

TOPIC #2: Should the United States continue its use of drone strikes abroad?

Opponents of drone strikes claim the strikes create more terrorists and kill large numbers of civilians, while proponents argue the strikes decimate terrorist networks and kill fewer civilians than other weapons of war.

In your response, analyze the two articles taken from www.procon.org to determine which position is better supported. Use relevant and specific evidence from both articles to support your response.

Article 1

- (1) Drone strikes create more terrorists than they kill. People who see their loved ones killed in drone attacks become motivated to join actions against the United States. According to author Jeremy Scahill, the vast majority of militants operating in Yemen today are “people who are aggrieved by attacks on their homes that forced them to go out and fight.” Support for al Qaeda in Yemen is “indigenously spreading and merging with the mounting rage of powerful tribes at US counterterrorism policy” as the drone strikes have “recruited thousands.” The number of al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) core members grew from 300 in 2009 (when US drone strikes resumed after a seven-year hiatus) to 700 in 2012, resulting in an exponential increase in the number of terrorist attacks in the region. Both the “Underwear Bomber,” who tried to blow up an American airliner in 2009, and the “Times Square Bomber,” who tried to set off a car bomb in New York City in 2010, cited drone strikes in Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia as motivators for the plots.
- (2) Drone strikes target individuals who may not be terrorists and enemy combatants. President Obama's policy of “signature strikes” allows the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the military's Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) to target anyone who fits a specific terrorist profile or engages in behavior the US government associates with terrorists, regardless of whether or not they have been conclusively identified by name as enemy combatants. At the height of the drone program in Pakistan in 2009 and 2010, as many as half of the strikes were classified as signature strikes. According to top-secret intelligence reports reviewed by McClatchy Newspapers, drone operators are not always certain of who they are killing “despite the administration's guarantees of the accuracy of the CIA's targeting intelligence.”
- (3) Drone strikes kill large numbers of civilians and traumatize local populations. According to a meta-study of drone strikes, between 8% and 17% of all people killed in drone strikes are civilians. Since the United States began conducting drone strikes abroad following the September 11, 2001 attacks, it is estimated that between 174 and 1,047 civilians have been killed in Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia. According to 130 interviews with victims and witnesses of drone strikes by researchers from Stanford and New York University, people who live in the affected areas experience harm “beyond death and physical injury” and “hear drones hover 24 hours a day,” and live with the fear that a strike could occur at any moment of the day or night.

Article 2

- (1) Drone strikes make the United States safer by decimating terrorist networks across the world. Drone attacks in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Yemen, and Somalia have killed upwards of 3,500 militants, including dozens of high-level commanders implicated in organizing plots against the United States. According to President Obama, “dozens of highly skilled al Qaeda commanders, trainers, bomb makers and operatives have been taken off the battlefield. Plots have been disrupted that would have targeted international aviation, US transit systems, European cities, and our troops in Afghanistan. Simply put, these strikes have saved lives.” David Rohde, a former *New York Times* reporter held hostage by the Taliban in Pakistan for several months in 2009, called the drones a “terrifying presence” for militants. On November 1, 2013, drone strikes killed Pakistani Taliban leader Hakimullah Mehsud.
- (2) Drones kill fewer civilians, as a percentage of total fatalities, than any other military weapon. The traditional weapons of war – bombs, shells, mines, mortars – cause more unintended (“collateral”) damage to people and property than drones, whose accuracy and technical precision mostly limit casualties to combatants and intended targets. Although estimates vary because of the secretive nature of the program, it is estimated that 174 to 1,047 civilians have been killed in Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia since the United States began conducting drone strikes abroad following the September 11, 2001 attacks, roughly 8 – 17% of all deaths from US drones. In comparison, in World War II civilian deaths, as a percentage of total war fatalities, are estimated at 40 to 67%. In the Korean, Vietnam, and Balkan Wars, the percentages are approximately 70%, 31%, and 45% respectively.
- (3) Drones make US military personnel safer. Drones are launched from bases in allied countries and are operated remotely by pilots in the United States, minimizing the risk of injury and death that would occur if ground soldiers and airplane pilots were used instead. Al Qaeda, the Taliban, and their affiliates often operate in distant and environmentally unforgiving locations where it would be extremely dangerous for the United States to deploy teams of Special Forces to track and capture terrorists. Such pursuits may pose serious risks to US troops, including firefights with surrounding tribal communities, anti-aircraft shelling, land mines, improvised explosive devices (IEDs), suicide bombers, snipers, dangerous weather conditions, harsh environments, etc. Drone strikes eliminate all of those risks common to “boots on the ground” missions.