

# Pakistan: Drones and left-wing politics

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**The Left needs to hold fast to founding principles. As with the debate around the Pakistani military's operations in the north-west, the (snide) retort to many of the Left's objections is to ask, instead, for immediate, quick-fire alternatives to the misery and violence that rack the region.**

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The trajectory of the Obama administration since its accession to power in January 2009 has rightly clarified, for progressives worldwide, many a Left truism about politics under capitalism: the nature of the bourgeois State, the impossibility of Messiahs substituting for mobilization, the shortcomings of liberal anti-racism, etc. One of the more potent illustrations of Obama's capitulation, for Pakistanis, has come in the alacrity with which he has expanded the war inside Pakistan. To these sordid efforts, of course, the CIA-run drone program has been pivotal: at the time of writing, Obama had ordered more than one hundred and fifty attacks since his inauguration (almost three-and-a-half times the number launched under Bush). [\[1\]](#)

Yet, despite agreement among all serious forces on the Pakistani Left about the nature of the American empire and its drone program, a few shrill voices have emerged—most centered around the Aryana Institute for Regional Research and Advocacy (AIRRA)—to claim that the drones are worthy of our support. This isn't unprecedented, of course; the past decade has seen no shortage of reactionaries, home and abroad, rally to the defense of American wars overseas. What is specifically disorienting about the discussion around drones, however, is that these people have often spoken to (and sometimes even as) Leftists. Their irrelevance to progressive politics notwithstanding, it is thus useful to dispense with them officially. Nothing is clearer, really, than the fact that they have nothing to offer or teach the Left.

## Legal

First, any discussion of the drone program has to take, as its starting point, the incontrovertible fact of its illegality under international law. Philip Alston, no radical, recently offered a pithy account of the program's iniquities. The problems stem, he argued, from "the scope of the armed conflict in which the United States asserts it is engaged, the criteria for individuals who may be targeted and killed, the existence of any substantive or procedural safeguards to ensure the legality and accuracy

of killings, [and] the existence of accountability mechanisms.” [2]

The first of these flaws is familiar, and far-reaching in its implications for the legality of American meddling. It also illustrates a sad, treacherous fact about the ‘peace candidate’ and the groups that backed him: in effect, even as Obama has abandoned some of the language of the War on Terror, he has refused to dispense with its core legal foundation (what Alston refers to as the ‘law of 9/11’). The US continues to assert a right to self-defense based on the wholly spurious justifications made famous under Bush: that the war is borderless, and that the groups with whom the USA is in armed conflict are ‘undefined and open-ended’.

As Alston rightly notes, “this interpretation of the right to self-defense is so malleable and expansive that it threatens to destroy the prohibition on the use of armed force contained in the United Nations Charter.” And thus, rejecting this justification of the American presence in Af-Pak means that all of the legal obstacles that successive administrations have found so inconvenient (habeus corpus and the right to a trial, most centrally) would immediately rear their heads. It hardly needs to be noted that the drone program would fail spectacularly, if subjected to the basic standards of these obligations.

Still, even granting the US the right to declare itself engaged in a war of self-defense in FATA would leave in place the many safeguards that international law imposes on belligerents. Alston’s case rests primarily on the fact that the CIA and the Obama administration have shown no interest in clearing any of these hurdles, either. There has been no attempt to explain the criteria for the assassinations (instead, the program and its victims are shrouded in impenetrable secrecy), and there is a criminal lack of accountability when violations do occur.

For instance, only three days into his Presidential term, Obama authorized his first drone attack, on an apparent ‘Taliban hideout’ in South Waziristan. According to an investigation carried out by the Campaign for Innocent Victims in Conflict (CIVIC), [3] the missiles struck the house of Malik Gulistan Khan, the member of a pro-government peace committee, killing him and four other members of his family (including three of his sons). Under the aforementioned international statutes governing the use of lethal force, the President of the United States ought to have been prosecuted for war crimes. Instead, nine months later, he was rewarded with the Nobel Peace Prize.

It is telling, of course, that Farhat Taj and her yammering allies share none of these legal or ethical qualms. Taj’s defense of the program, in fact, unabashedly reverses elementary legal principles: absent “verifiable evidence of civilian ‘casualties’,” she has argued, drone victims can be declared terrorists. [4] Given that she means this to be the serious, reasoned argument of a ‘civilized’ public intellectual, the barbarity of the logic merits explication: the outrageous supposition, here, is that the program’s victims are militants (guilty) until proven civilian (innocent)! Taj is content, moreover, to root this argument in her faith in the CIA. Given that this is the intelligence wing of a State apparatus that is dripping in the blood of civilians, past and present, I hope I can be forgiven for suggesting that the Pakistani Left knows better.

## Empirical

Of course, on its own, the ‘civil liberties’ critique of drones is inadequate. The program’s defenders, after all, have readily reconciled themselves to these facts; their conviction is rather that, its illegality notwithstanding, the program is reliably killing terrorists (and not civilians) in FATA. Unfortunately, the grounds for this assertion—when not premised on blind faith in an institution that has done more than enough to earn our unconditional distrust—are pathetic. Both the strong and weak sources of support for the argument that the drone program is precise are entirely baseless.

The stronger version of this argument takes its cues from the mainstream media. The suggestion, here, is that reputable news outlets regularly confirm, attack after attack, that the vast majority of those killed are 'militants.' And certainly, it is true that the drone program is typically covered in this fashion; it is rare to see anything but reports of militant casualties in the news.

But there are at least two grave problems with this position: one ethical, and one empirical.

First, even entirely on the basis of mainstream reporting, the New America Foundation concludes that hundreds of civilians have died in the recent history of the program (as of November 16, roughly one-quarter of all deaths). Defenders of the program, in response, often suggest that the exceptional pressures of the War on Terror call for the relaxing of 'peacetime' moral standards. Yet this immediately invites a clarification: if hundreds of civilians represent a tolerable burden on a civilized conscience, do we draw the line at five hundred? One thousand? Ten thousand? (Why not just nuke FATA? 'We're at war, man!')

Second, the supposition that mainstream reports are trustworthy doesn't stand up to basic scrutiny—not because these same media outlets customarily whitewash crimes committed by their respective States (though that fact is not unimportant), but rather because their drone reporting depends, almost exclusively, on the word of anonymous security officials. It scarcely needs to be noted that these officials represent institutions tarred by shameful (and frequently hushed-up) histories of mass murder; citing their unverifiable and private testimony in order to conclude that the program's victims are overwhelmingly 'militants' is simply indefensible. [5]

The weaker form of the 'empirical' defense has been made famous by the frantic advocates at AIRRA, who have consistently insisted—to much acclaim in the American mainstream, incidentally—that the drone strikes are popular with FATA residents.

The trouble, here, is twofold.

First, given AIRRA's well-known inability to share details regarding its methodology (principally, to provide assurances that it arrived at a representative and random sample of residents of FATA, in general, or drone-hit areas, in particular) we are being asked to take Taj and her colleagues at their word. It should be noted that the AIRRA website, which formerly hosted some of their 'research,' had been dysfunctional for months at the time of writing. That, needless to say, doesn't inspire confidence in their results.

Secondly, since the release of a recent NAF publication on the tribal areas concluding that—in stark contrast to the AIRRA study—the drone program is overwhelmingly unpopular with the residents of FATA (76% opposed), we are being asked to ignore the results of a comparatively more robust study of the region (pages 12 and 13 of the full report describe the study's methodology in much more detail than AIRRA has ever made available). [6]

Taj, in a recent temper tantrum in the pages of *Daily Times*, [7] denounced the NAF study for flaunting 'research ethics.' Yet her principal objection merits some attention: if, as she argues, a significant number of these populations are inaccessible to researchers lacking the permission of regional power brokers, are we to believe that AIRRA was able to make the requisite arrangements? Put differently, her insistence on the impossibility of surveying a representative sample of residents in FATA is not insignificantly perplexing, given that she and AIRRA simultaneously purport to have done precisely that!

Moreover, Taj's piece is animated by the implication that the NAF's work was distorted by its partisanship (a textbook case of the proverbial pot and kettle problem, I must say). However, as Taj

would know if she took the time to read their publications, the NAF is actually lukewarm on the legitimacy of the drone program. A policy paper authored by Peter Bergen and Katherine Tiedemann, as late as February 2010, actually concluded that “the drone attacks seem to remain the only viable option for the United States.” [8] Taj’s accusation of self-serving bias is misplaced, at best.

## Political

Finally, in addition to the legal and moral holes in the pro-drone position, there are at least two grave political flaws in the argument, as well.

First, as many a ‘counter-insurgency expert’ has noted, the drone program is almost certainly ineffective as a weapon in the war against ‘terror.’ This sentiment grounds NAF’s equivocal position on the program, and has been voiced by as establishment a figure as David Kilcullen, former adviser to General Petraeus. As Kilcullen argued in a co-authored op-ed in The New York Times, “every one of [the] dead noncombatants represents an alienated family, a new desire for revenge, and more recruits for a militant movement that has grown exponentially even as drone strikes have increased.” [9]. This is an impeccably mainstream concern, of course—the worry, for these thinktankers, is that Obama has substituted tactics for strategy in what is otherwise a legitimate counterinsurgency effort [10]—but the sentiment is entirely compatible with a Left position. It should be obvious, I think, that the drone program has done everything but put a lid on militancy in ‘Af-Pak.’

Second—and this is a position I don’t expect the pro-drone crowd to understand—the Left needs to hold fast to founding principles. As with the debate around the Pakistani military’s operations in the north-west, the (snide) retort to many of the Left’s objections is to ask, instead, for immediate, quick-fire alternatives to the misery and violence that rack the region.

In response, we should not be shy in asserting that—because the crises associated with the war have their roots in larger political and economic structures—the resolution of the multiple grievances of FATA and Khyber-Pakhtunkwa’s populations is a long-term struggle. Its fulfillment will demand an overhaul of the geo-political and socio-economic reality that currently imprisons them.

Because of the vision and principles that inform this position—whatever the tactics adopted, in the short-term—at no stage does the path from the present to these goals run through the American or Pakistani establishments. Farhat Taj is fond of noting that there is, today, a happy coincidence between her goals and the goals of the American Empire. The criminal naivete and willful neglect of history that this argument exemplifies reminds me of the fate of the Iraqi ex-leftist, Kanan Makiya. Makiya, too, hoped to ride American bombs into an Iraq free of tyranny and oppression; before long, of course, he woke to find his country irreparably ravaged by the subsequent imperial onslaught. While his pride has prohibited penitence, Taj could learn a thing or two from his silence.

## Conclusion

In a somewhat anodyne chronicle of Obama’s decision to launch the Afghan surge, Obama’s Wars, Bob Woodward relates a November 2008 meeting between then-CIA chief Mike Hayden and Zardari. After Hayden briefs Zardari on the agency’s plans for the drone program, Zardari—carrying himself with the pathetic arrogance of power—offers his ready, urgent consent: “Kill the seniors. Collateral damage worries you Americans. It does not worry me.” [11]

On the evidence of the drone debate, our honorable President has a handful of co-thinkers in the 'progressive' Pakistani intelligentsia. The Left would do well to shun them unequivocally.

by **Adaner Usmani**

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## **P.S.**

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## **Footnotes**

[1] As of 11/17/10, 152 had been carried out under Obama's watch, compared to 45 under Bush's. A full list is available at: <http://counterterrorism.newamerica.net/drones>

[2] "Rules for Drone Wars: Six Questions for Philip Alston," Scott Horton, Harper's Magazine (Jun. 9, 2010) <http://www.harpers.org/archive/2010/06/hbc-90007190>

[3] "Civilians in Armed Conflict: Civilian Harm and Conflict in Northwest Pakistan," Christopher Rogers et. al. (October 2010) [http://www.civicworldwide.org/storage/civicdev/documents/civic\\_pakistan\\_2010\\_final.pdf](http://www.civicworldwide.org/storage/civicdev/documents/civic_pakistan_2010_final.pdf)

[4] "Drone Attacks: Challenging Some Fabrications," Farhat Taj, Daily Times (January 2, 2010) [http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2010%5C01%5C02%5Cstory\\_2-1-2010\\_pg3\\_5](http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2010%5C01%5C02%5Cstory_2-1-2010_pg3_5)

[5] Indeed, it is unsurprising that deliberate investigations of specific attacks reveal a far greater civilian toll than disclosed in mainstream accounts. The CIVIC report mentioned earlier looked into nine specific incidents, and found that thirty civilians (including fourteen women and children) had been murdered. As Gareth Porter argued, "if that average rate of 3.33 civilian casualties for each drone bombing is typical of all the strikes since the rules for the strikes were loosened in early 2008, it would suggest that roughly 460 civilians have been killed in the drone campaign during that period." ("Report Shows Drones Strikes Based on Scant Evidence," Gareth Porter, IPS News (October 18, 2010) <http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=53194>).

[6] "Public Opinion in Pakistan's Tribal Regions," New America Foundation/Terror Free Tomorrow (September 2010) <http://www.newamerica.net/sites/newamerica.net/files/policydocs/FATApoll.pdf>

[7] "An Unethical Survey on FATA," Farhat Taj, Daily Times (October 9, 2010) [http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2010\10\09\story\\_9-10-2010\\_pg3\\_4](http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2010\10\09\story_9-10-2010_pg3_4)

[8] "The Year of the Drone: An Analysis of US Drone Strikes in Pakistan, 2004-2010," Peter Bergen and Katherine Tiedemann, New America Foundation: Counterterrorism Strategy Initiative

Policy Paper (February 24, 2010)

<http://counterterrorism.newamerica.net/sites/newamerica.net/files/policydocs/bergentiedemann2.pdf>. See also Bergen and Tiedemann's piece from June 2009, which is exceedingly understated in its criticism of the program, and not shy to offer some praise—even if the overall conclusion suggests the US will eventually have to move to more conventional forms of counterinsurgency ("The Drone War," Peter Bergen and Katherine Tiedemann, *The New Republic* (June 3, 2009) [http://www.newamerica.net/publications/articles/2009/drone\\_war\\_13672](http://www.newamerica.net/publications/articles/2009/drone_war_13672)).

[9] "Death From Above, Outrage Down Below," David Kilcullen and Andrew McDonald Exum, *The New York Times* (May 16, 2009) [http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/17/opinion/17exum.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/17/opinion/17exum.html?_r=1)

[10] As Gareth Porter notes, since January 2008 the drone program has been understood as an accessory to counter-insurgency efforts in Afghanistan. The futility of fighting the Afghan Taliban with drones, however, is obvious (and at the center of Kilcullen's critique): this is an insurgency that replaces assassinated leaders with ease, since its primary recruiting tool (the criminality of the American occupation and its puppet regime) is only bolstered by the drone program. This is why Kilcullen, in the aforementioned same op-ed, reminds readers that "[o]ur experience in Iraq suggests that the capture or killing of high-value targets has only a slight and fleeting effect on levels of violence."

[11] *Obama's Wars*, Bob Woodward (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010), pg. 26.