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[www.afgazad.com](http://www.afgazad.com)

[afgazad@gmail.com](mailto:afgazad@gmail.com)

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## US drone strikes in Pakistan tribal areas boost support for Taliban

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The deafening explosion rent the calm of the winter night. A house disappeared in a cloud of flame and dust, its thick earthen walls splaying into the street.

“We ran from our house to help but it was after curfew, and soldiers in a nearby post began to fire on us,” Amir Shah Jehn, 25, said. “So it wasn’t until morning that the bodies were pulled from the rubble and laid at the roadside. There were five dead: a three-month-old baby, the woman of the house, two young men and an Arab.”

It was November 2005. The strike on a house sheltering an Egyptian al-Qaeda commander, Abu Hamza Rabia, in the village of Hamzoni five miles (8km) outside Miran Shah, the capital of North Waziristan, was one of the first carried out by a Predator drone in Pakistani tribal areas.

Drones are the Obama Administration’s weapon of choice for killing militants in the tribal areas. The pilotless Reapers and Predators have chalked up a long list of insurgent deaths, accounting for scores of leaders from al-Qaeda and the Taliban since their deployment in 2004.

The effects of the campaign, however, are beginning to veer dramatically off course as the strikes intensify, according to tribesmen. “Before the drone attacks began the Taliban weren’t so obvious among us and the militancy wasn’t as strong,” Amir said. “But now every home in North Waziristan seems to have one or two Taliban living in it. The youth are joining them. Feelings against the US and Government are rising because of the attacks. Al-Qaeda has been badly affected by drones — but it has benefited too.”

There is no doubting that drone attacks have increased. At least 55 strikes have occurred since President Obama's inauguration. There were only 45 during the Bush era. Their use has risen sharply since the suicide attack on a CIA base in Khost, Afghanistan, in December last year. A total of 11 strikes, killing 90 suspected militants, were carried out in a three-week period in January.

The civilian casualty toll is more contentious, with estimates varying hugely. A respected recent study by the New America Foundation, a Washington-based think-tank, concluded that 32 per cent of the 830 to 1,210 people killed in 114 drone strikes from 2004 until February this year were civilian.

The Pakistani military appears to agree, to some extent. A senior officer told *The Times* that he believed that a third of the dead were militants, a third sympathisers and a third innocent civilians.

The list of insurgents killed includes Saudis, Libyans, Egyptians, Chechens, Uzbeks and Somalis, as well as Pakistanis and Afghans. Last month Abdul Haq al-Turkestani, a militant Uighur leader from Xinjiang, was killed by a drone strike in North Waziristan; an insurgent bastion where at least 55 per cent of drone strikes have occurred.

"One cannot deny the effect of the drones in taking out senior leadership, the militancy's centre of gravity," a Pakistani army officer admitted. "It has had a huge impact. But at the same time it has become a huge motivation to fight against the Government and the army because of the perception that it is a breach of sovereignty and is killing civilians. All combined, it creates a very negative impact."

Major-General Tariq Khan, one of Pakistan's most experienced border fighters, told *The Times* that he had been forced to delay an operation in Kurram Agency due to tribal antipathy after a US drone strike.

"We complained about it [the strike]," he said. "It was detrimental to our operations. I was about to mount an operation and the moment the drone did its attack I had to change dates. Our success lies with the writ of the Government and our popularity with the people. We have to take into account the influences and perceptions these people have."

Others disagree. "To those people sitting in the drawing rooms of Islamabad talking about the sovereignty of Pakistan, we say, 'What about when Arabs or Uzbeks occupy your village? What about sovereignty then?'," said Syed Alam Mehsud, a Peshawar-based political activist who is from Waziristan. "We compare the drones with *Ababeel*" — the swallows tasked by God in the Koran to smite an army with rocks. "Any weapon which kills these people who damaged my sovereignty is in fact helping the sovereignty of my region."

It is widely agreed that the drone strikes have disrupted insurgent operations, complicated their communications and supply lines, and forced key leaders underground.

However, this comes at a price. Many of the displaced leadership have sought sanctuary in populated areas, spreading instability. Overall, cross-border attacks from North Waziristan into

Afghanistan remain at a similar level. The Taleban and al-Qaeda appear to be able to absorb their losses. Anti-US sentiment is growing.

For Waziris and other Pashtun tribes living in the shadow of the drones, it is not just the missiles they fear. The Taleban have grown increasingly convinced that spies are in the midst of the local people, planting transmitter chips — *patray*, as the locals call them — to guide the drones on to their targets. Although no chips have yet been discovered, after every raid witnesses say that the Taleban react with rage, abducting, torturing and killing anyone suspected of planting a chip.

“Sometimes we see a body a day lying by the roadside,” said Gul Rafay Jan, from Miran Shah. “They’ve got signs around their necks saying they were spies planting chips. Sometimes they have been tortured to make confession videos by having rods pushed through their arms or stomachs, or being suspended over a fire.”

In this climate of fear locals have begun to suspect one another. “Most of them are not educated,” Amir said. “Even if their own son is abducted and killed, they may later wonder if perhaps he was really a spy. So now each time a drone attacks, a few are killed by the missile and a few more by the Taleban, and everyone is left suspecting everyone else.”

- Contrary to earlier reports, an American arrested in Karachi recently is not Adam Gadahn, the spokesman for al-Qaeda, Pakistani authorities have said. The suspect, an al-Qaeda member, has been identified as Abu Yahya Majadin Adam; a name similar to one listed on the FBI website as an alias for Gadahn, the most-wanted American in the terror network. Gadahn, 31, has appeared in several al-Qaeda videos threatening the West since 2001.