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Blame the Terrorists, Not the Drones

By [C. Christine Fair](#)

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The Obama administration has recently [revealed](#) that the United States killed two al-Qaida hostages, [Warren Weinstein](#) and [Giovanni Lo Porto](#), in a January 2015 drone strike. Both were aid workers who were likely sold to al-Qaida and transferred to the al-Qaida safe-house after being kidnapped elsewhere in Pakistan. Because Weinstein was a U.S. citizen, the Obama administration has made the unprecedented offer to [declassify](#) information about the drone attack in which he was killed. Several aspects of this drone strike have renewed old arguments for a serious overhaul if not abandonment of the program. Each of these varied arguments are misplaced.

First, the American identity of Weinstein is not a reason to structurally reconsider the program because it reveals nothing inherently flawed in the way in which drones are used in Pakistan. Regrettably, in every war so-called [friendly fire](#) kills too many people. [British](#) and [American](#) troops fighting in in Afghanistan have been killed by American friendly fire in alarming numbers, yet this has not been significantly mobilized to justify rethinking the war in Afghanistan. Despite the fact that drones hovered over the targeted facility for hundreds of hours and did not detect the two hostages is not an indicator that the the strike was “botched,” as [some have said](#). Unless al-Qaida brought the hostages into the open, the drones could not visualize the men. After all, drones cannot see through walls. In fact, the tragic deaths of the hostages ironically confirm that the CIA had correctly identified the facility as an al-Qaida redoubt.

[READ: [U.S. Strike that Killed Hostages Could Change Drone Policies](#)]

There is something genuinely sinister about the motives of those who herald the inadvertent death of an American civilian as a cause for ending the drone campaign in Pakistan. These misplaced claims have contributed to Pakistani skepticism that only “white” lives matter. In a recent Pakistani editorial in Dawn titled “Drones – One white death can change everything,” the writer [opined](#):

Then this January came the death of a white, American hostage: Warren

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Weinstein, an American who was being kept hostage in the tribal areas of Pakistan. In an instant, what had been a near round celebration of remote controlled killing has transformed into calls for an honest investigation of the program.

Indeed, the focus upon Weinstein's American identity as being more special than the many more Pakistani civilians who have died is outrageous and shameful. All civilians killed by the drones, although comparatively fewer in number than other air campaigns, are equally mourned and regrettable.

Ultimately, responsibility for the deaths of the hostages rests with the terrorists who kidnapped them – not the drone program.

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Second, this particular strike has brought renewed attention to a basic fact: The CIA does not always [know the identities of persons](#) killed in structures identified as terrorist facilities which are targeted. Drone foes use this as another argument to denounce the program. This argument is as absurd as it is disingenuous. In no other war is the combatant required to know the inventory of persons housed in a targeted building. Rather, target selection is based upon a joint assessment of the war-making utility of that building to the adversary and an explicit intent to minimize civilian deaths. The [International Committee of the Red Cross](#), applauding the U.S. and British effort in the Persian Gulf War wrote:

The principle of proportionality acknowledges the unfortunate inevitability of collateral civilian casualties and collateral damage to civilian objects when noncombatants and civilian objects are mingled with combatants and targets, even with reasonable efforts by the parties to a conflict to minimize collateral injury and damage.

This proved to be the case in the air campaign. Despite conducting the most discriminate air campaign in history, including extraordinary measures by the coalition's aircrews to minimize collateral civilian casualties, they could not avoid causing some collateral damage and injury. When the history of the drone program is written, there is no reason to believe that it will be less indiscriminate than Operation Desert Storm, which relied upon conventional aircraft to deliver ordinance.

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Unfortunately, given the Pakistani law that governs the tribal areas where drone strikes are confined, it is [nearly impossible](#) to accurately assess the civilian losses in the Pakistani drone campaign despite the claims of human rights and advocacy organizations to the contrary. However, even drone opponents concede that civilian casualties, per their own flawed methods of assessment, have [plummeted](#). Given the precision with which drones can target persons, advocates of minimized civilian casualties should applaud drones rather than revile them.

Finally, drone foes are endeared to the argument that [drones make more terrorists than they eliminate](#). Alas while this argument has certain intuitive appeals, there is no actual evidence undergirding it. In fact, the available evidence suggests that the [drones have decimated al-Qaida's](#) ability to operate in Pakistan. The reasons for this are straightforward: The drone program continues to depopulate their leadership ranks throughout the chain of command. They must rapidly replace these persons with candidates who have less experience and who cannot be vetted as thoroughly. This cyclically degrades the organization's ability to operate.

Of course, the drone program has also been used to target Pakistani Taliban. It should be noted that in recent years, the Pakistani Taliban have been considerably restrained in their ability to attack high value Pakistani military and intelligence targets. Unable to hit high-value targets, they have substituted to increasingly attacking innocent civilians. The success of the program in degrading the quality of terror

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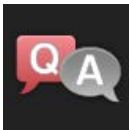
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these groups can perpetrate explains why the Pakistani military and intelligence agencies [covertly assist and facilitate](#) all aspects of the program.

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Finally, the most important reason to retain the program in Pakistan is that there is [no alternative that is better or even less worse](#). When Pakistani military conduct air operations, they kill thousands and displace millions . There are no police forces that operate in the tribal areas. Thus [the preferable alternative of arrest is simply not available](#). This means that the only alternative to drones is to do nothing. Is this an ethical option for those Pakistanis who are terrorized by the militants ensconced in the tribal areas?

There is no doubt that there should be greater transparency about the program. Unfortunately, this is not likely to transpire, not because of the preferences of the U.S. government but instead because of our Pakistani partners. The Pakistan army and intelligence agencies welcome the drone program because it can eliminate terrorists they cannot. Because these institutions have long argued that they are the most competent organization to run – and in actuality ruin – Pakistan, such revelations would be devastating.

In the meantime, as long as we are at war with these elements, drones are the best option we have.



About [C. Christine Fair](#) is an assistant professor at Georgetown University. She is the author of [Fighting to the End: The Pakistan Army's Way of War](#) and the co-editor of [Pakistan's Enduring Challenges](#).

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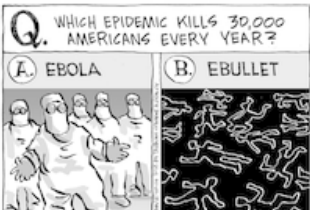
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