

Defense One

The Problem with Drones that Everyone Saw Coming

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A new trove of Pentagon documents revealed by the *New York Times* shows once again that drone warfare does the United States more harm than good. U.S. drone strikes, which have killed many hundreds of civilians in the greater Middle East, radicalize enemies, keep the United States involved in wars long past their expiration date, and cause post-traumatic stress for those running the drone program.

The general argument for using drones is that these uncrewed, generally precision-guided weapons can accomplish many of the desired effects of general conventional war at a far lower cost. Proponents argue that drones send a credible signal to adversaries that the U.S. can fight wars indefinitely, that they allow Washington to mostly withdraw from the Middle East, and the reusable nature of new drones keeps U.S. troops out of harm's way.

This could not be further from the truth. Even if drones do send a credible signal to adversaries, that does not matter unless those adversaries stop fighting. The opposite is true. Because drone strikes kill families and innocent civilians, they lead to radicalization.

The *New York Times* reports show that 1,417 civilians have been killed in U.S. drone strikes in the Middle East. This means that the United States is playing right into the narrative anti-American terrorist organizations use to radicalize recruits. Reporting shows that the Islamic State has used footage from the aftermath of drone strikes in its propaganda videos. It is not difficult to convince someone that a far-off country hates them after you show them footage of what a drone strike did to a family in their country.

The impact of this is stark. Recent research finds that, when attacks successfully kill a cell's leader in Pakistan, the resulting power vacuum typically leads to a nearly 30 percentage point-increase in attacks over the next three to six months. Other research finds similar effects in Yemen, Somalia, and the Middle East as a whole.

Beyond increasing the number of enemy troops, drones allow for primacy on the cheap. They are attractive to presidents because they demonstrate "doing something" to fight terrorism. In 2013, CIA Director-appointee John Brennan said drones are best at deterring future terrorist attacks. Furthermore, successful drone strikes increase presidential approval ratings despite things like

weak economies more than is seen with traditional uses of force. Thus, even if the president is unsure of drones' efficacy, the future benefits from this "cheap primacy" are undoubtedly attractive.

The problem is that this also means an extension of forever wars. The U.S. drone program fits well with the "over the horizon" operations Washington continues to conduct in Afghanistan, despite knowing that its partners have the perverse benefit of mandating Washington's involvement in the region. Beyond that, the United States is using drone warfare to aid Saudi Arabia's war in Yemen that has led to the largest manmade humanitarian crisis in history.

Finally, the cost to American soldiers from using drones is not cheap. A 2011 Pentagon study found that drone pilots experience post-traumatic stress at the same rate as pilots of manned aircraft, a cost that persists long after the fighting has stopped. Beyond the burden for taxpayers, these former drone pilots face a life of nightmares and flashbacks, which can reduce their ability to work and maintain relationships. Recent psychology research affirms this point, finding that drone operators have higher chances of having PTSD, emotional exhaustion, and burnout compared to manned aircraft pilots. Policymakers cannot justify drone warfare on the claim that it does not cause harm to American soldiers, just because they are physically far from harm.

It is attractive to focus on how drones allow for primacy on the cheap. Yet, by increasing the number of terrorists and psychologically damaging American soldiers – all while allowing forever wars to endure – drone warfare hurts the United States and target countries. Warfare on the cheap is still war, primacy on the cheap is still primacy, and Washington's policymakers should operate on this reality.

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