

Civilian impact of covert drone operations overlooked

New report offers comprehensive analysis of drone platforms and civilian harm

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WASHINGTON, DC Sept. 30, 2012 — As US covert drone strikes become more entrenched as an accepted counterterrorism strategy, the US government needs to conduct a thorough accounting of the impact on civilians, said a new report released today by Columbia Law School's Human Rights Clinic and Center for Civilians in Conflict.

The Civilian Impact of Drones: Unexamined Costs, Unanswered Questions is the first systematic study of the US government's covert drone program and its impact on civilian populations. The US claims of precision and the low number of civilian casualties caused by drone strikes, while not empirically disproven, obscure key questions about civilian harm in Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia.

"Drones are a technological advance, but in practice they carry their own problems for minimizing harm to civilians, especially when used in places with fewer US boots on the ground," said Naureen Shah, Acting Director of the Human Rights Clinic at Columbia. "For example, drones produce a flood of video data that's hard to corroborate, and it's nearly impossible to properly investigate who was actually killed or injured."

Signature strikes—strikes that target individuals based on patterns of behavior identified by US intelligence—are particularly risky for civilians. According to *The Civilian Impact of Drones*, without an understanding of the local context, power dynamics, and cultural practices, drone operators may interpret routine behavior as suspicious, and mistakenly target civilians.

The report finds that drone operations are setting the US on an untested and unexamined course. The CIA and the military's Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) have taken a lead role in these campaigns that, due to government secrecy, the public knows little about. Neither organization has ever described the rules and mechanisms it employs to protect civilians, track deaths or investigate reports of civilian harm. Additionally, neither the CIA nor JSOC have ever conducted strikes on this scale or with this degree of collusion; even high-level policymakers do not always know which organization is responsible for a strike, or which to hold accountable for civilian harm. Civilians have no one to turn to if their loved ones are harmed or if their homes are destroyed.

"Drones are becoming synonymous with US counterterrorism strategy," said Sarah Holewinski, executive director of the Center for Civilians in Conflict. "But unlike in regular wars, policymakers are failing to ask the hard questions here, including whether other tactics or strategies are more appropriate than drone strikes, and whether US expansion of drone operations is causing more harm than good."

The report recommends that the White House establish an interagency task force to evaluate the impact of drone strikes, and calls on the CIA and Department of Defense to disclose their policies on civilian protection and response to civilian harm. Congress should review these agencies' policies and procedures in this regard, and also intensely scrutinize claims by the CIA and JSOC that strikes have a limited impact on civilian populations in light of credible reports to the contrary.

Notes to Editor

The report is based on publicly available materials and heavily informed by interviews, consultations, as well as written information from current and former government and military officials, and other experts including researchers and journalists.