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The 'Drone Papers' Do Not Reflect All Drone Programs, Especially in Pakistan

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Recently, The Intercept announced that it had "obtained a cache of secret documents detailing the inner workings of the U.S. military's assassination program in Afghanistan, Yemen and Somalia." According to The Intercept, the documents, which were illegally furnished to the news outlet by a so-called whistleblower, "offer an unprecedented glimpse into Obama's drone wars."

Despite the hype, the documents offer little that is new. In fact, major newspapers, such as the *New York Times, Washington Post, Financial Times* and *Los Angeles Times*, did not bother reporting on it. Worse, members of The Intercept team continue to obfuscate the complex issues surrounding the various U.S. drone programs and these documents to promote what appears to be an anti-drone agenda.

The "Drone Papers" suffer from "selection bias." Selection bias occurs when the information that is available (the "sample") is not representative of all information about a particular subject ("the universe"). We would all recognize such bias if a polling firm claimed to offer insights into the "American voter" but only interviewed white males between the ages of 18 and 30. We would immediately understand that the survey could only speak to a particular slice of the American public.

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These leaked documents represent an infinitesimally small fraction of all information about various drone programs in different countries and under different operational commands (e.g. CIA versus Department of Defense). I know for a fact that other classified assessments exist that demonstrate the efficacy and accuracy of the program, at least in Pakistan. The average reader cannot know how representative the "Drone Papers" are of all documents about the drone program. And there is no way of knowing because the vast majority of the documents, appropriately, remain classified.

Another problem with these stashes of documents is the assumption that they are accurate or that their classification (e.g. Secret, Top Secret, Top Secret-NOFORM) confers veracity of the documents' contents. Unfortunately, this is not often the case. Classified assessments, like any other, are only as good as the data that undergird them and the analytical capabilities of the authors. As someone who used to use these materials, I rarely found that either assumption was true. In some theaters, civilian contractors and even military personal with very little relevant experience were deployed, and it shows in their assessments. Moreover, the data that are available to analysts are surprisingly shoddy, in my experience.

Obtaining data on drone targets and outcomes is extremely difficult in some countries where the program is used. In Pakistan, it is impossible to verify who has been killed because the Pakistan government does not permit international or even domestic researchers into the areas where drones are used. In the absence of such direct access, a variety of anti-drone advocacy organizations have published their own assessments, which are riven with a variety of biases. But the reality is that it is nearly impossible to come to conclusive findings given the data available.

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I had the pleasure of engaging Glenn Greenwald during a recent pre-taped and edited discussion on Al Jazeera, which was prompted by The Intercept's recent report. Oddly, the show was largely focused on Pakistan. However, the "Drone Papers" were not about Pakistan at all -- they were about Afghanistan, Yemen and Somalia. And drone strikes in these countries are actually quite different.

Drone operations in Pakistan are all intelligence-led operations under the CIA auspices. In contrast, in other countries, drone strikes are also used by the Department of Defense and CIA. Generally, drone strikes committed by the Department of Defense are more likely to yield civilian casualties because they are not exclusively intelligence-led (for example, they are used when troops come into contact with the enemy in places like Afghanistan) and have considerably less oversight than those of the CIA. Moreover, in Pakistan, the U.S. government has multiple sources of intelligence and does not rely exclusively upon "signals intelligence."

One reason for the accuracy of the U.S. drone program in Pakistan is the fact that the U.S. government has deep cooperation with Pakistan's intelligence and military organizations. Note that both the New America Foundation and the Bureau of Investigative Journalism's recent data show the marked decrease in so-called civilian casualties. However, my own review of the methodologies of these and other organizations suggests that there is no reason to trust any report on casualties until the Pakistanis permit these figures to be independently verified.

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The Intercept criticizes the drone program in part by arguing that individuals should be captured, tried and interrogated to obtain valuable information about their organization, their members and possible operations. I agree with this assertion in general. However, in Pakistan, for example, the Pakistani government limits drones operations to the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) -- where there are no police forces or traditional courts.

In FATA, residents view drones as the least undesirable of all options, when compared to Pakistan military strikes, which have killed thousands and displaced millions, allowing militants operating there to continue acting with impunity. In fact, some residents of Waziristan, one of FATA's seven agencies, compare "the drones with ababils -- the holy swallows sent by God to avenge Abraha, the invader of the Khana Kaaba."

One Associated Press journalist actually found a way to interrogate these claims by sending a stringer to Waziristan, Pakistan. In a six-month study, reporter Sebastion Abbot dispatched a Waziri stringer to a village in North Waziristan where drone attacks took place. Villagers claimed that, according to the AP report, "at least 194 people killed in the attacks, about 70 percent -- at least 138 -- were militants. The remaining 56 were either civilians or tribal police, and 38 of them were killed in a single attack on March 17, 2011. Excluding [one catastrophically disastrous strike which inflicted one of the worst civilian death tolls since the drone program started in Pakistan] *nearly 90 percent of the people killed were militants.*"

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Anti-drone advocates argue that drone attacks are remote control killing where the "operator" is shielded from the consequences of her actions. But the truth is that many drones have pilots, and they suffer the same stresses that conventional pilots do and possibly with greater intensity and higher frequency. The reason for this is that drone pilots frequently observe targets for days to establish a pattern of life. Unlike a conventional pilot who does not see the consequences of her actions, drone pilots watch it all -- they see death up-close and personal.

There is no doubt that the public needs to know more about U.S. programs and what their varied costs and benefits are. After all, people are being killed in the name of our freedom and our democracy. However, one should be very dubious about persons and organizations claiming to know the entire truth about the various drone programs. If Americans are going to have a genuine discussion about the drone programs our government runs, we need more honest analysis, a greater understanding of data and their limits, and we need more information and transparency from our government.

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