

US Covert Operations and Suicide Terrorism

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April 5, 2017

Introduction

Covert Operation

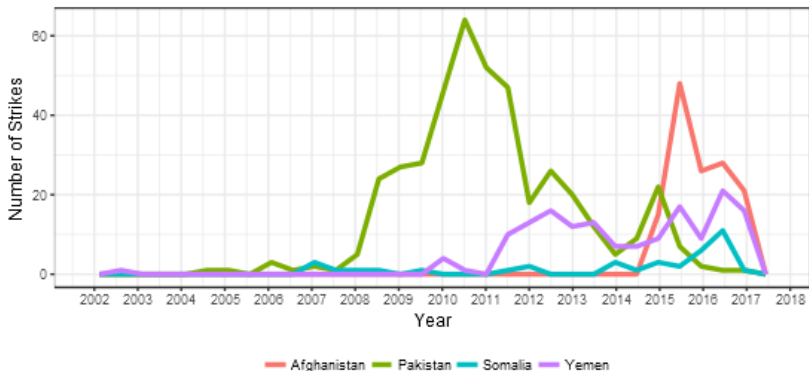
"An operation that is so planned and executed as to conceal the identity of or permit plausible denial by the sponsor."
(U.S. Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms)

Generally speaking: drone strikes, other air strikes

- The Obama administration relied heavily on drone strikes and other covert operations to target the leadership of terrorist groups
- These operations allow the US to reduce their military footprint overseas, but attract international controversy due to collateral damage to civilians and their secretive nature



Locations of US Covert Operations, 2002 - present



Source: The Bureau of Investigative Journalism (Confirmed attacks only)

Research Question

- Do covert US air strikes delay or hasten subsequent suicide terrorist bombings in the countries where the strikes are carried out?

Theory

- Scholars divided on the utility of air strikes in counter-terrorism
- Rival sets of theories:
 - **Blowback/Backlash:** Strikes anger local populations and increase support for terrorist groups → more terrorism
 - **Disruption, degradation, deterrence:** Strikes interfere with terrorist groups' operations, remove key players, and deter would-be terrorists → less terrorism

Empirical Findings: Incidence Models

	Scope	US Operations	Terrorist activity	Key Findings
Lyall (2014)	Afghanistan 2006-2011	All air strikes and non-lethal shows of force	Attacks on military targets	Increase in incidence of attacks in bombed areas relative to non-bombed
Gill (2015)	Pakistan 2004-2013	Drone strikes	All attacks	Increase in incidence and lethality of attacks after drone strike
Johnston & Sarbahi (2016)	Pakistan 2007-2011	Drone strikes	Attacks on civilians	Decrease in incidence and lethality of attacks after drone strike

Gaps in the Literature (1)

- Which types of terrorism are relevant? Not all acts are carried out by the groups targeted in US air strikes. Some carried out by rival groups or lone wolves. Impossible to know for certain who committed what. Thus, looking at terrorist activity as a whole may not be helpful for gauging the effect of air strikes on the groups they specifically target.

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Proposed solution

Use suicide bombings only. Suicide bombings are particularly difficult to carry out, require heavy explosives and often specific training. They are the hallmark of professional terrorist cells, not lone wolves. Also, they are widely used by the groups targeted in US air strikes.

Gaps in the Literature (2)

- Do air strikes hasten or delay terrorist activity? Looking at the incidence of attacks across a longer period (e.g. month) does not answer this question because attacks can be spaced closely together or far apart.

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Proposed solution

Look at the length of time between attacks.

Question & Hypotheses

- **Research question (restated):** Do covert US air strikes delay or hasten subsequent suicide terrorist bombings in the countries where the strikes are carried out?
 - **H1 (Blowback/Backlash):** Terrorist groups behave more aggressively after an air strike and carry out more attacks in quicker succession.
 - **H2 (Disruption/Degradation/Deterrence):** Terrorist groups are hindered by the effects of air strikes and take longer to prepare and carry out attacks.

Assumptions

- The effects of drone strikes are not necessarily localized, i.e. terrorist cells may move away from zones targeted by air strikes, or the same terrorist group may respond to an air strike in one part of the country by carrying out an attack in another part of the country. However, they should generally operate in the same country over the short term.
- Terrorist groups do not distinguish between different types of air strikes.

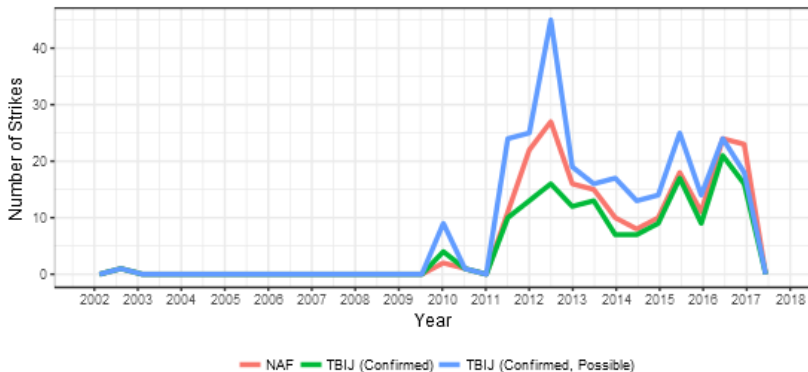
Analysis

- **Method:** Survival/event history model
- **Unit of analysis:** Country-week
- **Independent variable:** Number of US air strikes (lagged or weighted)
- **Dependent variable:** length of time between individual suicide bombings
- **Control variables:** country characteristics such as GDP per capita, polity score, etc.

Data

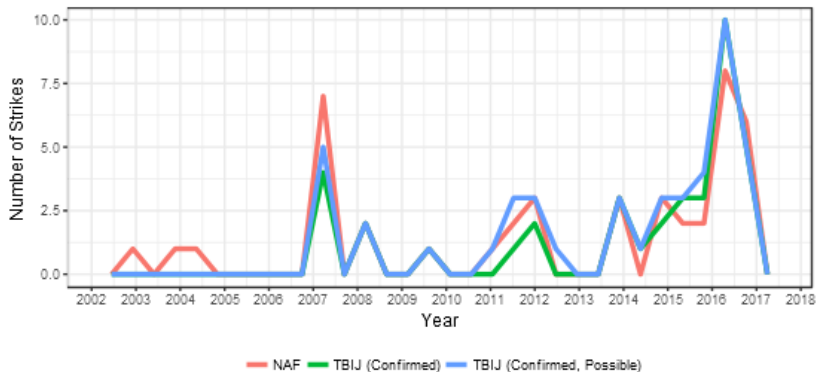
- **Countries:** Yemen, Somalia, Pakistan, Afghanistan
- **Years:** 2002-2016
- **Drone strikes data:** The Bureau of Investigative Journalism
 - Independent watchdog
 - Data based on international and domestic media reports, government reports and other accounts
 - Data publicly available for free
 - Only source for air strikes in all four countries
- **Suicide terrorism data:** UChicago's Suicide Attack Database
 - Based on international and domestic media reports
 - Publicly available, free

US Covert Operations in Yemen, 2002 - present



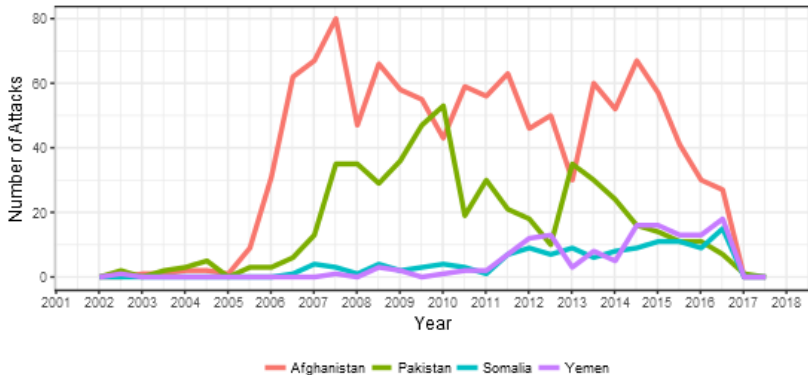
Source: New America Foundation (NAF), The Bureau of Investigative Journalism (TBIJ)

US Covert Operations in Somalia, 2003 - present



Source: New America Foundation (NAF), The Bureau of Investigative Journalism (TBIJ)

Suicide Terrorist Attacks, 2002 - 2016



Source: Suicide Attack Database

- Gill, Paul. 2015. "The Impact of Drone Attacks on Terrorism: The Case of Pakistan." London: Remote Control Project. http://remotecontrolproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Paul_Gill_drones_terrorism_Pakistan.pdf
- Johnston, Patrick B., and Anoop K. Sarbahi. 2016. "The Impact of US Drone Strikes on Terrorism in Pakistan." *International Studies Quarterly* 0: 1–17. doi:10.1093/isq/sqv004.
- Lyall, Jason. 2014. "Bombing to Lose? Airpower and the Dynamics of Violence in Counterinsurgency Wars." <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2422170>.