

Since the 11th May the United States has carried out three unmanned airstrikes:

15th May: US Predators fired missiles at a Taliban compound and "two truckloads of militants" in the first recorded airstrike with Pakistan's Khyber tribal agency. Between 5 and 15 Taliban fighters were killed in the attack, but none were reported to be senior figures. The location of the attack also remains unclear.

21st May: Unmanned aircraft fired four missiles at a Taliban compound in the village of Mohammed Khel, North Waziristan. Reports suggest that between 6 and 10 'terrorists' were killed in the attack. Initially it remained unclear if the casualties were al Qaida, Taliban or other Jihadists operating in the area. No senior figures were reported killed at the time. However on the 31st May As Sahab, al Qaida's propaganda arm, released statement confirming that its chief finance official Mustafa Abu Yazid was killed in the strike. Yazid is considered one of al Qaida's most senior figures. He served as al Qaida's leader in Afghanistan and was identified by the 9/11 Commission as its "chief financial manager." This would have made him responsible for the distribution of funds from al Qaida's treasury.

28th May: The United States launched its first unmanned airstrike in South Waziristan this year. Eleven terrorists were reported killed in strikes on 'militant targets' in the Nezaï Narai area. No senior Taliban or al Qaida figures were initially reported killed. However on the 3rd June a Jihadist media outlet reported that a senior al Qaida operative and was killed along with a Taliban commander in the strike. Osama bin Ali bin Abdullah bin Damjan al Dawsari was reportedly meeting a local Taliban leader known as Omar Khaitab at the time of the attack. Daswari coordinated al Qaida operations in Afghanistan and was rumoured to have played a role in the 30th December 2009 attack inside Combat Outpost Chapman in Khost.

According to the Long War Journal the United States has now carried out 38 unmanned airstrikes in Pakistan in 2010. Despite the recent drop in airstrikes the United States remains on course to exceed the 53 attacks undertaken in 2009. In total there have now been 137 unmanned airstrikes since 2004; 127 of these have occurred since 2008. The death of Daswari is perhaps the most high-profile since the killing of Baitullah Mehsud the overall leader of the Movement of Taliban in Pakistan in August 2009.

Despite recent successes and indeed a decline in the regularity of attacks unmanned airstrikes by the United States remain the subject of international debate. On the 3rd June 2010 Philip Alston, the United Nations special rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions delivered a report to the United Nations Human Rights Council declaring that the "life or death power" of drones should be entrusted to armed forces. Alston's proposals are underpinned by the contrast in how the military and the CIA respond to allegations regarding civilians killed during airstrikes. Whilst Alston considers the Department of Defense to be more accountable when attacks go wrong, the CIA by definition does not answer questions, provide information or publicly undertake any follow-up concerning the allegations. As a result, intelligence agencies that seek to remain unaccountable to everyone except their paymasters should have no say in the running of unmanned aerial programmes.

Alston's arguments were enhanced on the 29th May after the U.S. military released a report indicating that "inaccurate and unprofessional" reporting by drone operators led to the deaths of 23 civilians in February. In the aftermath of the attack General Stanley A. McChrystal, the top commander of American forces in Afghanistan, disciplined officers, announced further preventive initiatives and personally apologised to President Hamid Karzai. General McChrystal's response reflects an undertaking given in June 2009 to prioritise the protection of civilians and dramatically reduce the number of airstrikes. So as not to outstay their welcome in Afghanistan McChrystal also emphasises that the U.S. military will admit to its mistakes and do all that it can to rectify them.

McChrystal's

commitment to transparency in Afghanistan stands in stark contrast with recent activities in Yemen. On the 25th May the deputy governor of Marib province, five of his bodyguards and two al Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula operatives were killed in an airstrike. The deputy governor was killed whilst trying to negotiate a settlement with an al Qaida leader. Whilst the Yemeni government has apologised for the attack rumours persist that unmanned U.S. Predators or Reapers were circling the area. However intelligence officials towed the official line by refusing comment about the airstrikes whilst confirming that the United States continues to provide logistical and intelligence support to Yemen.

Yet as criticism of U.S. unmanned airstrikes grows in the West, there is evidence from Pakistan that such activities are increasingly tolerated. A recent article in the Guardian indicated a survey from last year reported that only 9% of Pakistani supported drone strikes. However in recent months the airstrikes have gained a greater acceptance as the CIA widened its list of targets to include Pakistani Taliban militants. According to one Pakistan Muslim League-N figure the turning point was the killing of Mehsud. Anecdotal evidence also suggests that opposition to drone strikes is far greater in urban centres than in more rural locations where the Taliban exert greater influence. The airstrikes result in less civilian casualties and are deemed favourable by tribal elders wishing to rid remote regions of Pakistan from the grip of the Taliban.

As the second half of 2010 approaches it seems likely that the unmanned airstrikes will remain both a controversial and a lethal instrument in the 'war on terror.'