

Drone Opposition in Pakistan and the Issues of Post-colonial Identity

Written by Wali Aslam

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2014/02/26/drone-opposition-in-pakistan-and-the-issues-of-post-colonial-identity/>

WALI ASLAM, FEB 26 2014

The Federally Administered Tribal Areas of Pakistan (commonly known as FATA) are set to slide into anonymity again. The region attracted great international attention when the US started targeting the areas using its unmanned aerial vehicles (or drones) in 2004 during the presidency of George W. Bush. The strikes were initially aimed at the members of al-Qaeda who fled Afghanistan in the aftermath of Operation Enduring Freedom and took refuge in these areas. President Obama drastically increased the frequency of drone strikes soon after arriving in the Oval Office in early 2009. The strikes reached their peak in 2010, when 122 targets were attacked in that year alone – a huge increase compared to 48 total strikes under George W. Bush. However, recently, their count has dramatically fallen once again, as most of the wanted individuals have been killed or forced to leave the area. In a recent visit to Pakistan, US Secretary of State John Kerry also announced that the attacks are on the decrease and may even end soon.

FATA have also been the focus of much controversy due to the loss of civilian lives from the drone strikes. Imran Khan, the leader of one of Pakistan's main political parties – the Pakistan Movement for Justice – organised a march towards FATA in 2012 to highlight the civilian victims of American UAVs. He was accompanied by the representatives of major global media outlets and the march gained widespread publicity worldwide.

In the last few years, the level of support for, and opposition to, drones in FATA as well as in the rest of Pakistan have raised puzzling questions. Where the strikes have been almost universally opposed in the rest of Pakistan, there has been significant support for drones among the residents of the tribal areas. One resident, who assisted the CIA in its pursuit to find suitable targets in the tribal areas, stated quite explicitly that 'there is more support for the drone attacks in the tribal regions than people out there in the world think.' This is quite puzzling because FATA has been at the receiving end of the strikes (taking 370 total hits), with only four strikes occurring outside of the region. In addition, as publicised by various organisations in the West, the drone attacks have caused a number of civilian casualties within FATA. Hence this is the key question: why is there such support for drones within FATA when they enjoy very limited support in the rest of Pakistan?

Some would suggest that the answer is simple: drones are getting rid of the 'bad guys' and that is why they are supported in the tribal areas. Even if this is indeed the case, such an explanation is a bit simplistic. Why is there not the same level of support for drones in the rest of Pakistan? Could it be that the right-wing political parties and the country's multiple private news channels' (conservative) chat-show hosts might be affecting the public opinion in the more-settled areas of the country? These clarifications, however, are also not very helpful. This is because, as far the role of the political parties is concerned, the country's two most populous provinces, Punjab and Sindh, are governed by fairly secular political parties: the Pakistan Muslim League (N) and the Pakistan Peoples Party, respectively. Indeed, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province (bordering FATA) is currently governed by the PTI, which is the most conservative among the mainstream political parties in Pakistan. If the political parties' stances were the sole explanation for this dichotomy of support, FATA would display *more* opposition, given PTI chairperson, Imran Khan's role in leading the drone resistance movement in Pakistan. On the other hand, the country's private news channels, usually blamed for their role in radicalising the population, are accessible throughout Pakistan. Why would they only affect one segment of the population and not another?

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Given this scenario, the answer lies in Pakistan's postcolonial identity. The assessments of, and attitudes towards, the efficacy of the drone campaign are shaped by that identity. The settled areas of Pakistan (e.g., Punjab and Sindh) were under British rule for nearly a century. A long struggle for independence contributed to the British withdrawing and granting independence to India in 1947, thus resulting in the creation of India and Pakistan as two independent states. However, the British never succeeded in fully asserting their control over the tribal lands (where FATA currently lie), and the areas were not affected by British rule in the way that the rest of India was. The tribes in these outlying areas have always maintained autonomy and independence and to this day are only under nominal control of the state of Pakistan – with its security forces, for instance, unable to rid North Waziristan of militants that have repeatedly attacked targets throughout the country. In brief, under the British Empire, the FATA territories were largely left to fend for themselves and the British asserted control through tribal elders, rarely interfering with the tribal life and customs. The impact of the colonial master was very shallow indeed.

The assessments of the efficacy of American drone strikes in most of Pakistan have been shaped by the country's post-colonial identity. For people in the major cities of Lahore, Karachi and Islamabad, drones are a symbol of American technological imperialism, in itself reminiscent of British imperialism, which, in their eyes, the forefathers of all Pakistanis had to endure. In these people's view, the drone strikes are a perfect example of Western arrogance: the West does not want to risk its own soldiers' lives by dispatching them to the unruly tribal 'badlands' to apprehend individuals suspected of terrorism. Rather, it employs its technological superiority to protect itself. The residents of FATA, on the other hand, do not bear the same emotional burden from the past to affect their assessments of the drone strikes. If one were to accept the premise that the drones are ridding the areas of all the 'bad guys,' a case could be made that FATA residents are likely to be better able to assess that particular claim because they are not burdened by the emotional blinkers and baggage that bias the rest of the Pakistani population's view.

The emotional blinkers among the populace in the settled areas of the country usually lead to a widespread opposition to America's other policies concerning Pakistan. Many Pakistanis generally want the US to leave the region and would be happy if left to look after themselves. For them, it is not the Taliban (either Afghan or Pakistani) but rather the US that is blamed for the chaos and violence in the country. American policies (concerning the threat of global terrorism) are seen to be serving the US's own interest and not that of the international community – a contemporary continuation of attitudes towards the British policies when they colonised India.

Anti-drone marches and statements by Pakistan's political and religious leaders are steeped in the metaphors of honour, self-respect, sovereignty and territorial integrity. Where such sentiments can undoubtedly be explained through a number of other approaches, examining them given the context of Pakistan's postcolonial identity can reveal a great deal. Hence, a better assessment of the efficacy and utility of the drone strikes by Pakistanis is possible if they are analysed without the emotional blinkers imposed by the country's varied past events. The purpose of this evaluation is not to take a moral stance either way on the use of drones in Pakistan. The author is interested primarily in highlighting the role played by Pakistan's history in the assessments of the US drone strikes in the country.

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