

the *Atlantic*



## You Say Pakistanis All Hate the Drone War? Prove It

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*According to the latest Pew research, only a slim majority of them are aware it even exists.*



Reuters

Observers of Pakistani politics say Pakistanis universally loathe the American drone strikes against Islamist militants in Pakistan's tribal belt. The view is based on anecdotal accounts of Pakistanis, but not the ones most affected by the strikes who live in the tribal areas where the drones fly. Most of these informants have no personal knowledge of the tribal areas and the political situation that prevails there. Despite these limitations, observers such as Murtaza Haider

confidently avow that "[if there is a consensus in Pakistan on any one matter, it is the unanimous opposition to the American drone strikes on Pakistan's territory](#)."

This conventional wisdom is wrong. Yes, drone strikes are not very popular among a large section of Pakistani society. But Pakistanis are not united in opposition to drone strikes. In fact, many Pakistanis support the drone strikes. This suggests that there is room for the United States to engage in a public diplomacy campaign to win over more Pakistanis to the idea that drone strikes are not the bringers of carnage that is so often portrayed in the Urdu-language media in Pakistan if the United States could be persuaded to bring this worst-kept secret out of the closet and into embassy briefings in Islamabad.

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Writers critical of the drone program have mobilized various public opinion polls to buttress their claims, notably those conducted by the Pew Research Center as a part of its Global Attitudes Project. Pew asks Pakistanis whether they believe that the drone strikes are conducted with consent of the Pakistani government and whether they believe the strikes kill civilians in large numbers, among other sensitive topics. Drone opponents have used the responses as evidence that the program is being forced on Pakistanis by the United States, which has decided to engage in these extrajudicial killings as the way to best conduct its own war against Islamist militants who are ensconced in Pakistan's tribal areas. [Pew's 2010 report](#) on the drone war declared: "There is little support for U.S. drone strikes against extremist leaders -- those who are aware of those attacks generally say they are not necessary, and overwhelmingly they believe that the strikes kill too many civilians." Drone foes have seized upon these and subsequent survey results and marshaled them as iron-class proof that Washington's drone program faces a wall of [Pakistani public opposition](#). Fortifying opinion with data is a welcome thing. Unfortunately, drone critics have been highly selective in their use of the data, with a tendency to rely on survey answers that cast Pakistani opinion as being overwhelmingly hostile to drones. When one examines all of the data gathered by Pew on drones in Pakistan, a very different and much more complex picture emerges about Pakistani attitudes toward various aspects of the American drone program. A more detailed look at the data suggests that that even while some Pakistanis think drones kill too many innocent Pakistanis, they are still necessary.

### The Landscape of Pakistani Opinion

To get a more complete understanding of Pakistani public opinion, [we studied the full range of answers](#) related to drones from the 2010 [Pew Global Attitudes Project](#) survey, looking at the respondent-level data. Public commentary has been based upon selective stories about

misleading tabulations. For example, a large majority of Pakistanis indicated that the drone strikes killed too many innocents. Drone opponents use this and other questions to link collateral damage to their claim that drone strikes are unpopular. In fact, most Pakistanis were either unaware of the drone program or declined to answer questions about them in 2010. Only 35 percent of the sample professed knowledge of the drone program -- compared to 43 percent who said they knew nothing. The difference is comprised of persons who chose not to answer the question for whatever reason. Most of the drone-critical commentary based upon these 2010 data does not acknowledge that conclusions are being drawn from a *minority* of all respondents.

Data from subsequent Pew surveys show that knowledge of the drone program has grown slightly, as has opposition to it. Spring 2012 data demonstrate that 56 percent of Pakistanis have heard something about the drone program and 21 percent knew nothing about it at all despite the extensive media coverage in Pakistan and beyond. Another 23 percent of respondents declined to say whether they had heard of the drone strikes. Among those who had heard of the program in 2012, 17 percent said that drone strikes are necessary to defend Pakistan from extremist groups (when done in conjunction with the Pakistani government), whereas 44 percent opposed the strikes. While 41 percent who were familiar with the program believe that they are being conducted without their government's approval; 47 percent correctly believe that their government has given its approval for these strikes. Clearly, Pakistani public opinion is not as informed and much less unanimous as commentators often presume. There is not a wall of opposition to drone strikes in Pakistan but a vocal plurality that merely gives that impression. The question arises: who are those Pakistanis that support, or alternatively, oppose America's use of armed drones?

### **Who Opposes the Drones? Who Supports Them?**

To understand why people oppose or support drone strikes in Pakistan, you have to start with their sources of information about drones. Clearly, by the large numbers who are not aware of the drone strikes, many Pakistanis have no information about the program. This is not surprising, given the high illiteracy rate in Pakistan and the lack of access poorer Pakistanis have to television and the Internet. In fact, in a statistical analysis we did on Pakistani attitudes toward the drone strikes, we found that the people who were more likely to know about drone strikes in Pakistan were male, more educated, and had access to the Internet. So that tells us something about who at least is knowledgeable about the drone program. This is a fundamental issue that *all* public commentary has ignored: it is not random who does or does not know about the program. In short, there are important selection biases in the data. This is in addition to the more general problem with Pew's data on Pakistan that it is overwhelmingly urban.

Once we have identified an underlying bias in the respondents who know about the program and thus express their views about it, what can we say about who opposes and supports them? We had the hunch that education would be key to understanding where people stand on the drone strike issue in Pakistan, in addition to explaining who has knowledge of the program in the first place. This hunch was based on the widely accepted idea in political science that people with higher levels of education are generally more interested in politics and global affairs than those with less education and the more educated typically have better and more diverse access to information than the less well-educated. In a developing country like Pakistan, the greater the

level of education, the more likely they would be able to read English and have the wealth and knowledge to access the Internet and other sources of electronic media.

Access to media alone does not shape views about drones alone; rather respondents vary in their knowledge base and ability to discern between credible stories and arguments about drones and those that are based on conjecture and rumors. More educated persons may be more discerning about the arguments floating around Pakistan about the drone strikes happening in the tribal belt.

Our analysis of the Pew data on the question of whether Pakistanis supported drone strikes to kill militants confirmed our suspicions about the role of education. Among those who were aware of the drone program, less-educated respondents were more likely to oppose it whereas the better-educated were more likely to support it.

The average Pakistani has minimal education and is conversant in a regional language and/or Urdu, the national language. A slender majority of men (69 percent) can read and write and only a minority of women (45 percent) can. Thus, the average Pakistani will either not care about issues such as drones or only have access to Urdu-language media, if they do know about the drones and care enough to follow stories on them. This is very important because there is a pervasive anti-drone discourse in Pakistan's boisterous Urdu-language media (private television, radio, and print), which tends to be more jingoistic.

More-educated Pakistanis have access to more-nuanced reporting about the drones and the terrorism issue in Pakistan. While the reporting on drones may still be relatively negative, there is some positive commentary in the English-language press in Pakistan. The more-educated are also more likely to read stories in sources that address the terrorism problem arising from the tribal areas. Drones in those sources are presented not just as a reason many Pakistanis are killed, but also as one possible tool to fight a very serious security threat.

As we alluded to above, there is a very important gender component to this story. While men were more likely to be in the sample of people who knew about drones in the first place, those women who knew about the drones were less-educated and more likely to oppose the drones compared to men who knew of the program.

Interestingly, political Islam *did not* play a role in shaping attitudes toward the drone strikes in Pakistan. Beliefs about al Qaeda, for instance, did not predict Pakistanis' beliefs about drones. Respondents who identified with political Islam and even Islamist militancy were not more vocal in their opposition to -- or in their favor of -- drone strikes. This may be because the Islamist spectrum in Pakistan is rather broad and the Taliban militants the drone strikes have been targeting do not enjoy widespread support.

### **How Obama Can Turn the Tide of Public Opinion**

The narrative of analysts who presume to speak on behalf of all Pakistan is vitally important. Local and international media react to it. Pakistan's government and even the military are responsive to it. Increasingly, anti-drone commentary has influenced American views on drones and emboldened drone critics at home.

The United States has avoided discussing this program publicly because it is covert. Officials likely suspect that being more transparent about the program will have little effect because they, too, assume that Pakistanis universally oppose the drones. However, our analysis suggests that such assumptions are dead wrong. Pakistanis are indeed responsive to information about this program -- for better or for worse. If the United States wants to make this program sustainable, it will likely have to find ways of being more transparent. The drone war may be a war against militants. But there is also a war for Pakistani hearts and minds about the legitimacy of the war against militancy as well as the means to fight it, including the use of armed drones.

Washington needs to be more assertive and transparent in discussing drone strikes in Pakistan because it must draw to its side the large swath of the population that doesn't even know about the program. This may mean using radio, non-cable TV (including local Pakistani networks) or even hyperlocal media such as SMS -- and it means doing so in Urdu and perhaps other vernacular languages. So far, the United States seems content to communicate with Pakistanis using the language only a miniscule fraction of the country knows: English. There is space for a genuine struggle over Pakistani public opinion, but the U.S. government has to enter the fray with greater openness and transparency. This may be the only way to save the drone program President Obama so values.

This article available online at:

<http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2013/01/you-say-pakistanis-all-hate-the-drone-war-prove-it/267447/>

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