

Aug 20 2013

Drones or No Drones, The Violence Will Continue in Pakistan

LSE IDEAS

By Harrison Akins, Ibn Khaldun Chair Research Fellow, American University's School of International Service in Washington, DC.



Speaking from Islamabad, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry recently hinted at the possibility of ending the use of the drone in Pakistan. Reflecting an earlier speech by President Obama at the National Defense University in Washington, DC, Secretary Kerry stated, "I think the programme will end as we have eliminated most of the threat and continue to eliminate it." He continued, "I think the President has a very real timeline and we hope it's going to be very, very soon."

The drone campaign in the Tribal Areas of Pakistan, primarily in Waziristan, has become a flashpoint for the increasingly poor relations between Pakistan and the United States in recent years and a focus of Pakistani politics, with many major candidates in the recent elections campaigning against their use including the new Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif.^[1] While the cessation of

drone strikes will be a positive step towards improving relations between these two countries, something which will be vital to the Americans as they withdraw from Afghanistan, the use of the drone is but one small part of a much larger problem—the conflict between the central government and tribal periphery. It is this conflict which drives much of the violence being witnessed throughout the country.

While the drone strikes exacerbate the violence in this northwestern periphery, ceasing the strikes will do little to resolve it. Only by addressing the structural breakdown between the centre and periphery and the deteriorating law and order situation can Pakistan have any respite from the violence which has plagued the country for almost a decade. This should be the first priority for Nawaz Sharif and the new government in the Tribal Areas.

The Tribal Areas of Pakistan are a region of extremes: high mountains, baking deserts, harsh winters, and the fiercest of the Pashtun tribes which populate Afghanistan and northwest Pakistan. Known as the land of *riwaj*, or tribal custom, the Tribal Areas have been outside of the control of the central government since the era of the Mughal rulers and the British Raj. During the time of British rule, government authority effectively extended only hundred yards on either side of the road.^[A1] Tribesmen conducted their lives according to their tribal code of honor and revenge, *Pashtunwali*, rather than a legal or civil code. The tribes were able to maintain stability and order through the interaction of the three pillars of authority: the council of elders, or *jirga*, religious leaders acting as mediators, and the central government representative, the Political Agent. It was the often fluid relationship between these three positions which was able to check the violent elements of society before lengthy blood feuds and tribal wars began.^[2]

Over the past decade, it was a combination of factors that led to the instability: drone strikes, Pakistani military actions, and the dreaded suicide bombers. The Pakistani military invasion of 2004 in the Tribal Areas, the largest since the military garrisons were withdrawn by M.A. Jinnah in 1947, under the auspices of catching fleeing militants from Afghanistan sparked the first violent responses from the Tribal Areas. The military invasion was followed shortly by the first drone strikes targeting the leaders of the local Taliban organizations in Waziristan.

And the pace of the violence across Pakistan quickened after the 2007 Red Mosque incident in which Pakistani commandos stormed the mosque complex. Students had barricaded themselves inside after detaining individuals for being "un-Islamic" and setting up sharia courts. A large number of them were killed including a number of female students. A string of suicide bombings and other revenge attacks quickly followed with the Pakistani military continuing its operations in the Tribal Areas.^[3]

The Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), the fiercest of the Taliban groups, was formed in Waziristan in the wake of the Red Mosque attack. Its first targets were the remnants of the traditional pillars of authority who could challenge their authority, with elders, religious leaders, and political officers being killed by suicide bombers or fleeing the Tribal Areas. It was now the TTP who filled the vacuum left by the destruction of the three pillars, the very structure which traditionally checked such men of violence. The conflict in Waziristan has been characterized by a cycle of strike and counterstrike between the TTP and the Pakistani military.^[4]

Drone strikes were occurring with increased frequency in this chaotic environment, reaching their peak in 2010. The drone only made the conflict between centre and periphery worse, with increasing reports of innocent people being killed. The TTP views the Pakistan government as complicit in the strikes; a view confirmed recently in [an interview with former President Pervez Musharraf](#). Many of the suicide bombings in Pakistan are in revenge for the drone strikes, according to statements made by the TTP.^[5] And all the while it is the innocent tribesmen, many of whom have fled the region as destitute refugees, who suffer the most.

Neither the use of the drone or the cessation of the drone strikes is a solution to the violence in the Tribal Areas. The near daily attacks by militant groups in recent months, despite nearly a decade of drone strikes, is proof that the use of the drone is doing little to abate the violence and further proof that the US continues to misunderstand the turmoil in the Tribal Areas. The resentment and anger aroused by the drone and the many innocent deaths that it causes ripples throughout a population already under siege by the actions of its own government and groups of violence from its own tribal population.

Yet peace will never come to the Tribal Areas until the underlying cause of the turmoil is addressed –the structural breakdown between center and periphery. In order to check the violence, the local administrative structure working with traditional tribal leaders, through which law and order is maintained, needs to be reconstructed and supported, an argument made in Akbar Ahmed's latest book *The Thistle and the Drone* which is based on 40 case studies of tribal societies across the Muslim world. And only when such a structure is in place can Pakistan begin to address the other ills of tribal society, such as the lack of development, womens rights, and education (female literacy rates in the Tribal Areas are essentially zero^[6]). To attempt to address these substantive issues without an administrative structure in place first is letting the cart get in front of the horse.

As the US increases its use of the drone in Yemen and in other tribal societies, it should learn the lessons from the failed drone campaign in Pakistan. Such use of force only increases the tempo of the violence and does nothing to address the underlying causes, creating more enemies than it can eliminate. Only by working towards long-term, holistic, and political solutions will peace come to these troubled peripheries in the Muslim world.

Harrison Akins (London School of Economics, MSc '10) is the Ibn Khaldun Chair Research Fellow at American University's School of International Service in Washington, DC. He served as the senior researcher for Professor Akbar Ahmed's study The Thistle and the Drone: How America's War on Terror Became a Global War on Tribal Islam (Brookings 2013).

[1] "Nawaz Sharif reiterates demand to put an end to drone strikes," *The Nation* (Pakistan), July 16, 2013.

[2] See Akbar S. Ahmed, *Resistance and Control in Pakistan* (London: Routledge, 2004).

[3] Zahid Hussain, *The Scorpion's Tail: The Relentless Rise of Islamic Militants in Pakistan—And How It Threatens America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010), p. 120.

[4] Ahmed, *The Thistle and the Drone*, pp. 70-81.

[5] Ahmed, *The Thistle and the Drone*, p. 74.

[6] Ahmed, *The Thistle and the Drone*, p. 93.

This entry was posted in [Southeast Asia](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#).