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America's Scandalous Drone War Goes Unmentioned in the Campaign

James Joyner
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U.S. Air Force/Getty Images News/Getty Images

A new study released this week by researchers at Stanford and NYU has found that American drone strikes in Pakistan are killing far more civilians than advertised, taking

out few high value targets, and have become the primary recruiting tool for the terrorist groups the policy is aimed at combating. The report, "Living Under Drones: Death, Injury, and Trauma to Civilians From US Drone Practices in Pakistan," is based on "more than 130 interviews with victims, witnesses, and experts, and review of thousands of pages of documentation and media reporting" conducted over nine months.

The research found that, over the last eight years, drone strikes have "killed 2,562-3,325 people in Pakistan, of whom 474-881 were civilians, including 176 children." Meanwhile, only 2 percent of those killed were "high-level" targets. This means that the strikes have killed three times as many children as terrorist leaders. The report also shows that the impact of the drone war isn't limited to those directly affected by strikes because the constant presence of drones overhead "terrorizes men, women, and children, giving rise to anxiety and psychological trauma among civilian communities." People in these regions have become afraid to render assistance to innocent victims or to attend funerals, as both rescuers and mourners have been targeted for secondary strikes.

The report's findings are irrefutably stunning. Even more so is the fact that these revelations won't play any role at all in the pending presidential campaign.

The study authors point to several legal, moral, and philosophical questions that arise from the drone policy, including whether it's wise for a democratic government to undertake a systematic policy of killing over a period of years with virtually no transparency to its own people. Let's leave those aside, however, and focus on the narrow and basic question of whether the campaign of targeted killing facilitated by the use of unmanned vehicles serves U.S. policy interests. American citizens are, after all, unlikely to demand that their leaders abandon a policy that's keeping them safe from another 9/11 attack on the basis of some innocent lives ruined halfway across the world. It is, after all, easy to rationalize the toll on civilians who are family or associates of terrorists who mean us harm.

To be sure, some extremely high-value al Qaeda leaders have been killed under the policy. Qaed Sinan Harithi, believed to have been a planner of the USS Cole attack and killed in Yemen in November 2002, was likely the first. Saeed al-Masri, then-al Qaeda's number 3, and Ahmed Mohammed Hamed Ali, East Africa embassy bombing mastermind, and others are also on the list. Further, as the report begrudgingly acknowledges, "Documents selectively released by the US after the raid on bin Laden's Abbottabad compound indicate that bin Laden himself expressed concern about, and modified operations in response to, drone strikes."

Still, the vast majority of those killed are mere "foot soldiers" or simply those who might be "militants" of some stripe. Indeed, that's been an explicit policy choice by President Obama, under whose tenure the pace of attacks have dramatically escalated. The Bush administration carried out between 45 and 52 attacks, all aimed at major terrorist leaders. In less than half the time, his successor has carried out nearly 300, lowering the targeting

threshold to include so-called "signature" strikes against "groups of men who bear certain signatures, or defining characteristics associated with terrorist activity, but whose identities aren't known."

While obviously dangerous—the 9/11 hijackers themselves were low level operatives, after all—they are much easier to replace than senior leaders. It's debatable whether it's worth the reported one million dollar per strike price tag for taking out these low level targets, much less whether it's worth the resentment and collateral damage that's the natural fallout.

The report authors note that "evidence suggests that US strikes have facilitated recruitment to violent non-state armed groups, and motivated further violent attacks." They cite a May New York Times report asserting that "drones have replaced Guantánamo as the recruiting tool of choice for militants" along with a June Pew survey which finds "74 percent of Pakistanis now consider the US an enemy." (Although, in fairness, they omit the fact that the exact same survey shows very low support for al Qaeda, the Taliban, and other anti-American extremist groups and that, if anything, the trend in that regard is positive.) The report also cites a June 2012 Middle East Policy Council report which "identified a correlation between drone strikes and terrorist attacks in the years 2004-2009"and found it "probable that drone strikes provide motivation for retaliation, and that there is a substantive relationship between the increasing number of drone strikes and the increasing number of retaliation attacks."

These findings reflect the increasing sense among expert analysts and practitioners that the policy is backfiring. New America Foundation national security studies program director Peter Bergen declared earlier this month that "If the price of the drone campaign that increasingly kills only low-level Taliban is alienating 180 million Pakistanis--that is too high a price to pay." Retired Admiral Dennis Blair, former Director of National Intelligence, declared in an August 2011 New York Times op-ed that "Drone strikes are no longer the most effective strategy for eliminating Al Qaeda's ability to attack us," and that the drone campaign "is eroding our influence and damaging our ability to work with Pakistan to achieve other important security objectives like eliminating Taliban sanctuaries, encouraging Indian-Pakistani dialogue, and making Pakistan's nuclear arsenal more secure."

Despite the increasing intensity with which this issue is being debated in foreign policy wonk circles, the discussion has been all but absent in the ongoing presidential campaign. Terrorism is not among the twenty-six "issues" discussed on Mitt Romney's website and the treatment of "Afghanistan & Pakistan" doesn't mention the drone policy. To the extent that the issue is getting any traction on the domestic political front, it's coming from the likes of Glenn Greenwald and others on the president's left. One suspects that's just fine with Obama, whose ability to tout the fact that "we got bin Laden" has put him in the unique position among Democrats of having the edge on national security issues.

Indeed, Obama has shrewdly—some might say cynically—positioned himself to the right on foreign policy, thereby insulating himself from the "weak on defense" canard that has plagued his party going back to the days of George McGovern. He doubled down on Afghanistan, at the expense of more than a thousand dead American soldiers and marines, at a point when it was obvious the war was unwinnable on the timetable he set. He ignored the hectoring over damaged relations with Pakistan that would result from the bin Laden raid, betting that success would ensure his re-election. And his use of drone strikes makes George W. Bush look like a cautious man.

Romney seems to sense that he can't use foreign policy to his advantage and has embarrassed himself on the few occasions he's tried, notably his bizarre performance the morning after the murder of America's ambassador to Libya. So, he's taken James Carville's axiom ("It's the economy, stupid") far more seriously than Bill Clinton ever did. The result is that the most important national security issues of the day aren't being debated during the contest to determine who will be commander-in-chief the next four years.