

What Shapes Civilian Beliefs about Violent Events? Experimental Evidence from Pakistan

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Abstract

Why do civilians in warzones often hold widely divergent beliefs about what is happening in the fighting? While there is a burgeoning literature on the micro-dynamics of armed conflict, variation in civilians' factual beliefs has received scant attention. Yet such beliefs are critical, as they form the basis for wartime opinion and action. I argue that—particularly for civilians outside the direct “line of fire”—this variation comes not chiefly from an event's empirical nature, but from civilians' prior political orientations in the dispute. In order to investigate these dynamics, I fielded a survey experiment in Pakistan in which I manipulated the features of a reported counter-insurgent air strike and then measured civilians' ensuing beliefs about it. The results show that these beliefs are most driven by the perpetrator's identity and civilians' own preexisting attachments. While actual casualty levels matter too, these findings suggest that civilians' beliefs about conflict events are often deeply biased in nature.

Keywords

asymmetric conflict, belief structure, civilian casualties, civil wars, counterterrorism

On October 7, 2012, thousands of Pakistanis gathered in the capital city of Islamabad and its neighbor Rawalpindi for a peace march toward Pakistan's tribal areas in order

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to protest the American drone strikes often conducted there. Led by cricketer-turned-politician Imran Khan, the nine-mile-long convoy was packed with red-and-green flags for Khan's *Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf* (PTI) party and anti-drone posters with slogans like "Drones Fly Children Die" ("US Activists Join Drone Protest in Pakistan," *The National*, October 7, 2012). At one of his several speeches during the route, Khan captured the mood when he thundered: "PTI is with the people of Waziristan during this American war. These cruelties by the Americans in which women and children are killed by drones . . . we will raise this issue with the entire world, and, God willing, this party of yours will bring peace here!" While this picture of drones undoubtedly resonated with a major segment of the Pakistani population, some perceived the strikes quite differently. "Son, *bangbangane* (local name for drones) go after the *gunehgar* (sinner) and not the innocent," one elderly woman in a camp for those displaced from the tribal areas said in an interview (Muhammad Zubair, "Drone Attacks—Myth and Reality," *The Daily Times*, June 4, 2012). Drone strikes are "the closest thing to getting our prayers answered," explained another (Aqil Shah, "Drone Blowback in Pakistan is a Myth. Here's Why," *The Washington Post*, May 17, 2016). Even the brother of a drone victim declared he "would always go for drones," attributing his brother's death to a targeting error instead of American malice (Pir Zubair Shah, "My Drone War," *Foreign Policy*, February 27, 2012). These statements are illustrative of a growing trickle of pro-drone testimony in Pakistan—mostly by the very "tribal people" Khan is claiming to represent—which holds that the drone campaign is actually quite precise, careful, and targeted in nature.

How can we understand these divergent beliefs about the nature of the same violent events in a war-torn society like Pakistan? In fact, such variation is far from unique; from Palestinian perceptions of Fatah– Hamas clashes to Nigerian beliefs about Boko Haram bombings, civilian perceptions of violence vary widely across war-torn societies. These differences often transcend questions about the legitimacy or desirability of the violence to what it is even doing and who it is even targeting—that is, to its *factual or empirical nature*. Are the rebels targeting civilians or not? Is the state's incarceration campaign picking up insurgents or terrorists? Was that truly a massacre? How civilians in countries engulfed in armed conflict answer such questions is tremendously important. Indeed, civilians not only provide crucial forms of support—such as fighters, funds, supplies, and information—to combatants (e.g., Sewall et al. 2007), but they also vote, protest, and mobilize in ways that shape the broader strategic environment (Jaeger et al. 2012). And, critically, civilians' factual beliefs about the fighting influence these decisions—that is, what they think is happening in the conflict shapes who they support and what they do. In Pakistan, for example, the widespread perception of the drone campaign as indiscriminate and destructive has not only fueled the rise of the populist opposition leader Imran Khan and his conciliatory policies toward the Pakistani Taliban, but also forced some key concessions from the United States—like the closures of critical air bases and supply

lines—and, according to some accounts, boosted militant recruitment in the country.¹

Yet existing literature on the micro-dynamics of armed conflict is largely silent on civilians' factual beliefs in war. To begin with, much of the literature about conflict dynamics has focused on combatant behaviors—such as patterns of political violence, governance, and resistance (e.g., Kalyvas 2006; Kalyvas and Kocher 2007)—with relatively few studies of civilian attitudes and perceptions. Recently, a handful of studies have deviated from this trend, examining how civilians respond to violence with local attitudinal data from various contexts (Jaeger et al. 2012; Lyall, Blair, and Imai 2013; García-Ponce and Pasquale 2013). However, like the literature on combatant behaviors, the focus of these studies is generally extremely localized in nature, on how civilians respond to violence in the particular village, community, or district in which it occurs. While this work is important, it ignores the broader variation in civilian beliefs about the fighting that arises across war-torn societies. Indeed, violent events today frequently reach mass audiences of millions of people across their respective societies and beyond through the mass media and other channels of information (Nacos 2007). Moreover, combatants spend substantial effort trying to “spin” or frame them to their advantage, so they clearly believe that these beliefs matter. For instance, the media strategies of the belligerents in the Syrian civil war have been described as campaigns to “assign blame and, through images and rhetoric, present a distribution of pain and suffering that warrants their actions” (Powers and O’Loughlin 2015, 176). Why waste resources doing this unless you think civilian beliefs about the nature of the fighting are important, as well as malleable?

In this article, I argue that these beliefs do vary systematically in conflict settings, and that this variation can be explained largely by civilians' psychological motivation in the dispute. Indeed, while civilians are often seen as highly rational actors who recognize and react to combatant signals accurately, I draw from research on motivational psychology (e.g., Kunda 1990) to argue that civilians in conflict zones will often interpret information about violent events in ways that satisfy their pre-existing orientations, particularly if they hold strong prior attitudes toward combatants or communities in the dispute. I investigate these dynamics in the context of the distinction between “selective” and “indiscriminate” violence, which refers to the extent to which the user of force tries to avoid harming civilians or not (Kalyvas 2006; Weinstein 2006; Schutte 2015). This is an ideal context in which to examine these issues, as a key distinction in the nature of political violence that ultimately “hinges on public perceptions” (Kalyvas 2006, 145).

To test this argument, I fielded a survey experiment across the four primary provinces of Pakistan. In this experiment, respondents were read one of several realistic but fictitious news stories about a counterinsurgent air strike in the country and answered a series of questions about their ensuing factual beliefs and political attitudes. In particular, I used a 2×2 factorial design with variation in the perpetrators (United States or Pakistan) and consequences (civilian casualties or not) of

the military operation. I also included pretreatment questions on participants' identities and ideologies that allows me to explore the impact of these variables on their beliefs about the event.

The analysis yields several key results. First, the identity of the perpetrator has a much stronger effect on perceptions of the air strike's "selectivity" than its actual reported level of civilian casualties. Second, the impact of perpetrator identity is heavily conditioned by civilians' prior political orientations, as proxied by factors like Islamist ideology and Pashtun ethnicity. These results suggest that civilian beliefs about the nature of violent events—including whether they are selective or indiscriminate in nature—are shaped not chiefly by the incidents' objective results, but by civilians' preexisting orientations toward the actors involved. Third, there is evidence that the perpetrator identity treatment in turn shapes civilians' overall support for (or approval of) the operation, and that this effect is strongly mediated by perceptions of its selectivity. In other words, we can see the link not only from civilians' biases to their beliefs, but also from these (biased) beliefs, in turn, to their attitudes. Ultimately, these results suggest that scholars and policy makers alike should pay closer attention to not just what actually happens in war zones, but also to what diverse civilian communities genuinely *think* has happened if they wish to understand, anticipate, and influence civilian behavior.

Existing Literature

Imagine that an improvised explosive device erupts on a dusty road in Afghanistan, an Israeli bulldozer demolishes a house in Gaza, or a band of rebels raids a village in Liberia. How do civilians know what happened in these routine violent events? Specifically, how do they know whether the perpetrator attempted to avoid killing civilians or not? It is almost a truism of modern armed conflict that civilians play a key role in shaping conflict dynamics and outcomes (e.g., Condra and Shapiro 2012; Lyall, Blair, and Imai 2013). Civilian communities not only support combatants by providing resources like funding, recruits, supplies, and information but also shape their strategies by voting, protesting, and engaging in other kinds of wartime mobilization (Jaeger et al. 2012). And, centrally for our purposes, whether they believe one side is killing innocent civilians will influence these choices.

But how do civilians make these judgments? Existing literature on armed conflict largely ignores the question. Indeed, much of the micro-level conflict literature focuses on the localized and militarized dynamics of war unfolding on the "battlefield," such as whether different types of counterinsurgency operations and strategies reduce the number of insurgent attacks in a particular village or district (Kalyvas and Kocher 2007; Condra and Shapiro 2012; Berman et al. 2013). While this literature has helped identify the causes and consequences of different combatant behaviors such as types of violence, it has generally "bracketed" the issue of civilian attitudes and beliefs, most likely due to the ethical and methodological concerns involved in fielding public opinion surveys in conflict settings (Lyall,

Blair, and Imai 2013). Yet simply ignoring or assuming civilian attitudes is problematic, as they may diverge from combatant behavior and control in important ways, particularly over the long term.

A handful of recent studies have begun to fill the gap by examining civilian attitudes and reactions to wartime violence using public opinion data from Afghanistan to Zimbabwe (Jaeger et al. 2012; Lyall, Blair, and Imai 2013; García-Ponce and Pasquale 2013). While these studies have made some major contributions, they have two crucial limitations for our purposes. First, like the combatant behavior literature noted above, they typically only examine how civilians respond to violence within a highly localized area, such as the specific village or at most district in which it takes place. In contrast, there is little to no attention, to the factual beliefs of broader populations that arise throughout the conflict setting, and the role of mass media, wartime propaganda, and psychological factors in shaping them. Indeed, this omission is particularly glaring in the age of “mass-mediated political violence” (Nacos 2007) or “mediatized war” (Maltby 2012), when news about violence frequently reaches millions of civilians in the war-torn society and beyond. Second, these studies examine how civilians respond to violent events, and not how they form beliefs about the nature of those events (or even whether the events occurred) in the first place. For instance, Lyall, Blair, and Imai (2013) find bias in civilian reactions to wartime victimization in Afghanistan, whereby harm by the in-group is less alienating than harm by the out-group. Yet a judgment about harm requires attribution: when do civilians think that their families or communities were “harmed” by a combatant to begin with? This study thus builds on existing wartime survey research by tackling the prior question of how civilians’ factual beliefs about conflict events—which may then shape their ensuing attitudinal and behavioral responses—come to form in the first place.

One partial exception to this neglect of factual beliefs in conflict zones is a recent study by Driscoll and Maliniak (2016). These scholars fielded a pair of surveys in post-Soviet Georgia, one shortly before and one shortly after the country’s brief war with Russia in 2008. While the principal focus of the study is on leadership evaluations during foreign policy crises, the study does document a “Fog of War” effect in which “many respondents earnestly reported believing different things about the events they had just lived through” (p. 266). Yet, in this sense, the study simply drives home the point that there *is* variation in civilians’ factual beliefs, but does little to actually explain and understand it. In fact, Driscoll and Maliniak largely attribute this variation to the chaos and confusion (or “fog”) of war, noting that “our interpretation of these trends is simple: media coverage of the war was confusing, and these confusions were internalized by Georgian citizens in the form of internally coherent narratives” (p. 272). In contrast, I argue that variation in civilians’ factual beliefs is not simply the result of cognitive confusion and wartime ambiguity, but the product of systematic motivational factors in conflict settings. This difference has important implications for understanding where and when we expect to see factual biases flourish in war. Ultimately, this study thus seeks to build on Driscoll and

Maliniak's observation by providing a fuller theoretical and empirical treatment of these dynamics.

Yet, while these issues have gone largely unexamined in the literature on conflict processes, they have been increasingly explored by scholars of American political behavior and political psychology. Indeed, there has been a recent explosion of research in these subfields on how and why citizens form different factual beliefs about their political environments, and the causes and consequences of factual misperceptions, conspiracy theories, political rumors, "fake news," and other similar phenomena in political life (e.g., Taber and Lodge 2006; Nyhan and Reifler 2010; Miller, Saunders, and Farhart 2016). This study attempts to link this fast-growing literature in American political behavior to the study of the dynamics of violent conflict, building a bridge between two corners of the field not normally in conversation with each other and examining the extent to which they point to similar processes at work in very different contexts. In fact, for reasons which I illuminate in this article, these issues may be even more severe in the deeply polarized and heavily politicized landscapes of war.

Perceptions of Selectivity

I investigate these dynamics in the context of the quality of violence that is used by combatants. In particular, violence is typically thought to provoke less alienation, opposition, and resistance, and thus be more strategically effective when it is "selective" as opposed to "indiscriminate" in nature (Kalyvas 2006; Weinstein 2006; Kalyvas and Kocher 2007). In brief, this means that it targets enemy combatants and collaborators and tries to avoid harming innocent civilians. Yet this paradigm rests on the assumption that the noncombatant civilian population can accurately distinguish between selective versus indiscriminate violence—if not, both will prove equally futile. In fact, one of the scholars who helped crystallize and popularize the concepts even recognizes that "in practice, the distinction between selective and indiscriminate violence hinges on public perceptions" (Kalyvas 2006, 145). In reality, of course, violence is not purely selective or purely indiscriminate but falls along a spectrum of selectivity based on how hard the perpetrator tries to avoid harming civilian populations, ranging from targeting individual enemy soldiers (or even leaders) to carpet bombing entire enemy cities. However, the argument advanced in this article suggests that civilians who are not directly exposed to the violence will perceive its selectivity not primarily through its "objective" conduct or results but through the lens of their own preexisting beliefs, attitudes, and identities in the dispute.

A Theory of Factual Beliefs in War

I argue that a powerful factor shaping how civilians perceive the nature of wartime violence is their psychological motivation when interpreting it. Decades of research

from social psychology show that people often process new information about the world in ways that preserve their preexisting attitudes and attachments. Specifically, they frequently engage in “motivated reasoning”—that is, thinking directed toward reaching the conclusions that maintain their emotional or psychological needs (Kunda 1990). Indeed, studies reveal that when people hold strong motivational biases toward new information, they not only arrive at self-serving conclusions but actually access and process information distinctly in doing so. These dynamics cut across a wide range of social settings, from political campaigns (Taber and Lodge 2006) to market outcomes (Bénabou 2012), and even beliefs about life-threatening issues like crime and gun control (Campbell and Kay 2014).

These tendencies apply to civilians in conflict settings as well. While civilians may not all be microcosms of overarching “master cleavages” (Kalyvas 2006), neither are they just simple “blank slates” that all interpret battlefield dynamics in the same way. On the contrary, people often hold strong preexisting attitudes and attachments toward the warring parties in conflicts, which they will attempt to defend when exposed to new information about the fighting. For example, if a civilian harbors a deep animosity for one of the combatants or communities involved in a dispute, he or she will “want to believe” that it was indifferent to any civilian casualties that occurred during its operations—or even that they were intentional. To do otherwise would be to challenge and threaten this deeply entrenched belief, which would be cognitively and emotionally costly.

There is a long and rich history of this type of thinking in armed conflicts. In fact, in his scathing critique of the wartime propaganda that fueled World War I (WWI), *Falsehood in War-Time* (1928), the former British Member of Parliament Arthur Ponsonby argues that wartime manipulation is possible not only because of the abundance of elite lies and liars but because of the willingness—even eagerness—of ordinary citizens to believe them. (1) Citizens in wartime, he states, often “quite willingly delude themselves in order to justify their own actions. They are anxious to find an excuse for displaying their patriotism.” (2) For instance, in the infamous WWI case of “the Belgian baby without hands,” in which a false story that a Belgian baby whose hands were chopped off by the Germans circulated widely in Allied nations, inflaming anti-German sentiment, Ponsonby’s critique is telling (1928, Ch. 8):

“No one paused to ask how long a baby would survive with its hands cut off unless expert surgical aid were at hand to tie up the arteries (the answer being a very few minutes). Everyone *wanted to believe* the story, and many went so far as to say they had seen the baby.” (emphasis added)

Similar dynamics helped foster what was perhaps the most notorious piece of anti-German atrocity propaganda created during WWI: the “German corpse factory” story. This was a fake report that the German army was rendering trainloads of its own corpses in a factory in order to extract their fats for the war effort. Although it was probably the most “appalling atrocity story of the war” (Knightley 2004, 114), it

nonetheless grew quite popular and influential in Allied nations. One scholar pins its broad appeal in part on the fact that “many people wanted to believe it. The war was well under way, with all its horrors and grief. To think that the enemy was the incarnation of evil helped the war effort” (Marlin 2002, 72).

These dynamics appear in contemporary conflicts as well. During the bloody wars that ravaged the Balkans in the 1990s, for instance, there was often a genuine state of denial or unwillingness to believe claims that one’s own group had engaged in widespread atrocities or “ethnic cleansing” of rivals. Reflecting on this phenomenon, one leading Serbian newspaper editor noted after the war that “The simplest truth is to say that ‘we are victims, look what they have done to us.’ When you believe that, it is so easy to get rid of any curiosity to find out more” (Di Giovanni 2007, 144). Likewise, in the case of the American drone campaign in Pakistan, the widespread if latent anti-Americanism that flourishes in Pakistani society has made many Pakistanis eager to embrace narratives about its destructive and harmful nature, with some Pakistani observers even lamenting that the prevailing mentality in the country has created an “inability, and sometimes unwillingness to consider” alternative factual narratives about the strikes (Muhammad Zubair, “Drone Attacks—Myth and Reality,” *The Daily Times*, June 4 2012). And similar types of motivated reasoning and denialism have been noted by journalists speaking to pro- and anti-regime civilians in Syria, including (but not limited to) beliefs about the regime’s use of chemical weapons against rebel-held communities (Di Giovanni 2016, 58).

These ideas lead to two closely related empirical predictions. First, they suggest that we should witness different beliefs about the nature of violent events based on the identity of the combatants involved—that is, based on who is doing the killing (and dying). For example, if an attack is carried out by an unpopular, external intervener such as the United States in Pakistan, it will tend to be seen as relatively indiscriminate by the Pakistani population, as compared to an otherwise equivalent attack conducted by a more popular combatant like the Pakistani army. This can be stated as follows:

Hypothesis 1: If a combatant is widely unpopular (popular) among the civilian population, its violence will tend to be perceived as more (less) indiscriminate in nature.

Second, and relatedly, we should see civilians’ beliefs about the nature of violent events vary not only based on the identity of the warring parties involved, but also based on the attitudes of the civilians themselves and their prior orientations toward those combatants. In particular, we should observe a greater tendency toward the formation of negative factual beliefs among those who hold unfavorable or even hostile prior orientations toward the perpetrator in question. This leads to the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1b: If a civilian harbors a negative (positive) preexisting orientation toward one of the combatants in a conflict, he or she will be likely to perceive its violence as more (less) indiscriminate in nature.

Ultimately, these hypotheses tap into the same underlying mechanism—motivated biases toward the combatants in the conflict—but they test it at different levels of aggregation and are thus usefully distinguished here to fully set up for the empirical analysis.

Of course, the idea against which these hypotheses are framed is that the objective features and characteristics of violent events will do most of the “work” in terms of shaping civilians’ factual beliefs about them. In other words, factors such as the level of civilian casualties, the weapons or technologies used, and the precautions taken or avoided by the perpetrator (such as distributing warning leaflets, creating escape corridors, and avoiding crowded areas) will be the key drivers of whether civilians perceive an operation as selective or indiscriminate. Indeed, this idea that civilians generally “get it right” is the implicit assumption in empirical studies examining the extent to which “objective” differences in violence—such as variation in its tactics, targets, or results—elicit different behavioral responses from civilian populations (e.g., Condra and Shapiro 2012; Jaeger et al. 2012; Benmelech, Berrebi, and Klor 2015). This can be stated in terms of the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: Civilians will perceive violence as selective or indiscriminate in nature based on its objective features or characteristics, such as its levels of civilian casualties.

Empirical Approach

In order to examine these hypotheses, I conducted a survey experiment in a war-torn society in which I exposed subjects to news stories about a violent event and manipulated its key attributes. This stands in stark contrast to most existing studies of civilian reactions to violence, which use either observed (Jaeger et al. 2012; García-Ponce and Pasquale 2013) or self-reported (Lyall, Blair, and Imai 2013) violent events as their key stimulus. While this observational approach may confer certain advantages, it comes at the cost of control over the “treatment”—the violence to which civilians are exposed. In practice, this means that scholars either treat all violence in the study as equivalent (García-Ponce and Pasquale 2013), or that they compare different types of violence—such as state versus rebel attacks—without accounting for the many potential differences between them (Lyall, Blair, and Imai 2013). In contrast, an experimental approach gives the researcher much more leverage to isolate and manipulate theoretically informed differences in violence, such as its perpetrators, tactics, and casualties.

In this experiment, I used a 2×2 factorial design with variation in the perpetrators (local or foreign) and consequences (civilian casualties or not) of the event.

While varying the civilian casualties helps us gauge the sensitivity of civilian perceptions to the operation's objective outcomes, varying its perpetrators helps us examine whether the perceptions are conditioned by prior loyalties and attitudes toward the combatants involved. I also included a number of pretreatment questions about respondents' identities and ideologies that offer additional leverage in getting at our hypotheses.

Empirical Context

The empirical context for the study is the ongoing American and Pakistani campaigns against Islamist militant organizations in Pakistan, particularly in the northwest of the country. This case is useful because it offers a variety of different sources and forms of violence, including attacks by local and foreign counterinsurgent forces against many of the same militant groups. This allows us to credibly manipulate the perpetrator carrying out a given military operation in a news story (e.g., the United States or Pakistan) without necessarily varying its other key features.² In other words, all four grid cells outlined above occur in the real world—both the United States and Pakistan routinely conduct operations against militant groups in the tribal areas of the country that vary widely in their results. Before delving into the details of the experiment, however, I first provide a brief overview of the conflict environment.

While Islamist militancy has deep roots in Pakistan, its present struggles with the Pakistani state can be traced back to the US-led invasion of neighboring Afghanistan in 2001, when the remains of Al Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban fled over the porous border between the two countries—the Durand Line—into the remote tribal regions of Pakistan. Under intense US pressure, the Pakistani army entered the tribal regions in 2002 to root them out, but its operation only enraged the deeply independent local tribes (Qazi 2011). This enabled the militants to win some tribal support, which they combined with killings of hostile tribal elders (maliks) to consolidate control of the tribal areas in 2004. In 2007, a number of the different factions coalesced into the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), or Pakistani Taliban, under the leadership of Baitullah Mehsud. The TTP soon proved itself to be an existential threat to Islamabad when it initiated a full-scale national insurgency, sweeping across Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province to within striking distance of Islamabad. While this advance was blunted by the army in 2009, the group continues to unleash deadly attacks across the country, as indicated by the 2014 Peshawar school massacre in which 132 children were slaughtered in an army public school (see, e.g., *New York Times*, December 14, 2014). Nor is the Pakistani campaign against such Islamist militant groups limited to the country's northwest—the TTP and affiliated groups are active in the sprawling slums of Karachi, the rural reaches of southern Punjab, and a number of other pockets countrywide.

In order to confront this situation, US and Pakistani authorities have conducted a variety of military campaigns and operations. The Pakistani army has, at times,

engaged in quite pitched battles against these adversaries, including in its counter-insurgency operations to clear Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and the tribal areas, which have often required the use of heavy airpower. It has also conducted a steady stream of more targeted arrests or raids in urban settings, such as the campaigns by the Pakistani Rangers in Karachi. At the same time, the United States has launched over 400 air strikes from unmanned aerial vehicles or “drones” against militant groups in and around the tribal areas since 2004.³ It has also conducted a number of special forces raids and other covert operations in the country, such as the 2011 Abbottabad raid against Osama bin Laden (Figure A1 in the Online Appendix shows the geographic distribution of US and Pakistani military operations in the conflict setting). Overall, this ongoing struggle against Islamist militancy in the country has resulted in over 50,000 total casualties,⁴ vast numbers of internally displaced persons peaking at 2.2 million in 2009 (see, e.g., “2.2 Million IDPs in Pakistan: United Nations,” *Dawn*, May 19, 2009), and an estimated US\$100 billion in economic losses (see, e.g., “12-Year War on Terror Cost \$100bn, says Dar,” *Dawn*, June 2, 2014.), although the situation has stabilized somewhat since 2014.

Fielding the Survey

The survey used in this study was fielded across Pakistan in December 2014 by the Institute for Public Opinion Research, an experienced survey firm based in Islamabad. The data were collected with a multistage stratified random sample of 1,000 respondents drawn from the entire adult (eighteen or older) population of Pakistan “proper,” including the four provinces of Punjab, Sindh, KP, and Balochistan. We first stratified the sample by province and then by urban/rural distribution in order to obtain sufficient variation on these dimensions, and then randomly picked rural villages or urban blocks/circles as our primary sampling units (PSUs). Within each PSU, we used the random walk method to select households and the Kish grid to select individual respondents. Overall, we achieved a 70 percent participation rate, a figure comparable to recent rounds of the General Social Survey (69 percent in 2014) and the American National Election Survey (49 percent in 2012). Figure A2 in the Online Appendix shows the geographic distribution of survey respondents across Pakistan.⁵ The survey was conducted with institutional review board approval, using mixed gender teams fluent in local languages in addition to Urdu.

One key point about the survey is that it was not fielded in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), the volatile slice of Pakistan in which the strike was reported to have occurred. Thus, it does not examine the beliefs of those directly exposed to the specific type of violence in question. Yet the sample still covers the vast majority of the broader conflict setting of Pakistan.⁶ Indeed, FATA contain only a small part of Pakistan’s population (under 2 percent), so we can still examine how the violence is seen across the vast majority of the country. And Pakistan’s post-9/11 conflict with Islamist militant groups like the TTP and its affiliates—which has claimed more than 50,000 lives and passed the conventional threshold for a “major”

civil war eight times (Gleditsch et al. 2002; Allansson, Melander, and Themnér 2017)—is in no way confined to FATA. Rather, many parts of the country have seen serious violence and contestation, from Peshawar to Quetta and Karachi to Lahore. In fact, 57 percent of our sample lives in a district that has seen at least five militant attacks since 2007, and 32 percent lives in a district that has seen at least one counterinsurgency operation by the Pakistani army over that time.⁷ Thus, while there is variation, much of the sample has been exposed to violence and manifestations of the country's ongoing conflict. Moreover, this broader civilian population feeds into the conflict in various ways, shaping it directly as potential recruitment pools (through, for example, the country's much-discussed madrassah system), resource bases, and safe havens for the militants, as well as indirectly through elections, protests, and various other forms of mobilization that influence the state's behavior in the struggle. In sum, while future studies should explore whether these results extend to the areas most directly affected by the specific actions in question, this study allows us to examine how civilians throughout the vast majority of a country experiencing a serious civil conflict—who are both immersed in and important to that conflict—form factual beliefs about events in the dispute.

The survey questionnaire began with a “warm-up” question about respondents' satisfaction with the direction of their country, followed by a battery of pretreatment questions about their general political attitudes for potential use as moderators of the treatment effects. The pretreatment political questions were kept fairly generic in nature so as not to artificially elicit views toward the combatants and thus constrain reactions to the treatment vignette via a consistency bias mechanism. Prior to the treatment vignette, respondents were also asked about their news consumption habits.

Respondents were then assigned at random to one of the four mock news reports about a counterinsurgent air strike conducted in the tribal areas of the country. As noted, the experiment used a 2×2 factorial design, varying the perpetrators (the United States or Pakistan) and results (civilian casualties or not) of the strike. The text for group 4—US strike with civilian casualties—is shown in Figure 1 to illustrate the design (group-specific text in bold).⁸ The format is loosely modeled on news reports about US and Pakistani operations in popular Pakistani news sources such as Dawn (the country's top English-language newspaper) and Geo News (its top private television station).

To measure respondents' perceptions of the operation, we asked two main questions. First, we asked about their overall approval of the air strike, on a scale from 0 to 10. Then, to capture their perceptions of its “selectivity,” we asked them how hard they think the perpetrator tried to avoid civilian casualties, on a five-point scale ranging from “not at all” (1) to “a great deal” (5). This question captures the idea of perceived selectivity fairly directly and is used as the primary dependent variable in the analysis. Finally, we asked respondents about their support for a number of different political actors, strategies, and goals, as well as a battery of standard demographic questions for potential use as covariates. The respondents were then

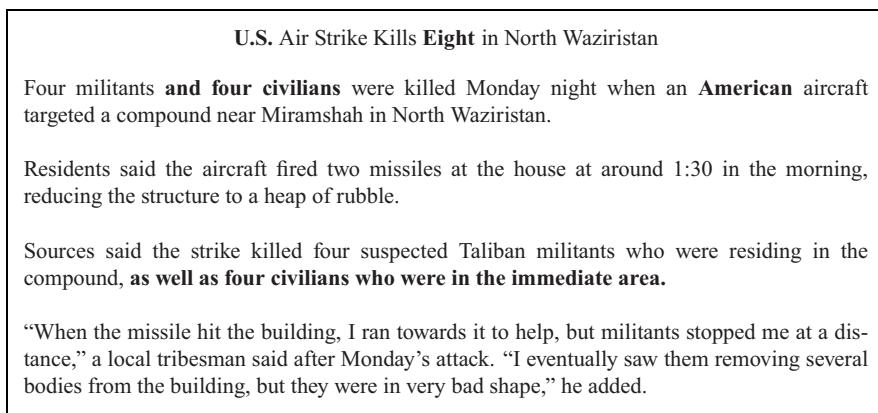


Figure 1. Sample treatment vignette.

debriefed and given a small gift as a token of appreciation for their participation in the study.

During the actual administration of the survey, each of the 1,000 respondents was randomly assigned to one of the four treatment groups or to a no-treatment control group which received no article. This yielded almost exactly 200 respondents per group (201, 200, 198, 200, 201).⁹ However, it should be clarified that this particular experiment was part of a larger study on the impact of different counterinsurgency tactics in Pakistan. In the analyses that follow, we examine the roughly 800 respondents in the four treatment groups who read the vignette about the air strike, in order to examine how their beliefs about the operation were shaped by its perpetrator and its results. In this sense, the “clean” Pakistani air strike can be understood as the baseline condition in our analysis, with the insertion of the United States as the perpetrator and the civilian casualties as the two manipulations in the study. The control group respondents, who did not receive the vignette, provide us with no additional leverage on this question and are thus excluded from our analyses here.¹⁰

Empirical Results

To examine the results, we first inspect the outcome visually. Figure 2 plots the perceived selectivity of the air strike by treatment condition. Two key points emerge. First, there is wide variation in the perceived selectivity of the strike both between and within treatment conditions. In other words, respondents are perceiving the selectivity of the operation in divergent ways independent of any experimental manipulation (i.e., of its reported perpetrators or casualties). This underscores the general point that civilians’ factual beliefs about violent incidents often diverge widely in a given conflict. Second, there appear to be large differences by perpetrator, with the US strikes seen as far more indiscriminate than their Pakistani

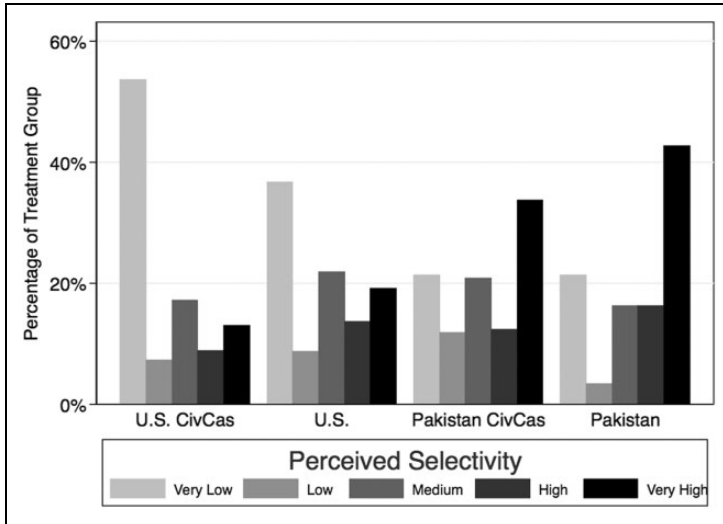


Figure 2. Perceived selectivity of the air strike by treatment condition. The figure shows the distribution of responses within each treatment group. The specific question wording was “how much do you think those who conducted this strike tried to avoid civilian casualties?” The options were “not at all, a little, somewhat, a lot, a great deal, or don’t know.” CivCas is short for civilian casualties.

counterparts. In fact, over half the respondents perceived the perpetrator as not trying to avoid civilian casualties at all when the strike was conducted by the United States and killed civilians, by far the highest mark of any group. There are also noticeable differences by civilian casualty level, although these appear to be far more modest than those attributable to perpetrator identity.

To probe more deeply, we next compare the mean levels of the dependent variable as well as their differences across treatment groups. Specifically, Table 1 shows the average level of perceived selectivity broken down by perpetrator identity, by civilian casualties, and finally by both treatments in interaction. It also includes the differences in means between conditions and their statistical significance. Note that in all of the results, the five-point ordinal measure of perceived selectivity is scaled from 0 to 4.

As can be seen, perpetrator identity has by far the largest effect on perceived selectivity—the operation is perceived as a full twenty-four percentage points (0.96/4) more indiscriminate when it is carried out by the United States than by Pakistan, and this difference in means is highly significant. Civilian casualties have a significant effect as well, with the strike seen as just over ten percentage points (0.41/4) more indiscriminate if it kills civilians. Yet, as seen in the bottom half of the table, this effect is somewhat dependent on the perpetrator. If the strike is done by the United States, the effect of hitting civilians is over twelve percentage points (0.50/4)

Table 1. Mean Perceptions of Selectivity by Perpetrator, Results, and Both.

	Perceived Selectivity (0– 4)
Perpetrator identity	
United States	1.44
Pakistan	2.40
Difference in means	0.96***
Operation's results	
Civcas	1.71
No civcas	2.12
Difference in means	0.41***
Perpetrator* results	
United States with civcas	1.20
United States without civcas	1.70
Difference in means	0.50**
Pakistan with civcas	2.25
Pakistan without civcas	2.56
Difference in means	0.30

Note: The table displays the air strike's mean level of perceived selectivity across treatment conditions, as well as the differences in those means and their statistical significance. Perceived selectivity is a five-point scale ranging from 0 to 4. CivCas is short for civilian casualties. KP = Khyber Pakhtunkwha.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

and the difference is statistically significant. However, if the operation is done by the Pakistanis, the difference is under eight percentage points (.30/4) and is not significant at conventional levels. In other words, we cannot confidently say that the Pakistani army is significantly penalized for inflicting civilian casualties, while we can say that the United States suffers a significant penalty for doing so.¹¹ Overall, these results provide support for Hypothesis 1a, suggesting that the perceived selectivity of a violent event depends first and foremost on preexisting popularity of the perpetrator. Moreover, they suggest that while the attack's objective results do matter (Hypothesis 2), their effect is substantively weaker than and statistically dependent on the identity of the perpetrator.

Moderating Effects

In order to investigate further, I examine how the treatments interact with respondents' prior attitudes and attachments (Hypothesis 1b). One attitude that might moderate these effects is support for Islam in politics. As in many Muslim majority countries, the Islamist versus secular-nationalist cleavage is a salient one in Pakistan, and those with an Islamist orientation tend to hold more unfavorable views of the United States and West more broadly. Indeed, while Islamist groups are diverse, they provide "a key source of identity to peoples intent on strengthening their social

cohesion against Western cultural assault” (Fuller 2002, 55), and empirical studies show that Islamists tend to hold more unfavorable views of the United States and its allies (Blaydes and Linzer 2012; Ciftci and Tezcür 2016). More country-specific work also highlights these tendencies in Pakistan in particular (Reetz 2006). Following the motivational logic laid out above, Islamists should interpret the selectivity of the US strike with greater directional bias against the United States to satisfy these views. In other words, the effect of perpetrator identity should be even larger among them. To capture Islamist attitudes, I use a question about whether respondents support the caliphate as a political model in Pakistan. While the caliphate can be understood in many ways, it is widely used as a symbol and banner by Islamist groups worldwide (Pankhurst 2013). This is particularly true in South Asia, where the idea is deeply linked to Islamist movements like the Jamaat-e-Islami, Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan, and Taliban (Zaman 2015).

Another key attachment that might moderate the treatments is respondents’ ethnic identities. Along with the role of Islam in politics, ethnicity remains one of the most salient cleavages in Pakistani politics, with one’s ethnic status as Punjabi, Sindhi, Mohajir, Balochi, or Pashtun often heavily molding one’s political outlook. In particular, the Pashtun community is one of the most conscious of its identity, and tends to be among the most unfavorable in its orientations toward the United States due to the impact of the war in Afghanistan and broader “War on Terror” on the Pashtun communities on both sides of the Durand line. Pashtun-majority parts of both countries serve as the main strongholds for their respective Taliban insurgencies and have seen the heaviest fighting in the conflicts (Kaltenthaler and Miller 2015). Accordingly, like those who harbor Islamist orientations, Pashtun identifiers should interpret the selectivity of the US air strike in a more biased way in order to satisfy their preexisting unfavorable beliefs about the United States.^{12,13}

To test these two interactions, I simply run a pair of models, each of which regresses the DV—perceived selectivity—on the treatment indicators plus their interactions with one of the two moderating variables (a number of additional models are reported later to ensure robustness). These models yield Figure 3, which shows how the impact of the United States as perpetrator varies by Pashtun ethnicity (left) and Islamist ideology (right).¹⁴ Looking first at the graph on the left, we can see that the effect of perpetrator identity is strongly moderated by Pashtun ethnicity. Indeed, the US air strike is seen as almost twenty percentage points (0.75/4) more indiscriminate than its Pakistani equivalent among non-Pashtuns, while that difference is nearly forty percentage points (1.5/4)—twice as large—among Pashtuns. Looking next at the graph on the right, we see that the effect of perpetrator identity is also heavily moderated by Islamist attitudes as proxied by support for the caliphate. In particular, whether the United States conducts the air strike or not has no discernible effect on those who view the caliphate unfavorably, but only among those with neutral or (particularly) positive attitudes. Moreover, the effect grows substantially as caliphate support increases, from around ten percentage points (0.4/4) to roughly thirty percentage points (1.2/4) among those with the highest support. In

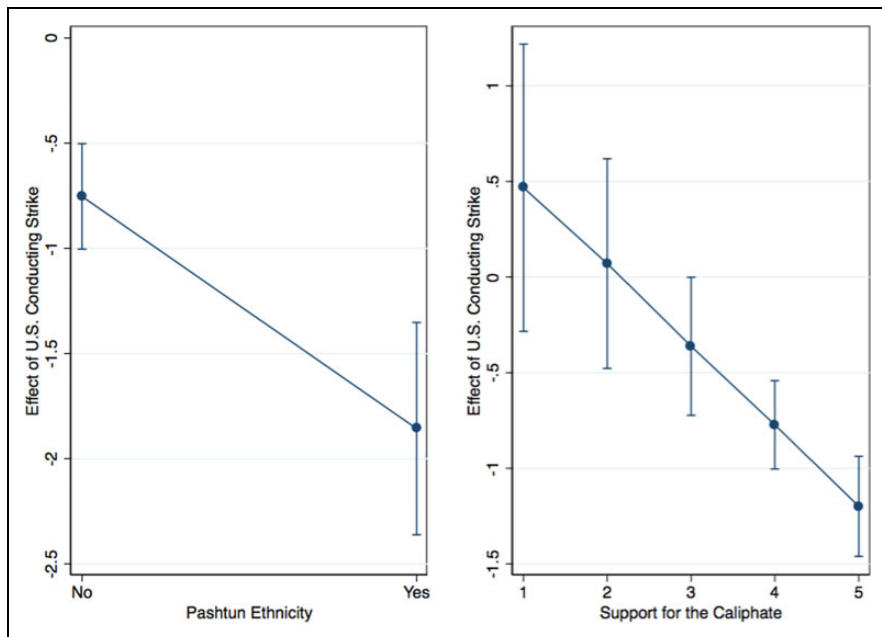


Figure 3. Interactions of United States as perpetrator with Pashtun ethnicity and Islamist ideology. The figure shows the effect of the United States conducting the air strike on respondents' perceptions of its selectivity by their level of Pashtun ethnicity (left) and Islamist ideology (right). Results from ordinary least squares regressions, with 95 percent confidence intervals. Perceived selectivity is a five-point scale ranging from 0 to 4.

sum, both the Islamist and Pashtun results provide evidence—along with the perpetrator identity effect itself—that whether civilians perceive violence as selective or indiscriminate is heavily influenced by their prior attitudes and attachments in the dispute. The crucial point here is not just that Islamists or Pashtuns tend to dislike the United States, or even disapprove of US military operations on their soil, but that they tend to perceive the *empirical nature* of such violent events in different ways as a result.¹⁵

From Beliefs Back to Attitudes

How do these results in turn translate back to opinion (and ultimately action)? One way we can start thinking about this is by investigating the other outcome question asked after the treatment vignette: civilians' overall support for or approval of the air strike. The specific question was: "How much do you approve of this strike, on a scale of 0 to 10?" While our respondents were relatively unsupportive of the military operation overall, there is substantial variation in the sample ($M = 3.49$, $SD = 3.64$;

Table 2. Effect of Treatments on Overall Approval of Strike, with Mediation Analysis.

	Approval of Strike	Approval of Strike
Treatments		
United States as perpetrator	-2.25*** (.35)	-1.29*** (.30)
CivCas	-0.47 (.35)	-0.23 (.30)
United States × CivCas	-0.06 (.50)	0.38 (.42)
Mediation		
Perceived selectivity		1.36*** (.07)
Covariates		
Sindh	-0.66* (.31)	-2.44*** (.27)
KP	-0.81* (.38)	-0.76* (.32)
Balochistan	0.73 (.48)	0.26 (.39)
Age	-0.00 (.01)	-0.01 (.01)
Gender	0.24 (.27)	0.20 (.23)
Education	-0.13 (.07)	-0.13* (.06)
Income	0.19* (.08)	0.09 (.07)
Urban	0.24 (.28)	-0.00 (.23)
Constant	4.18*** (.75)	2.42*** (.66)
Observations	756	699
R ²	0.14	0.44

Notes: The table shows effect of treatments on overall approval of strike, which ranges from 0 to 10, and the extent to which these effects are mediated by perceived selectivity. Results from ordinary least square regressions. Standard errors are in parentheses.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

see Figure A4 in the Online Appendix for full distribution). In order to examine how this support is shaped by our manipulations, I regress this question on both the perpetrator identity and civilian casualties treatments as well as their interaction. I also conduct a mediation analysis to examine whether such effects occur *through* the mechanism of respondents' perceptions of selectivity. The models presented include province fixed effects as well as basic demographic characteristics, although results are not sensitive to their inclusion.

Table 2 presents the results of this analysis. The first column shows the impact of the treatments on support for the air strike, while the second column adds perceived selectivity to see whether the effects of the treatments on attitudes are mediated by factual beliefs. Looking at the first column, we can see that only the perpetrator identity treatment has a significant effect on overall support for the operation, with approval being 22.5 percentage points (2.25/10) lower when it is carried out by the United States than by the Pakistanis. In contrast, the civilian casualties treatment does *not* have a significant effect on support for the strike, suggesting that while objective results shape civilians' judgments about the selectivity of a military operation, they do not have a clear effect on its broader popularity or legitimacy. Turning

to the second column, we can see that there is clear evidence of mediation from beliefs to attitudes: perceived selectivity is a powerful predictor of support for the strike, and its inclusion in the model diminishes the effect of the US-as-perpetrator treatment by over 40 percent. These findings fit nicely with the general thrust of our argument, suggesting that not only do civilians' biases strongly shape their factual beliefs about conflict events on the ground, but also that such (biased) beliefs in turn meaningfully influence their ensuing attitudes and support for military actions as well.¹⁶

Robustness Checks

In order to increase confidence in these results, I conduct two primary sets of robustness tests. This is important because, while the two treatment effects are the result of randomization, the interactive results (respondent ideology and ethnicity) show how these treatment effects vary across observed covariates that are not experimentally manipulated. To help assuage concerns that they may be correlated with other characteristics of respondents, I add an extensive set of covariates to each of the models used to create the figures shown above. To begin with, I add (1) province fixed effects and (2) basic demographic covariates (age, gender, education, income, and urbanity) to the models (see Online Appendix Table A2). Then, for a stricter test, I also include (3) additional social and political factors (Islamic sect, religiosity, national pride, democratic support, and general news exposure¹⁷) that may be linked to the moderating variables as well (see Online Appendix Table A3). In all cases, the models yield virtually identical results, with the moderating variables maintaining their substantively and statistically significant impact.

Second, I also replicate the interactive results with two additional models—ordered logistic regression and analysis of variance (ANOVA)—in order to ensure that the findings were not influenced by model selection (see Online Appendix Tables A4 and A5). These replications are done both with and without covariates in order to ensure their robustness. Across these models, the results are substantively unchanged, with respondent ideology and ethnicity still heavily moderating the effect of the United States as perpetrator treatment. Overall, the interactive results are quite robust to model selection and specification choices.

Additionally, I conduct these same robustness checks on the mediation results presented above, as they show how the influence of the treatments on approval of the air strike changes with the inclusion of an observed variable (perceived selectivity). In particular, I replicate the mediation analysis with (1) the full complement of covariates listed above and (2) the two additional models of ordered logistic regression and ANOVA instead of just ordinary least square. The results of these tests (see Online Appendix, Tables A6–A8) show that the evidence of mediation is similarly robust to issues of model selection and specification.

Discussion and Conclusion

While the growing body of micro-level conflict research has yielded many important insights into the behaviors and attitudes of conflict actors, it has not yet examined their factual beliefs about what is happening in the conflict. Yet, as in other areas of political life, people in conflict settings often hold quite divergent factual beliefs about the nature of the actions and events in their environment. In fact, this issue may be particularly severe in conflict situations, where civilians often hold strong preexisting orientations in the dispute, which influence how they interpret new information about combatant behaviors. We studied these dynamics in the context of civilian beliefs about violent events, particularly their targeting practices or degree of selectivity. Using an original national survey experiment in Pakistan that manipulated the features of a reported counterinsurgent air strike, we showed that civilians outside the directly affected area *did* hold widely varying beliefs about the selectivity of the strike, and that these beliefs were largely due to their prior social and political attachments as opposed to the actual observed level of civilian casualties.

These results have some significant implications for our understanding of the dynamics of modern armed conflict. Most notably, behavioral models of armed conflict should consider that civilians can hold widely varying beliefs about combatant actions, particularly once we widen our lens beyond a highly localized setting. Thus, studies that analyze the effect of different combatant behaviors—such as selective versus indiscriminate attacks—should be careful to “ground truth” them in the relevant case and ensure that civilians actually recognize these differences. Otherwise, how can we expect them to act and react in the ways that our theories predict? Indeed, these processes may help us understand cases in which high levels of restraint incite fierce counter-mobilization or when excess and brutality provoke surprisingly little. Moreover, findings that variation in the conduct or results of military operations have little discernible impact on civilian reactions (Zhukov and Baum 2016) may be partly due to biased factual beliefs as well. Particularly in the modern era of “mediatized war” (Maltby 2012), when conflict events reach ever-greater mass audiences, we should be closely attuned to these dynamics. These issues also raise the question of which other civilian beliefs vary within conflict settings—for example, beliefs about who is winning, who is negotiating, and even who is fighting may vary as well (Driscoll and Maliniak 2016).¹⁸ Combatants try to manipulate factual beliefs about every one of these issues in war.

At the same time, this study does have some limitations that provide key opportunities for additional research. As discussed earlier, one such limitation is that the survey experiment was not fielded within FATA itself. As noted, this still allowed us to explore civilian beliefs throughout the vast majority of the country, including areas of significant contestation and militant support. Yet the results may have been quite distinct in the tribal areas themselves. Indeed, there is growing anecdotal evidence that civilians in FATA, and particularly North Waziristan, have very

different beliefs about the empirical nature of the drone program.¹⁹ These local civilians may possess an intense “accuracy motivation” (Kunda 1990) to process information about the strikes carefully and unbiasedly given its importance for day-to-day survival. The factual beliefs of local civilian communities may thus diverge from those of their nonlocal counterparts over time (although it is worth noting that this would still fit broadly under a motivational model of belief formation, but with a different source of motivation). Ultimately, this presents a compelling avenue for future research; comparing civilian beliefs—or processes of belief formation—about the same conflict events in directly and indirectly exposed areas could be a particularly illuminating exercise for our understanding of civilian behavior in war, potentially allowing for better integration of rationalist (Kalyvas 2006) and group bias (Lyall, Blair, and Imai 2013) models of civilian populations within the same theoretical framework based on personal exposure to the events in question.²⁰

Another limitation is that, while I examined the impact of perpetrator identity versus operational results, I was unable to examine the effect of tactical choices such as the use of drones versus traditional piloted aircraft in the study. Indeed, the operation in the treatment vignette was framed as simply a “strike” whether it was done by the United States or Pakistan and resulted in civilian casualties or not. This was done in order to maintain experimental control and integrity across the different treatment conditions. However, Pakistani respondents may have imagined drones when they saw the United States and piloted aircraft when they saw their own army—as these are the most common ways in which air strikes have been conducted by each combatant within FATA.²¹ On the one hand, the fierce Pakistani backlash against non-drone uses of force by the United States and its allies in recent years (e.g., the Salala attack or Abbottabad raid) suggests that the way in which an attack is carried out may *not* be crucial to the reaction that it engenders. On the other hand, some observers have argued that the nature of drone warfare—in which the perpetrator’s soldiers are not even present on the battlefield and face no risk to themselves—is likely to violate basic norms of fairness and honor and provoke particular resentment among target populations (e.g., Bowden 2013). Future studies will have to evaluate whether such tactical variations (like the use of drones vs. more traditional methods) influence factual beliefs about the nature of military operations in target countries.

Finally, the study does suggest some key policy implications. For those who wish to mitigate or manage armed conflicts, it suggests that encouraging combatants to exercise restraint, aid civilian populations, participate in peace negotiations, and undertake any number of other prescribed actions in a conflict is necessary but not sufficient for de-escalation. For example, do Colombian civilians *believe* that the FARC is actually demobilizing as part of the country’s peace accord or not? Without challenging deeper motivational biases in the conflict environment, these deeds may fall on deaf ears—or even have an exacerbating influence. Models of conflict resolution or mitigation must consider not only which actions are taken by combatants or participants, but also, and perhaps even especially, which actions civilians *think* are being taken by them as well. Waging information campaigns to counter key

rumors or lies should thus be a standard part of the warfighting as well as peace-building toolkit.²²

These ideas also carry particular strategic significance for the United States and its allies. In fact, for American foreign policy and military strategy, the results suggest three key lessons. First, the United States should understand that it is at a distinct disadvantage in the domain of factual perceptions in countries like Pakistan as an external intervener. This is because foreign interveners and occupiers are likely to be particularly unpopular among the target population—a clear “away team” (Lyll, Blair, and Imai 2013)—facilitating factual bias about their battlefield behavior. In fact, this may be one important reason why outside interveners are particularly likely to fail in counterinsurgencies and other types of conflicts, especially in recent decades (Pape 2005; Lyll and Wilson 2009). For the United States, this means it should realize that it is “swimming upstream” and that even great selectivity or generosity may not be recognized widely within conflict settings. In this sense, it should consider the trade-offs involved in using force abroad very carefully, and when the expected tactical gains outweigh the anticipated perceptual costs of military actions in light of the biased factual beliefs likely to proliferate about them in the target society.

Second, when American policy makers do deem using force abroad to be essential, they should make every effort to shift the burden of doing so onto their local partners, whose operations may not be factually misperceived nearly as much as their own (e.g., Pakistani military air strikes instead of US drone strikes). Of course, this assumes they have relatively willing and capable local proxies within the dispute and may be problematic in cases where local shirking is severe. In the case of Pakistan, for example, there have long been concerns in Washington about the Pakistani “double game” of neglecting (and even nurturing) the militant presence in the country (Waldman 2010), but there are now clear indications of the Pakistani army more seriously targeting at least some of these groups (e.g., the Pakistani Taliban) in the wake of the army’s own suffering at their hands in recent years. While the relative merits of relying on local authorities will have to be debated on a case-by-case basis, the results offer one additional justification for the United States to delegate military action in debates about the appeal of local proxies and partners in US foreign security policy (e.g., Byman 2006; Krieg 2016).

Third, when it must act and it cannot delegate, these results suggest that the United States should “get into the information game” more aggressively; the veil of secrecy around drone strikes and other ostensibly covert operations in places like Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, and Libya cede the informational high ground to its opponents, who can spread their factual narratives freely throughout the conflict setting and beyond. In other words, if Al Qaeda’s Ayman al-Zawahiri is correct when he declares about his group’s struggle with America that “we are in a battle, and more than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media” (Al-Zawahiri 2005), the United States all-too-often concedes half the war, allowing factual misbeliefs to flourish about its military activities in conflict zones. If

combatants—the United States included—want their battlefield behaviors to be seen with some measure of accuracy, they must find ways of countering factual bias and conveying what has happened more effectively in conflict environments. Future studies should explore which types of messages or messengers, if any, can best do this.

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. Specifically, the United States was forced to shut down the Shamsi air base in Balochistan (a drone launch pad) as well as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) supply lines through Quetta and Peshawar to Afghanistan in 2011 due to escalating backlash against its drone campaign and other incursions. The lines have also been shut down at other times due to drones. For claims about drones fueling recruitment to the Pakistani Taliban, see, among others, Boyle (2013).
2. While Pakistani and US air strikes in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) are not equivalent, there is often significant overlap as well, or at least sufficient overlap in the basic features depicted in a short news report—that is, their generic tactics (e.g., air strikes), targets (e.g., suspected militants), locations (e.g., Waziristan), and outcomes (e.g., variable civilian casualty levels)—to credibly hold these features constant while changing who conducted a given strike. Indeed, the Pakistani army even initially tried to take credit for US drone strikes in 2004–2005 before being exposed by a local reporter (Fair and Hamza 2016). Moreover, to the extent that there is divergence, US strikes have killed and displaced far fewer civilians than their Pakistani counterparts, contrary to the beliefs elicited here. Thus, if prior results matter, we are underestimating the effect of motivational factors.

3. See, among other sources, the New America Foundation's (NAF) drone wars databases. As of August 7, 2018, NAF recorded 414 strikes in Pakistan. <https://www.newamerica.org/in-depth/americas-counterterrorism-wars/pakistan/>.
4. The South Asia Terrorism Portal database recorded 60,813 total fatalities between 2003 and 2016. <http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/pakistan/database/casualties.htm>.
5. In addition to strict quality control checks in the field, we used the program "percentmatch" (Kuriakose and Robbins 2015) to check for data falsification and found no evidence that it occurred (Online Appendix, Figure A3).
6. While terms like "conflict zone" or "conflict setting" are rarely defined in existing work, in the case of major civil conflicts today they are often used to refer to the country experiencing the armed dispute—such as "Iraq" or "Afghanistan"—or at least to a substantial portion thereof (see Buhaug and Gates 2002, 425, who find that the fighting in an average civil war covers 44 percent of the host country). I thus refer to the overall country of Pakistan as the conflict setting.
7. Author's calculations based on data from Pak Institute for Peace Studies (Pak Institute for Peace Studies [PIPS], ND).
8. In the conditions without civilian casualties, this phrase was replaced with the phrase "but did not harm any civilians in the surrounding area" in order to emphasize the treatment.
9. Table A1 in the Online Appendix shows the demographic balance across groups. The sample is well balanced across these five groups and parametric analysis of variance (ANOVA) tests show no evidence of significant differences between them.
10. Respondents in the control group, along with the treatment group, were asked other posttreatment items tapping downstream consequences of exposure to these events that are not explored in this article.
11. The difference-in-difference between these two effects is not significant ($p = .40$). Thus, we cannot say that the effects are significantly different, although we can say that 1 is significantly different from 0 while the other is not.
12. Of course, this is not to overgeneralize or overemphasize the role of Pashtuns in anti-Americanism. Pashtuns are diverse, and they are not the only ethnicity in Pakistan that tends to hold a more critical outlook toward the United States (e.g., Punjabis tend to do so as well). Rather, the result is simply meant to be illustrative of the moderating role of group identity factors in shaping civilian beliefs about violent events.
13. The question wording for respondents' ethnicity was simply "What is your ethnicity?" The choices were Punjabi, Pashtun, Sindhi, Sariaki, Muhajir, Balochi, Kashmiri, and Other.
14. We focus on interactions with the perpetrator identity treatment here given our expectation that it will be moderated by respondents' prior orientations toward the perpetrator (Hypothesis 1b). Yet we can also look at how the civilian casualty treatment varies with these orientations. This shows that the impact of civilian casualties does not vary significantly with Islamist ideology, but does vary significantly with Pashtun ethnicity: Pashtuns are significantly more likely to perceive the strike as indiscriminate if it hits civilians than are non-Pashtuns. This may be because they feel a stronger sense of kinship and association with the (Pashtun) communities in FATA. Full results shown in Figure A5 in the Online Appendix.

15. It is also notable that the correlation between Pashtun ethnicity and Islamist ideology is low ($r = .15$), suggesting that the two interaction effects are indeed capturing something quite separate and distinct. Indeed, including both in the same model yields no substantive change (results available upon request).
16. Of course, this does not allow us to examine how this then shapes their behaviors. But it is not hard to see how this can occur. Indeed, scholars have argued that public resentments toward US drone strikes and other US military operations and incursions in Pakistan over the last 15 years have had several key political consequences within the country, from fueling hundreds of anti-drone protests and attacks on NATO shipping containers to facilitating the rise of more stridently anti-American politicians like Imran Khan and gains in insurgent recruitment by the TTP (e.g., Boyle 2013). Thus, it is not difficult to extend the causal chain and see how biased beliefs crystallize attitudes which have proven consequential in the country's politics and conflict dynamics in recent years.
17. Subgroup analyses also reveal that reliance on different types of information sources—informal media, print and broadcast media, and digital or “new” media—for news in Pakistan moderates the effect of the treatments. Specifically, reliance on informal media appears to boost the negative effect of the US-as-perpetrator treatment (see Online Appendix, Figure A6). However, the mechanisms behind this (e.g., differences in the content, trustworthiness, or consumers of informal media) remain unclear, and would require further investigation and follow-up study to tease out.
18. In fact, beliefs about who rejected or sabotaged peace talks have often been contested in wartime, from the Korean War (Knightley 2004, Ch. 14) to the Arab–Israeli conflict (Pressman 2003). Likewise, external interventions have often been concealed or contested as well, as in the interventions by the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in Korea, United States in Cambodia, or Russia in Ukraine (Carson 2016). And of course, efforts to exaggerate and manipulate perceptions of each side's strength and success have long been a staple of psychological operations in war.
19. There have by now been a number of pieces in the Pakistani press about how drones are seen as selective and effective inside the tribal areas. For academic discussions of these dynamics, see, for example, Taj (2010) and Fair, Kaltenthaler, and Miller (2014). See also Aqil Shah, “Drone Blowback in Pakistan Is a Myth. Here's Why,” *The Washington Post*, May 17, 2016.
20. While the survey does not include FATA, there is wide variation among respondents in their distance from the location of the strike. In order to explore the effect of this variation, I ran models interacting the two treatments with respondents' distance from the reported strike location in North Waziristan. The results of this analysis (see Figure A7 in the Online Appendix) are decidedly mixed: the impact of civilian casualties is greater with proximity, but so is the impact of perpetrator identity. This suggests that, while facts may creep into the picture more as you approach the actual violence, biases are still quite powerful and can even grow stronger as well. This puzzle begs for further study.
21. I thank an anonymous reviewer for bringing this concern to my attention.
22. One rare success story in this arena comes from Uganda, where, in the face of extensive propaganda by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) that fighters who defect from their ranks would be killed by state forces, the Ugandan government and US military deployed

“defection messaging” via radio and leaflet to successfully rebut these rumors and boost LRA defections. See, for example, Ledio Cakaj and Paul Ronan, “The Lord’s Resistance Army is finally weakening in central Africa. This could dismantle it,” *The Washington Post*, December 6, 2016.

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