcement agencies, and political agents in the tribal regions. Dataset is publicly available on Pakistan Body Count (PBC) website. The paper provides a detailed data analysis on the numbers of drone strikes and fatalities in the tribal area of Pakistan, background and history of drone strikes in FATA, and reveals the most authenticate database on drone strikes in Pakistan.

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Introduction

The Federally Administered Tribal Area (FATA) of Pakistan is an autonomous region controlled by the Federal government and is located on the border with Afghanistan. This region has a historical importance as many invaders passed through here to reach the Indian subcontinent. During the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, FATA was used as training ground for the mujahedeen fighting in Afghanistan. However, after the defeat of the Soviets the region became oblivious to the world for some time.

Critics argue that drones kill without trial and deny justice to the affected civilians

It was in 2001, after the attack on World Trade Centre and the ensuing war on terror, that the importance of FATA was highlighted again. The border between Pakistan and

Afghanistan is very porous and not completely manned by the military. When the US offensive against the Taliban intensified, many Al-Qaeda and Taliban militants infiltrated into Pakistan through the porous border. The allied forces could not follow these elements inside Pakistani territory and they kept pressurizing the Pakistani government to do more operations against the militants. The Pakistani military responded by conducting operations within the tribal areas but the US and the allied forces were not satisfied by these efforts. To counter this problem of cross border infiltration of terrorists, the US initiated its drone strikes in FATA in 2004 to eliminate some of the high profile terrorists. It is not clear whether there was any deal on this issue between the US and the Pakistani government but Pulitzer prize-winning journalist, Mark Mazetti wrote that the program started as a result of deal between Pakistan and United States (Mazetti, 2013: 108-109). The drone strikes might have achieved some of the

objectives of the US, but it has raised a number of ethical and legal issues both for Pakistan and the US. Critics argue that drones kill without trial and deny justice to the affected civilians (CCC, 2012).

To counter this problem of cross border infiltration of terrorists, the US initiated its drone strikes in FATA in 2004 to eliminate some of the high profile terrorists.

number of people killed by it. The paper also calculates how many victims have died on average in a single drone strike as well as what percentages of attacks have hit women and children.

Brief history

Before analyzing the data, to find the reasons for increased drone strikes in Pakistan, a brief overview of the war on terror in Afghanistan and the adjoining tribal areas of Pakistan will help understand the issue. The



Figure 1: Map of the Federally-Administered Tribal Areas of Pakistan

This paper analyses the frequency of drone strikes in Pakistan and the

attacks on World Trade Centre in 2001 led to the US invasion of

Afghanistan, and the war on terror started. When Mullah Omar turned down the U.S request to hand over Arab Mujahidin after 9/11, President George W. Bush declared no distinction between the Afghan Taliban and Al-Qaeda members, vowing to combat them both without discretion (CCC, 2012). Operation Enduring Freedom started on October 7th 2001, and by November 2001, the United States had taken over Mazar-e-Sharif in the north of Afghanistan – a holy place for the members of Al-Qaeda and Taliban – with the assistance of Uzbek fighters (New America Foundation, 2015). The Northern Alliance took over Kabul a few days later.

As the allied forces tightened their circle, Osama bin Laden had no choice but to retreat towards Pakistan's border. The United States knew about his presence in Tora Bora, but the allied forces decided to rely on the Pashtun tribes to locate bin Laden and kill or apprehend him. This strategy was not successful. The Afghan Pashtuns played a double game and accepted money offered by Arabs fighters as well, to let bin Laden and his exhausted affiliates trickle into Pakistan (Serle and Ross, 2014). The Pakistani tribesmen were sympathetic towards the people crossing the border. Apart from

being obliged by *melmastia* (a Pashtun code for hosting guests with honor), they shared the same experience of the struggle against the Soviets in Afghanistan in the 1980s, which enhanced their personal bond.

The United States pressurized Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf to apprehend members of Al-Qaeda and Taliban crossing the border, and the Pakistan military began a ground offensive in October 2003. A dozen gunship helicopters airlifted 2,500 commandoes into South Waziristan (TBIJ, 2013). This was the first time in the history of Pakistan that the military intervened in the tribal areas. The *mashars* (tribal elders) reprimanded the army, emphasizing that any operation in Waziristan would be equated to war against Pashtuns (TBIJ, 2014).

Nek Muhammad, a former mujahid in Afghan Jihad, surfaced as the militant's leader to avenge Pakistan military operation in FATA in 2003. After two assassination attempts on President Musharraf, Pakistan's military decided to attack Muhammad's hometown Kalusha in Waziristan in March 2004. The military offensive followed a truce between the military and Nek

Muhammad (Rt.com, 2014) known as the Shakai peace treaty (Shah, 2013). This treaty aimed to have a ceasefire between the militants and the government. Nek Muhammad was killed shortly after the signing of the treaty in a US drone strike in June 2004. Muhammad's death near Wana in South Waziristan was the first known assassination in the tribal areas by use of armed drones.

In 2006, the government of Pakistan signed a pact - the Waziristan Accord - with the Taliban and Waziri tribal elders in North Waziristan. However, the pact did not stop the

Media reports leave a room of ambiguity on numerical details.

Several times, words like "many" and "several" are used to describe the number of people killed or wounded. Even if the media releases the figures of casualties obtained from government sources, it takes a long time to ascertain the veracity of the government information.

militants from expanding their activities.

Many militant leaders emerged later on. Baitullah Mehsud was another important Taliban commander in the FATA region. The United States continued to target terrorist networks in Afghanistan and the tribal areas of Pakistan. Mehsud was also killed later on in a US drone strike.

The number game

Several independent organizations maintain databases that document casualties from the drone attacks in Pakistan's tribal areas. According to the New America Foundation, a U.S. think tank, there have been a total of 370 strikes from 2004 to 2013, killing between 2,080 to 3,428 people, out of which 258 to 307 are marked as civilians, 1,623 to 2,787 as militants, and 199 to 334 remain unknown (New America Foundation, 2015). The Bureau of Investigative Journalism (BIJ) reported 383 drone strikes for almost the same period (2004-April 2014). BIJ report shows

2,296 to 3,719 people were killed, in which 416 to 957 were civilians and included 168 to 202 as children (Serle and Ross, 2014).

The leaked Pakistani government's report was severely criticised for being not accurate and many organizations presented proofs of civilian casualties. The ministry's top officials retracted their earlier statement, terming it "wrong and fabricated"

TBIJ also received leaked copy of the Pakistani government's document on drone strikes. This document recorded figures on drone strikes from early 2006 to September 2013 as reported by local political agents (FATA's top administrative officers) (TBIJ, 2014). Although the TBIJ stated that the casualties data in the leaked government report are "broadly similar" to TBIJ's own findings, as discussed above, the government document did not carry any record for the entire year of 2007 and for civilian casualties after 2008 (Rt.com, 2014). The document, therefore, didn't cover some strikes which got worldwide publicity, like the one that caused the death of Manana Bibi a 68 year old woman in the tribal areas of Pakistan (Shah, 2013).

Pakistani officials refused to verify the figures in the leaked document (Behn, 2013). Amnesty International's multiple requests to the representatives of the Pakistani government for information about the strikes have remained unanswered (Amnesty International, 2013:63). In March 2013, Ben Emmerson, UN's special rapporteur on human rights and counter terrorism, reported that Pakistan had confirmed the death of 400 civilians from the drone strikes and another 200 casualties were non-combatants (UN-OHCHR, 2013). Later, in October 2013, Pakistan's defence ministry submitted a report to the parliament, claiming that from 2008 to 2013, the number of civilians killed in drone strikes was 67. The report acknowledged 317 strikes during that time period. Moreover, it claimed that no civilian died of the strikes after 2012. This report was severely criticised for being not accurate and many organizations presented proofs of civilian casualties. The ministry's top officials retracted their earlier statement, terming it "wrong and fabricated" (Noorani, 2013).

Data analysis

The U.S. drone strikes have mostly targeted sites in Pakistan's tribal areas located on the border with Afghanistan. The identity of those killed and injured in the drone strikes remains contested. To justify the drone strikes, US consider all victims as guilty until proven innocent. The database used for this study makes a reverse assumption that all victims of the drones are innocent until proven guilty.

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It is certainly difficult to ascertain the exact number of casualties in FATA because media does not have easy access to the region and the reports of the government officials also seem unreliable. Media reports leave a room of ambiguity on numerical details. Several times, words like "many" and "several" are used to describe the number of people killed or wounded. Even if the media releases the figures of casualties

obtained from government sources, it takes a long time to ascertain the veracity of the government information. The casualty figures are confirmed later by database administrator for PBC after interviewing the locals, government administrators, checking out nearby health facilities or "medical-aid houses" for injured victims of drone strikes, tribesmen, and political agents. For, those who get injured in a drone strike and are under treatment but die later on are still considered among the injured. This makes the fatality database less accurate as it is not updated for those who die much later after the drone strike was conducted. The database prepared by the administrator and used for this study, takes into account the people who get injured in a drone strike and die much later. This makes the database more comprehensive and is much larger in size as compared to other publically available datasets.

Media reports about the drone strikes may be biased at times. If a drone strike kills a large number of people, the media may report fewer casualties due to pressure from both national government and international actors involved. In extreme cases the reports may not even be published. Media in

Pakistan has not matured as compared to the media in the developed countries and is also not completely independent. On the other hand, if a strike killed more foreign miscreants than local miscreants few would conceal the details of such a strike. Parsing through these biases is a big challenge in collecting the exact numbers of casualties. It is, therefore, necessary to make sure that diverse sources are explored, beyond mere reliance on media reports.

FATA is a male-dominated society and women are not allowed to interact with outsiders. Due to this reason the PBC database could not document a few cases, especially of pregnant women, who were reportedly killed or injured in a drone strike. Investigating those cases in the tribal region was difficult due to cultural sensitivity and norms

surrounding female members of the family.

A detailed analysis of the data of drone strikes in Pakistan as provided by the Pakistan Body Count (<http://www.pakistanbodycount.org>) was conducted which revealed very interesting facts. It is fascinating to see how data can reveal facts which otherwise would be oblivious to the world.

Figure 2 shows the annual frequency of attacks each year for the period 2004 to 2013. According to author's database (PBC), there were 379 drone strikes in Pakistan from 2004 to 2013 which killed 3,597 people and injured 1,357 others. A single drone strike claimed the lives of 10 people on average. Around 13% of the strikes have hit women and children. Almost 97% of the total strikes that our database recorded occurred from

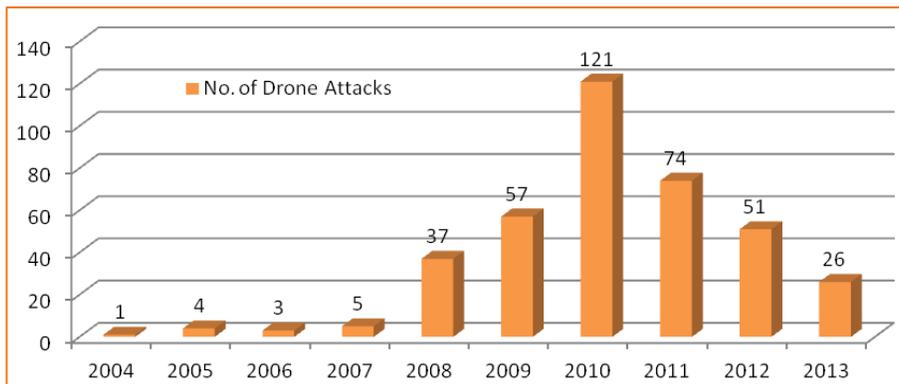


Figure 2: Annual Frequency: Number of Drone Attacks (2004 - 2013)

2008 to 2013. On average, a drone strike occurred every sixth day in those six years (2008-2013). In 2010 alone, 121 drone strikes occurred, the highest in any year, with a drone strike every third day. Very few attacks were launched in the first four years of the drone operation from 2004 to 2007.

Figure 3 shows the frequency of drone strikes along with their intensity (the size of the bubble represents the number of people killed in each year), for each year since 2004. It can be observed that the drone strikes increased in frequency and intensity after 2008

Figure 4 demonstrates the headcount for the dead and the injured. The death to injured ratio in this drone war has been 2.5:1. From 2008 to 2010

on average 720 people died in 72 strikes each year. The frequency and intensity decreased later on from 2011 to 2013. On average 400 people died in 50 strikes each year during this period. 2010 can be termed as the deadliest year of drone strikes in FATA. Besides recording the highest frequency of attacks, 2010 also witnessed the highest intensity of casualties. More than 1000 people died, with an average of 3 deaths per strike in that year. The figure also shows that there was a large number of injured in all the drone strikes since 2008. A large number of these injured might have died after a few days but most of the public databases about drone strikes do not count those.

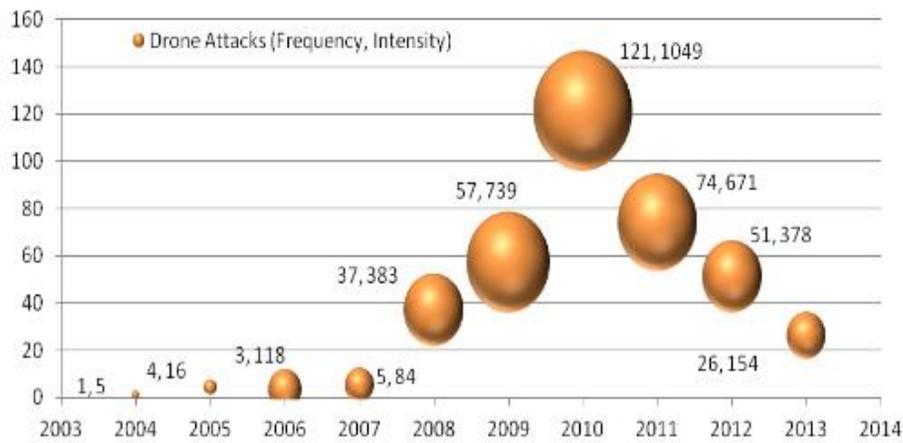


Figure 3: Drone Attacks: Frequency and Intensity (2004 - 2013)

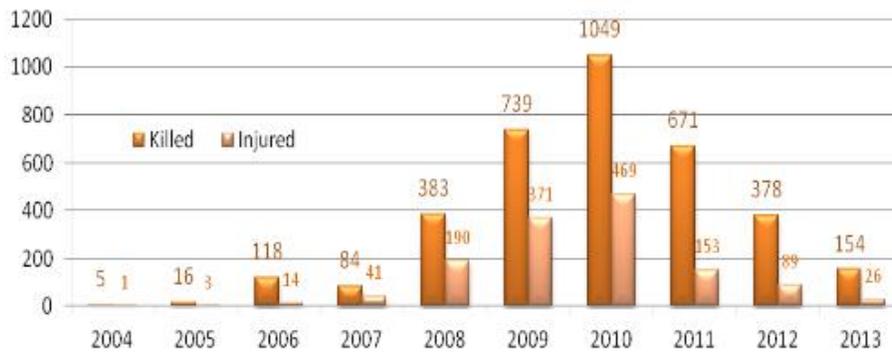


Figure 4: Killed vs. Injured (2004- 2013)

The effectiveness of the drone strikes can be evaluated from the different categories of people that were killed in these strikes. Figure 5 shows different categories of people killed in drone strikes in Pakistan since 2004. Of the total people killed so far, 2,604 were civilians accounting for 72% of the total casualties. Only 2% of the drone strike casualties were members of the Al-Qaeda outfit, while 15% of the targeted militants fall in the “Taliban” category.

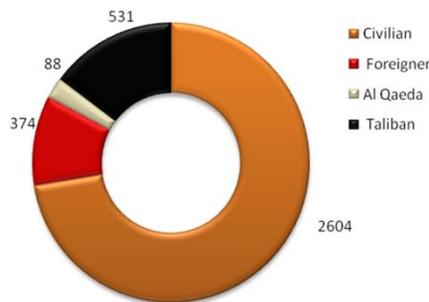


Figure 5: Drone Targets (2004- 2013)

Figure 6 shows the percentage distribution of drone strikes in Islamic months. The statistics of the drone strikes data reveal another interesting fact. The Islamic month of *Shawwal* witnessed the highest number of drone strikes, constituting approximately 16% of the total. The beginning of *Shawwal* is marked with the biggest Islamic festival of the year, Eid-ul-Fitr, in which congregational prayers are offered and visits paid to each other’s houses. It could not be a mere coincidence that such high number of strikes was conducted by chance during a particular Islamic month. It was probably due to the religious festivities that there was more movement of suspected terrorists as they would come out of their hiding places and visit family and friends.

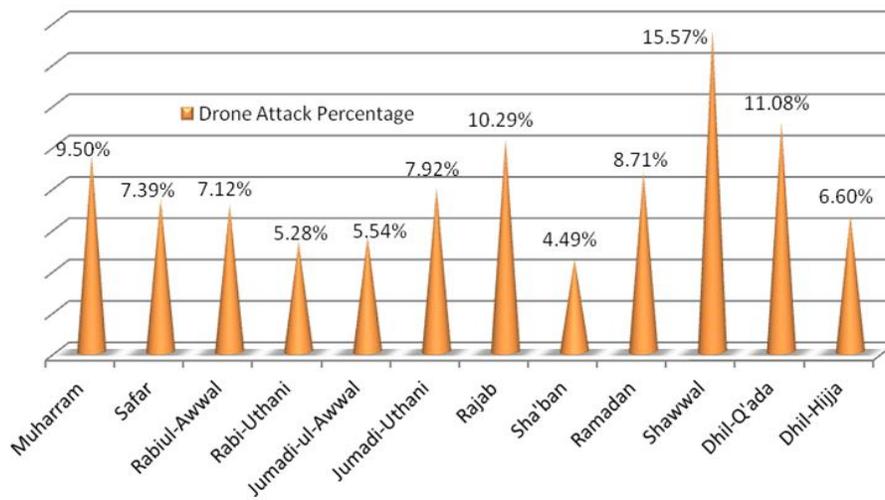


Figure 6: Percentage of Attacks by Islamic Months (2004- 2013)

Figure 7 provides the frequency of drone strikes according to the Gregorian calendar. The highest number of drone strikes occurred in September, constituting up to 12% of the total strikes. The month of April, on the other hand, has seen least

strikes, followed by February and July. The pattern seems cyclical with attacks increasing after every few months. When it comes to days, nearly 20% of the strikes have been on Fridays as shown in Figure 8 below. Most of the drone strikes were

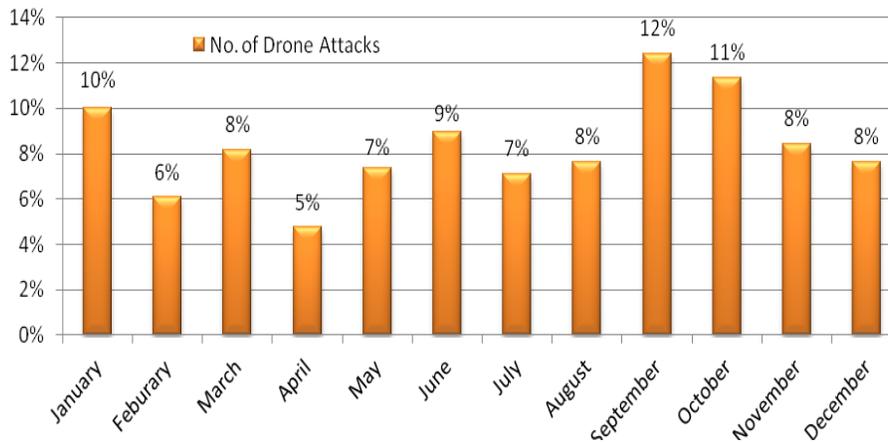


Figure 7: Frequency of Attacks by Gregorian Months (2004- 2013)

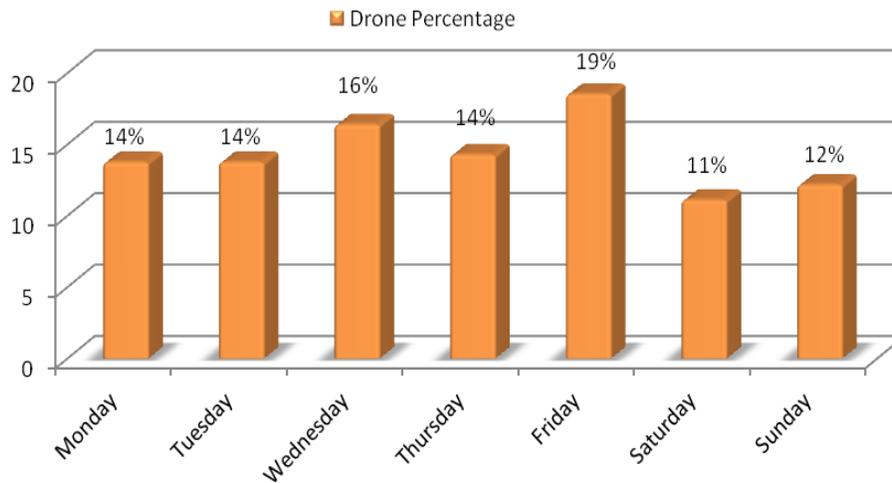


Figure 8: Percentage of Attacks by Weekdays (2004- 2013)

on Fridays indicates that the militants might have been travelling to mosques to offer prayers when they were targeted.

Almost 84% of the total attacks between 2004 and 2013, took place from August 2008 to August 2012. Approximately 85% of the total deaths from drone strikes were recorded in this time span. 85% of the total civilian deaths were also witnessed in this time period, going all the way till the end of 2013. What makes this period unique is the occurrence of multiple attacks on a single day irrespective of their target sites. Nearly 30% of the attacks from Aug. 2008 to Aug. 2012 have been multiple ones. Interestingly, multiple attacks were witnessed only during this time period. Before August 2008

and after August 2012, no single multiple-attack was carried out. These multiple attacks claimed 21% of the total deaths and 20% of the total injured. Out of every 10 deaths of multiple attacks, 8 were civilians; such attacks could take out two Al-Qaeda militants only.

Almost 84% of the total attacks between 2004 and 2013, took place from August 2008 to August 2012.

In September 2010, a cluster of drone strikes was carried out. In less than thirty days 24 attacks were carried out with 80% of the total in North Waziristan Agency. Half of cluster attacks were multiple attacks. In the

clusters attacks, 10 Taliban militants and 138 civilians died, accounting for 5% of the total civilian deaths. . This again highlights the priority of the US government to eradicate terrorist networks in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The data shows that the drone strike intensified and peaked in 2010 and a year later US forces killed OBL. The drone strikes reduced after 2011. As the top target was eliminated, there was no need to conduct multiple strikes. However data suggested that the civilian casualties were much higher as compared to the official figures.

The cost

The death and injury of civilians in the drone strikes has devastating effects on the society. Injuries of the survivors of drone attacks are very severe, mostly resulting in loss of limbs. This is not only painful for the people but it incapacitates the person for life. The tribal society in FATA has a joint family system. In most cases there is only one male bread earner of the family. Injury of civilians in drone strikes incapacitates the only bread earner in the family. Pakistan is not the best place for the handicapped, particularly the tribal areas where people still live a traditional life

without electricity, roads and other basic amenities of life.

A walk out for work in the agricultural fields may require navigating through twisty muddy tracks as FATA has mostly a mountainous terrain. A person with a leg amputation in FATA cannot even use the regular wheel chair, go to school or hospital, or even use a toilet on his own. And this makes life of an amputee in FATA difficult inside the house as well as outside it. Disability of the primary bread winner can change the course of life for an entire family, since most of the jobs in a village require physical exertion.

The drone attacks have left the tribal society devastated and angry. A lot of fear is observed in the local communities, which is even highlighted by an American scholar who wrote about children getting hysterical from the buzzing sound of drones in FATA (Kugelman, 2012).

Conclusion

This paper analysed the data about drone strikes in the tribal areas of Pakistan. The author spent a lot of time in interviewing people in the tribal area, government officials and media persons to come up with a unique database of drones strike

casualties. The drone strikes started in 2004 and peaked in 2010 killing thousands of people. This paper has tried to highlight that the number of civilians killed in the drone strikes is much higher than what is claimed by the authorities.

Due to these killings hatred has been created against the US in the region. Some hint that people who lost dear ones and their only bread earners

may have joined the ranks of the terrorists, as they pay them a decent monthly stipend and other facilities. The drone strikes have also created problems for the Pakistani government as the terrorists also attack its people and installations. Pakistan is fighting the war on terror on its home territory and has given a lot of sacrifices. Pakistan government has condemned the drone strikes as violation of its sovereignty.

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APPENDIX A:

Definitions

The following terms are defined by reviewing the journalism norms practiced in the areas affected by drone strikes, and internationally agreed definitions, including the ones that are mentioned in the UN charter on human rights.

Civilian: A person not on active duty in the armed services or police or firefighting force, and also not belonging to or working for any terrorist or anti-government organization

Foreigner: Any person belonging to or owing allegiance to a foreign country. In the scope of this text, the category of terrorist supersedes the category of foreigner; a foreigner terrorist will be listed as a terrorist. Therefore, a foreigner is any non-combatant person belonging to a foreign country. It includes settlers, like Afghans (who usually have kith and kin in FATA), as well as others who crossed the border before, during or after the US Invasion of Afghanistan, or the Soviet war.

Terrorist: A person who is against a government, or a particular sect, ideology, or group, and uses terrorism in the pursuit of political aims (He/she can be a local or a foreigner).

Taliban: A person affiliated to any of Taliban's militia groups engaged in fighting in Afghanistan and/or Pakistan against the government (He/she can be associated with any sister groups like Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), TTP-Jandullah, Jamaatul Ahrar, Ansarul Mujahidin, Haqqani group, Fedayeen al-Islam, Tehreek-e-Nafaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi etc)

Injured: A person with a physical damage to the body caused or aggravated by a drone strike (Injuries can be direct by blast waves and shrapnel or can be in-direct due to building collapse or stampede while rushing from the scene of the attack)

Definitions

Killed: The act of termination of life right then, or later, due to primary, secondary, or tertiary injuries caused by a drone strike

Al Qaeda: A global militant group founded by Osama Bin Laden to fight against the government for political gains

Children: In the scope of this text, persons below the age of 12 are considered children