

Pakistan's Afghan Border Areas: Victims of Obama's Drone Slaughter

by Ramtanu Maitra

March 25—Months before he was “gifted” with the Nobel Peace Prize late in 2009, President Barack Obama had already begun his cold-blooded killing, using his new-found remote killers, the drones. Years later, in 2015, in his memoir, Geir Lundestad, the non-voting Secretary of the Nobel Committee until he retired in 2014, wrote that he regretted awarding Obama the prize. Lundestad's regret did not bring back to life the thousands that Obama's drones had killed, nor did it help to put back together thousands of families torn apart by Obama's killings, be it in Afghanistan, in Yemen, in Pakistan, or in any other of the seven countries in which Obama and his CIA fellow-killers carried out drone attacks, killing in violation of the sovereignty of those nations and terrorizing their people.

Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) are a case in point. The FATA, a virtually ungoverned area dominated by a string of Pushtun tribes, engulfs border areas of Pakistan and Afghanistan, along the much-disputed Durand Line drawn by the British Raj. In October 2001, soon after the 9/11 attack on the United States, President George W. Bush launched an ill-conceived invasion of Afghanistan, calling it “Operation Enduring Freedom.” The goal was to overturn Afghanistan's Islamic fundamentalist Taliban regime, which

hosted al-Qaeda and its leader, Osama bin Laden—a largely synthetic figure who has been used to divert attention from the Saudi state sponsorship of the 9/11 butchery. British, Canadian, Australian, German, and French troops joined Washington's Bush-led folly.

Victory is Body-Count

Although the Taliban were dethroned quickly with the help of the Afghan opposition, the FATA territory allowed a large number of Taliban, al-Qaeda, and other local insurgents who had opposed the U.S. invasion, to move into Pakistan and use much of this 10,000-plus square miles of land to set up bases to oppose and harass the invading foreigners in Afghanistan. They began to operate freely, bringing in arms and fighters through the disputed border and ungoverned terrain. It was evident from the outset, that Pakistan had no intention of aiding an outsider nation, such as the United States, to take military control of Afghanistan with its long common border with Pakistan. As a result, whether the powers that be in Islamabad encouraged these fighters or not, the fighters were allowed virtually free movement to carry out their objectives.

By the time Obama was sworn in, in 2009, it was evident



Barack Obama presenting his Nobel lecture after receiving the Nobel Prize in 2009.

that the Taliban were back in almost full force, and that the so-called “winning” of the Afghan war was merely a dream in the minds of a handful of warmongers in Washington. If he had ever chosen to be honest with the American people, Obama would have admitted that for all practical purposes, all that was left of that invasion was the continued killing of Afghans, while sacrificing more American troops. And he and his fellow warmongers must have known that such killings would create new enemies, possibly more vicious than the ones before. That is exactly what his killing policy delivered in subsequent years.

Nonetheless, mouthing promises of “change,” and armed with his Nobel Peace Prize and his drones (first introduced by Bush, but used only sparingly), Obama went about “killing” the “suspected insurgents” from the air, and in the process, killed hundreds of innocent Pakistani civilians, which terrorized the FATA population in general. Such killings of innocent Pakistanis and Afghans were kept under wraps, since no mainstream journalists had any access to the FATA. They were not welcomed in this remote land, which was already very difficult to navigate because of its hilly terrain. Pakistan’s authorities, unwilling to abide by Obama’s diktats and at the same time afraid of losing arms and aid from Washington, went along with the Obama Administration’s official position, re-echoed religiously by the mainstream media, that the drones were killing off only the terrorists (Taliban) and not innocent people.

When Obama saw that he could get away with his killings of “suspected insurgents,” he set about to kill his way to a delusional victory in Afghanistan. He launched more strikes in his first year than Bush carried out during his entire presidency. A total of 563 strikes, largely by drones, targeted Pakistan, Somalia, and Yemen during Obama’s two terms, compared to 57 strikes under Bush. Between 384 and 807 civilians were killed in those countries, according to reports logged by the Bureau of Investigative Journalism.¹

1. Jessica Purkiss and Jack Serle, “Obama’s Covert Drone War in Numbers: Ten Times More Strikes than Bush,” Bureau of Investigative Journalism, Jan. 17, 2017.



U.S. Air Force photo/Lt Col Leslie Pratt

An MQ-1 Predator, armed with AGM-114 Hellfire missiles, in a combat mission over southern Afghanistan.

Pakistan in the Cross-Hairs

According to the London-based Bureau of Investigative Journalism (BIJ), among other sources, Pakistan’s FATA have seen the highest number of drone strikes outside of Afghanistan, beginning in 2004. The BIJ calculated that more than 400 strikes were launched targeting the Pakistani Taliban (TTP), al-Qaeda, other foreign jihadist groups, and the Afghan Taliban.

As the CIA began its most intense bombing campaigns in Pakistan between 2008 and 2010, it ignored lessons about minimizing civilian casualties that were becoming critical parts of counterinsurgency doctrine during the same period in Afghanistan. A WikiLeaks cable unearthed by author Chris Woods, a British investigative journalist, noted that the late U.S. special envoy Richard Holbrooke had waved off concerns about the drone strikes in Pakistan with the claim that “drones were more targeted than bombs.”

Woods, the author of *Sudden Justice: America’s Secret Drone Wars*, has argued that the increase was driven by the desire of the U.S. military in Afghanistan to hit insurgent safe havens across the border. “The many strikes on the TTP, which were not a threat to the United States in Afghanistan, might have been part of a *quid pro quo* deal between the CIA and Islamabad, i.e., the United States struck the TTP in return for Pakistan turning a blind eye to the United States killing those threatening American soldiers in Afghanistan.”²

2. Cora Currier, “Six Facts from ‘Sudden Justice,’ A New History of the



Outside a house, with bloodstained walls, after a U.S. drone attack in Mohammadhel village in north Waziristan along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. The strike killed about 20 people in two villages..

In Washington, the recurring theme of the Obama Administration has been the alleged precision with which the drones kill. Although since 2001, the United States has asserted its legal right, through an Executive Order signed by President George W. Bush, to kill hostile non-state actors if their host government is “unwilling or unable” to deal with the threat, the BIJ pointed out in its Jan. 17, 2017 report that the Obama Administration has insisted that drone strikes are so “exceptionally surgical and precise” that they kill terror suspects while not putting “innocent men, women, and children in danger.” This could be as far from the truth as the United States winning the war in Afghanistan—or the war in Vietnam.

Perhaps more important, Obama ignored the fact that the United States had not invaded Pakistan, but in fact, Pakistan was a partner in America’s “war on terror.” But Obama, a constitutional lawyer, could not be bothered with those little details. Apparently, to him, remote killing outside of war zones was business as usual. Obama, as President, chose to establish a law only for himself, which would allow only him the power to target foreign individuals, or Americans dwelling in foreign lands, for execution on his sole command, since he determined that the person to be killed was a “terrorist.”

The list of whom to kill using drone attacks was drawn up in the White House on “Terror Tuesdays.” President Obama, acting as judge, jury, and execu-

Drone War,” *The Intercept*, June 11, 2015.

tioner, “personally authorized all strikes in Yemen and Somalia and ‘the more complex and risky ones’ in Pakistan (about a third of the total).”³

Micah Zenko, in a 2013 special report of the U.S. Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) titled, “Reforming U.S. Drone Strike Policy,” noted that,

Obama Administration officials have also failed to address other troubling questions about the scope of drone strikes. For instance, do legitimate targets include children, individuals attempting to rescue drone strike victims, and the funeral processions of deceased militants? U.S. drones have reportedly targeted all three on multiple occasions.

Presumably, the United States deliberately targets these groups, but when asked, U.S. officials will not acknowledge such practices. In addition, it is unclear if there is a process in place to investigate accidental civilian casualties, hold willful perpetrators of those actions accountable, or provide compensation to the families of unintended victims—similar to the process for accidental civilian casualties as a result of U.S. military operations in Afghanistan. None of these targeting issues stems directly from drones themselves, but instead from the policy choices about how targets are selected, public articulation of who is targeted, and the maintained position that highly publicized CIA drone strikes are covert and thus cannot be acknowledged.⁴

Deny Till the Cows Come Home

What should have disturbed the American people, were repeated denials of drone killings by the Obama Administration, even while many reports emerged in Pakistan on the intensity of the drone attacks. Until 2012, the Obama Administration kept denying that it was killing people with drones inside Pakistan. Such denials also helped Washington to ignore accusations of civilian deaths. In July 2011, the *Guardian* ran an

3. Kate Clark, “Drone Warfare 2: Targeted Killings—A Future Model for Afghanistan?” Afghan Analysts Network, March 1, 2017.

4. Micah Zenko, “Reforming U.S. Drone Strike Policies,” Council on Foreign Relations, Council Special Report No. 65, January 2013.

article documenting the strikes on the FATA using the photographs and documents collected by Pakistani photojournalist Noor Behram. Behram is from the FATA, and has documented drone strike scenes in his native Waziristan district.

Sometimes arriving on the scene just minutes after the explosion, he first has to put his camera aside and start digging through the debris to see if there are any survivors. It's dangerous, unpleasant work. The drones frequently hit the same place again, a few minutes after the first strike, so looking for the injured is risky. There are other dangers too: Militants and locals are suspicious of anyone with a camera. After all, it is a local network of spies working for the CIA that are directing the drone strikes.

But Noor Behram says his painstaking work has uncovered an important—and unreported—truth about the U.S. drone campaign in Pakistan's tribal region: that far more civilians are being injured or [are] dying than the Americans and Pakistanis admit. The world's media quickly reports on how many militants were killed in each strike. But reporters don't go to the spot, relying on unnamed Pakistani intelligence officials. Noor Behram believes you have to go to the spot to figure out whether those killed were really extremists or ordinary people living in Waziristan. And he's in no doubt.

"For every 10 to 15 people killed, maybe they get one militant," he said. "I don't go to count how many Taliban are killed. I go to count how many children, women, innocent people, are killed."

According to Noor Behram, the strikes not only kill the innocent but injure untold numbers and radicalize the population. "There are just pieces of flesh lying around after a strike. You can't find bodies. So the locals pick up the flesh and curse America. They say that America is killing us inside our own country, inside our own homes, and only because we are Muslims. The youth in the area surrounding a strike get crazed. Hatred builds up inside those who have seen a drone attack. The Americans think it is working, but the damage they're doing is far greater." . . .

There are photos of burned and battered Qur'ans—but no pictures of women: The conser-

vative culture in Waziristan will not allow Noor Behram to photograph the women, even dead and dismembered. So he makes do with documenting shredded pieces of women's clothing.⁵

Kill, But Invoke Law

To escape the blame for the murder of innocent victims, the Obama Administration needed a "legal" side-road. Jameel Jaffer of the *Guardian*, in a Nov. 15, 2016 [article](#), pointed out that "Senior officials in the Administration of President Barack Obama variously described drone strikes as 'precise,' 'closely supervised,' 'effective,' 'indispensable,' and even the 'only game in town'—but what they emphasized most of all is that the drone strikes they authorized were lawful." In this context, Jaffer noted that "lawful" had a specialized meaning:

Except at the highest level of abstraction, the law of the drone campaign had not been enacted by Congress or published in the U.S. Code. No federal agency had issued regulations relating to drone strikes, and no federal court had adjudicated their legality. Obama Administration officials insisted that drone strikes were lawful, but the "law" they invoked was their own. It was written by executive branch lawyers behind closed doors, withheld from the public and even from Congress, and shielded from judicial review.

Zenko, in his CFR report cited here, noted that the Obama Administration, breaking with precedent, began to acknowledge the broad outlines of selected drone strikes in early 2012:

Initially, the Obama Administration maintained that all targeted killings in non-battlefield settings were classified as covert, and officials refused to admit their existence on the record, while candidly discussing the strikes off the record. But in January 2012, President Obama unexpectedly answered a pointed question about drones: "A lot of these strikes have been in the FATA going after al-Qaeda suspects . . . actually,

5. Saeed Shah and Peter Beaumont, "U.S. Drone Strikes in Pakistan Claiming Many Civilian Victims, Says Campaigner," *Guardian*, July 17, 2011.



allpakistaninews.com

A Pakistani intelligence official reported, on April 22, 2011, that at least eleven people were killed in an Obama Administration drone attack, in which four missiles were fired on a compound in Spinwam, North Waziristan.

drones have not caused a huge amount of civilian casualties.”

Since the Obama Administration was concealing all the drone attacks in Pakistan until as late as 2012, and never admitted the killing of civilians by the supposedly ultra-precise drones, the question of paying compensation to the families of those killed in the FATA did not arise. But Obama had to give up that bit of charade as well. Although the Pakistanis were never considered worthy of receiving any compensation, a crestfallen Obama appeared before news reporters on April 23, 2015, apologizing for “accidentally” killing captive American aid worker Warren Weinstein, Italian hostage Giovanni LoPorto, and two terrorists who were U.S. citizens.

The al-Qaeda casualties were Adam Gadahn, a Californian who became a prominent propagandist for al-Qaeda, was close to Osama bin Laden, and had a \$1 million bounty on his head for treason, and Ahmed Farouq, who was described as a deputy commander in Pakistan. These were, however, not the only American citizens killed by the CIA-operated and Obama-ordered drones. These four deaths brought to seven the number of Americans killed by the extra-judicial power grabbed by Obama, while the U.S. Department of “Justice” under Obama’s friend, Eric Holder, stood on the sidelines cheering. In reality, the reason that drone killing became the favorite annihilation weapon of Obama, re-

placing the napalm or cluster bombs used in earlier days, is that it is much more deniable.

Following that incident, Obama said that Weinstein’s family would be compensated for his “accidental” killing. His wife, Elaine Weinstein, made it public that she had been hoping that the Obama Administration and Pakistan’s government would together help to free him. While compensating the Weinstein family was the right thing to do, hundreds of Pakistani civilians killed over the years—of which at least 200 were children, according to the BIJ—were not considered worthy of receiving compensation. Weinstein’s case was the first time that the U.S. government has committed to compensate civilian victims of drone strikes in Pakistan.

‘Grievable’ and ‘Ungrievable’ Lives

Obama’s compensation of some, while ignoring others, shows the truth of Judith Butler’s analysis that nations at war divide the world into “grievable” and “ungrievable lives.” In her 2016 book, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* She pointed out that lives not considered grievable become targets for annihilation in order to protect those lives that are “worthy of life.” Butler further notes how populations who do not conform to Western norms of what it is to be human, end up being abandoned, and while these lives may not be physically lost, they are often destroyed. Perhaps no one absorbed this sick concept better than President Obama did.

Despite growing international attention to the Obama-led drone killings over the years, attacks in Pakistan’s FATA went on. The last reported attack was on the then Taliban chief Mullah Akhund Mansoor, who was killed last May in Pakistan’s Balochistan province close to the Iranian border. What is unusual is that the U.S. military claimed this strike. Following that incident, the then Pakistan army chief General Raheel Sharif told U.S. ambassador David Hale, who visited the military’s General Headquarters in Rawalpindi, that the U.S. drone attack on Pakistani soil to kill Afghan Taliban chief Mullah Mansour, was detrimental to bilateral ties. This is really the first time that the Pakistani Army has openly expressed indignation about drone strikes. Since then, no drone strike within Pakistan’s territory has been reported by the Pakistani military.