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The year of the drone misinformation

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This paper challenges the widely held view in the research communities around the world that US drone strikes on the Pakistan's north-western border area with Afghanistan lead to large-scale civilian casualties and are unpopular in that tribal area. As an example of that view the author analyses a recent research report, 'The Year of the Drone', produced by the New American Foundation, and argues that sources of the report are questionable and doubtful. The author, who is a native of the border area with Afghanistan and has lived almost all of her lifetime in the area, informs that the drone attacks are popular in the region and the reports about large-scale civilian casualties are baseless. She provides some evidence in support of her argument and cautions the researchers against the uncritical acceptance of the notions, like the drone attacks are unpopular or have killed civilians.

Keywords: drone attacks; Waziristan; civilian casualties; Taliban; tribal realism; Pakistan; Peshawar Declaration

There has been a great deal of research and journalistic literature produced about the US drone attacks in the Federally Administered Tribal Area, FATA, in the north-west of Pakistan.¹ Most of the literature misinforms in terms of civilian casualties caused by the attacks and public opinion in FATA about the strikes. As a person from the area and having direct access to people from the drone-hit areas, I have been addressing such reports via my newspaper columns.² Unfortunately, the misinformation continues.

One such example is a new report 'The Year of the Drone' produced by two writers, Peter Bergen and Katherine Tiedemann, and published by the New American Foundation. The report claims that 32% of those who have died in drone attacks in FATA since 2004 have been innocent civilians and that public opinion in Pakistan, including FATA, is against the drone attacks. I will analyse the report with a view to showing how the report fails to capture the drone attacks-related situation in FATA, especially in Waziristan, the most drone-hit area in the north-west of Pakistan, in terms of both civilian casualties and public opinion. I would question the sources of information the report draws upon and contradict it with other sources of information.

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1. 'Civilian casualties'

1.1. *Media reports: the problem of access*

The authors write that their research draws only on accounts from reliable media organizations, Pakistani and Western, with 'deep reporting capabilities' in Pakistan. The term 'deep reporting capabilities' is highly questionable. The writers need to elaborate on 'deep reporting capabilities' of the media organizations in the drone-hit areas. What does it mean, especially in terms of access to the drone-hit areas in FATA? I understand no reporters of the media organizations referred to by the writers have direct access to or a presence in Waziristan due to bad security.

Hence, reports of civilian casualties that they produce are unverified. I have been sharing such reports about civilian casualties with many people in FATA. Not a single person, including those from the drone-hit villages, was able to confirm the reports.

Moreover, I have challenged all the media organizations that report 'civilian casualties' in the drone attacks to provide evidence of the casualties via my op-ed piece 'Drone Attacks: Challenging Some Fabrications' in the *Daily Times* (Pakistan) dated 2 January 2010. None of the media organizations with 'deep reporting capabilities' has thus far been able to meet the challenge! I repeat; there are no media organizations with 'deep reporting abilities' in this lawless Taliban-controlled area.

Secondly, the reason Bergen and Tiedemann's report and other media or research reports about 'civilian casualties' are wrong is that immediately after every attack the Taliban terrorists cordon off the area and no one, including the local villagers, is allowed to come near the targeted place. The militants themselves collect the bodies, bury the dead and then issue the statement that all of them were innocent civilians. This has been part of their propaganda campaign to provide messages to pro-Taliban and al Qaeda media persons and political forces in Pakistan to generate public sympathy for the terrorists.

1.2. *Media reports: reporters' credibility*

The people of FATA and North-West Frontier Province, NWFP, who observe the Pakistani media question the credibility of many Pakistani reporters who have been frequently reporting on FATA. They accuse them of constantly distorting the facts about this Pashtun area in line with the views of the pro-Pakistani military establishment's right-wing Islamist ideology. A journalist, Farooq Sulehria, writes in an analysis of the domination of pro-Taliban journalists in Pakistan:

also, a fact hardly known outside of Pakistan is domination of pro-Taliban journalists and columnists over country's media outlets. Ridiculed by left and liberal circles as Media Mujahideen, these journalists and columnists distort the facts, misreport or slant the news, and employ all the dirty tricks of the trade to build an opinion in favour of Taliban. Also, like any other country, many known journalists are cat's paw for Pakistan's secret services. Since Benazir Bhutto

(former prime minister of Pakistan) was never in the good books of Pakistan military she used to get a lot of bad press. Cornered and frustrated, when she became prime minister, she took a sweet revenge. A list comprising two dozen journalists was leaked to press. These journalists had been receiving monetary benefits from Intelligence Bureau to feed the readership with falsehoods and half-truths. It is not merely monetary benefits, sometimes journalists in Pakistan go an extra mile out of conviction to glorify or justify Taliban brutalities.³

The journalists' promotion of the Taliban or the military establishment's view is especially true in case of FATA. Most Pakistani media reports about FATA do not reflect the reality of the area. An example of how Pakistani reporters misinform regarding the situation in FATA can be seen in a report in *The News* dated 10 April 2010: '60 drone hits kill 14 al-Qaeda men, 687 civilians'.

Quoting some unnamed Pakistan authorities, the report claims that 687 civilians have been killed in 60 drone attacks. There is no information on how the authorities collected the figures. The authorities have no writ over Waziristan, which is under the control of the militants. Moreover, said authorities fail to provide any evidence in terms of names or place of residence of the victims. Also, the authorities have not been able to produce relatives of those 687 'innocent civilian' victims. Such information has not been provided till this date.

The point that I want to make is that researchers need to be critical of the Pakistani news reports about FATA and NWFP.

2. Public opinion source

The writers of the above report refer to some public opinion survey in Pakistan to conclude that public opinion in Pakistan is sharply against the drone attacks, which are seen as a violation of Pakistan's sovereignty. My question is: which public opinion in Pakistan are the writers referring to? Public opinion in FATA or outside FATA? The public opinion survey that the writers referred to has not been conducted in FATA. Therefore, it does not capture the view of the people of FATA. Actually, according to my knowledge, there has never been any public opinion survey in FATA on the issue of drone attacks, apart from the one conducted by the Aryana Institute for Regional Research and Advocacy (AIRRA), which reflects a positive public opinion of the tribesmen of FATA on the drone attack.

I would therefore, request researchers to refrain from drawing conclusions from public opinion surveys that have not included FATA in the sampling.

3. Factual mistake in Bergen and Tiedeman's report

In terms of innocent 'civilian casualties', the report points out that the drone attack that killed Baitullah Mahsud also killed his wife and father-in-law. In fact, the father-in-law is alive and well in Waziristan. It is also the case that the father-in-law, Mr Ikramudin, is not an innocent civilian; he has had close links with the Taliban. This is one reason he gave his daughter in marriage to Baitullah. He, however, went through an ordeal following Baitullah's death in the drone

attack. The Taliban arrested him, his brother, Sadullah Mahsud, a nephew, Iqbal Mahsud, and a cousin, Zargul Mahsud, on suspicion of spying for the US that led to the drone attack which killed Baitullah. The Taliban later released him and his brother. But they tortured to death his nephew, Iqbal Mahsud, and cousin, Zargul Mahsud. The Taliban killed them by bolting nails in their heads and knees.

4. Civilian casualties: the tribal realism

I have had dozens of opportunities to discuss with many people of FATA – men, women, educated, illiterate, rich and poor – the issue of the ‘civilian casualties’ in drone attacks. The crux of the discussions is as follows.

Taliban and Al-Qaeda have overpowered the people of FATA, who are suffering under the militants’ control. The Taliban’s control has to be broken. There is no question about that. The question is how? One approach is that of the Pakistan army: hundreds of civilians killed,⁴ public and property worth millions of dollars destroyed,⁵ and hundreds of thousands of people displaced and not even a single leading Taliban commander killed! The other way is the US use of drones: no displacement of the population, no damage to public or private property, almost no civilian casualties and tens of leading Al-Qaeda and Taliban leaders killed. The local people obviously prefer the latter.

They point out that civilians are rarely killed in drone attacks. One occasion on which some civilians were killed was a drone attack on the funeral procession of Khwazh Wali, a commander of Tehrek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). In that attack too, many TTP militants were killed including Bilal (the TTP commander of the Zangara area in Waziristan) and two Arab members of Al-Qaeda. But some civilians were also killed. After the attack, the local people used it as an excuse not to attend the funerals of slain TTP militants or offer them food, which they used to do out of compulsion in order to put themselves in the TTP’s good books. ‘It (this drone attack) was a blessing in disguise,’ several people commented.

People in Waziristan have confirmed that women and children of the Taliban and Al-Qaeda have been dying in the drone attacks. But they also emphasize that that too used to happen in the past. Now the terrorists don’t hold meetings at places where women and children of the Al-Qaeda and Taliban militants reside. Moreover, in this case too no one is in a position to give even an approximate number of the women and children of the terrorists killed in drone attacks.

The people, however, do not rule out the possibility that more children and women of the terrorists may be killed in future attacks. But they put a very realistic perspective on this possibility. ‘This is war, not game and in wars innocent people do die’, they argue. The options available to the people of FATA are harsh. Either they condemn the drone attacks for the sake of women and children of the militants and let them continue to slaughter the tribal people, including women and children, or they ignore the deaths among the militants’ families and welcome the attacks in the hope of their release from the Taliban and Al-Qaeda’s control of their land. Most people of FATA go for the latter.

5. Evidence of FATA public opinion on drone attacks

Unlike the wider society in Pakistan, Taliban and Al-Qaeda terrorists control the tribal society in FATA. Tribesmen and women of FATA have suffered much more at the hands of the terrorists than the people of any other area of Pakistan. It is in this context that contrary to the wider public opinion in Pakistan, the people of FATA welcome the drone attacks and want the Americans to continue hitting the FATA-based militants with drones until they have been completely eliminated. I know all this because of my close association with the area. However, I need to provide scientific evidence to convince the research communities.

Due to the bad security situation, the area is not accessible for independent research. However, there is enough evidence that should at least caution researchers against uncritical acceptance such notions as that the drone attacks are unpopular in FATA or that they lead to large-scale civilian killings. Following are the pieces of evidence.

5.1. AIRRA survey

The Aryana Institute for Regional Research and Advocacy (AIRRA) is a think tank⁶ made up of researchers and political activists, including myself, from FATA and NWFP. We have direct access to the drone-hit areas through family, friends, work, and tribal or ethnic affiliations. Our information is that the people of Waziristan welcome the drone attacks.

Despite the acute resource constraints,⁷ AIRRA conducted a survey on the drone attacks that clearly showed that most people are comfortable for the drone attacks to continue. The survey findings should be a signal to caution researchers against uncritical acceptance of the notion that the attacks lead to instant anti-Americanism in the area. With better resources, AIRRA could do a much wider survey in terms of themes and sampling on the issue to bring about an even clearer picture of the situation in FATA. AIRRA is open to cooperate with any research organization for the purpose.

5.2. Peshawar Declaration

The Peshawar Declaration⁸ is a joint statement of political parties, civil society organizations, businessmen, doctors, lawyers, teachers, students, labourers and intellectuals of FATA and NWFP, following a conference on 12–13 December 2009, in Peshawar, Pakistan. The Declaration notes that if the people of the war-affected areas are satisfied with any counter-militancy strategy, it is drone attacks that they support the most. Some people in Waziristan compare the drones with the Qur'an's *Ababeel* – the holy sparrows sent by God to avenge Abraha, the intended conqueror of the *Khana Kaaba*, the holiest Muslim site in Mecca, Saudi Arabia.

It is pertinent to mention that a US researcher, Brian Glyn Williams, has already taken note of the stance of Peshawar Declaration on drone attacks through his article⁹ in the *Terrorism Monitor*, an online weekly of the Jamestown

Foundation. This gives the hope that other researchers would also pay attention to the declaration, because, as far as I am aware, no other Muslim society has likened anything from the US military with a Qur'anic symbol? Only the Pashtun have done this publicly in this time of rising anti-Americanism across the Muslim world! Why would they do so if the drone attacks were as despised in their homeland as reported by the research?

5.3. *Reference from Armageddon in Pakistan*

Armageddon in Pakistan is a book written under a false name, 'Khan', for security reasons. The writer is a Pashtun from NWFP. Since the publication of this book he has lived in hiding somewhere in NWFP. He feels very threatened by the Taliban and the intelligence agencies of Pakistan. Khan's book depicts happy sentiments of the people of Bajaur in FATA about the drone attacks. I quote his from the book:

Another excitement is the sighting of the drone. People and children do not rush indoors, they look at them and discuss and argue about the distance at which they must be flying. The general impression is that they are close. They feel the happiness of something close, friendly and powerful and against evil.¹⁰

I hope that the above evidence coupled with my challenge to the media to provide proof of civilian deaths, would encourage researchers to investigate the issue of the drone attacks on FATA from a new and unconventional perspective.

Conclusion

The reason I analysed Bergen and Tiedemann's report is by no means to be disrespectful to the authors. This analysis is a request to researchers linked with leading think tanks in the West on behalf of myself, as a person from the religious militancy hit north-west of Pakistan, and other people of our area with whom I have been discussing the report. My request is simple: please do not draw conclusions about FATA from unverified media reports or public opinion surveys that exclude the area. At least you should clearly say that you or your think tank are in no position to verify the media reports independently and that this is a limitation of your research. Any conclusions drawn from the research should be seen in light of this limitation. In my view, this would make your research more objective, less objectionable in the eyes of the people of FATA and, above all, less likely to mislead people around the world about the ground situation in FATA.

Notes

1. For example, for example, Kilcullen and Exum, 'Death From Above, Outrage Down Below'; Dogar, 'The Talibanisation of Pakistan's Western Region', 29; Ahmad, 'Role of Airpower for Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan and FATA', 76; Sheikh, 'Disaggregating Pakistani Taliban, Does the Good, the Bad and the Ugly Taliban Distinction Represent a Failed Policy', 7.

2. Taj, 'Drone Attacks – a Survey', 'Drone Attacks: Challenging Some Fabrications', 'Drone Attacks and US Reputation'.
3. Sulehria, 'Reporting "war on terror"'.
4. 'Cost of Conflict in FATA', 5.
5. Ibid., 3.
6. <http://www.airra.org>.
7. Taj, 'Pakhtun Diaspora: Irresponsible and Insensitive'.
8. See the text of the Peshawar Declaration at: http://khyberwatch.com/nandara/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=809&Itemid=84.
9. Williams, 'Pakistani Responses to the CIA's Predator Drone Campaign Against the Taliban and al-Qaeda'.
10. Khan, *Armageddon in Pakistan*, 178.

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