

REVIEW ESSAY



The rise of targeted killing

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ABSTRACT

Targeted killings have become a central tactic in the United States' campaigns against militant and terrorist groups in the Middle East, Asia, and Africa. Both 'demand' and 'supply' factors explain the rise of targeted killings. Demand for targeted killings increased as the United States faced new threats from militant groups that could not be effectively countered with conventional military force. Concerns about the political consequences of long-term military involvement overseas and American casualties led political leaders to supply more targeted killings. The conclusion discusses how this tactic may have unintended consequences as other states follow the United States use of targeted killings.

KEYWORDS Targeted killings; terrorism; counter-insurgency; drones; unmanned aerial vehicles


Hugh Gusterson, **Drone: Remote Control Warfare**. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2016. Pp. 216. \$15.95, PB. ISBN 978-0262534413

John Kaag and Sarah Kreps, **Drone Warfare**. New York: Polity, 2014. Pp. 200. \$19.95, PB. ISBN 978-0745680989

Jack McDonald, **Enemies Known and Unknown: Targeted Killings in America's Transnational War**. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017. Pp. 256. \$27.95, HB. ISBN 978-0190683078

Scott Shane, **Objective Troy: A Terrorist, a President, and the Rise of the Drone**. New York: Random House, 2016. Pp. 432. \$17.00, PB. ISBN 978-0804140317

Targeted killings of suspected militants are a centerpiece of American counterterrorism and counterinsurgency strategies. Over the last decade, the US killed al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden in a special operations forces raid and launched hundreds of strikes from drones and manned aircraft against militants, both as an adjunct to the use of its ground forces in Iraq and Afghanistan and in countries where it does not use conventional forces,

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including Syria, Libya, Somalia, and Pakistan. It has combined aerial surveillance and munitions technologies in armed drones for carrying out targeted killings, greatly expanded the size of its special forces and the scope of their operations, and developed new intelligence and military organizations and internal rulebooks for deciding who can and cannot be targeted for death.

This rise of targeted killings is puzzling. Prior to the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the US eschewed the tactic and criticized other countries, including close allies, that employed it. The books reviewed here seek to explain why the US subsequently embraced the regular targeting of militants. Their authors address this issue from a variety of perspectives and backgrounds. Kaag and Kreps, a philosopher and political scientist, respectively, describe how the development of armed drone technology alters the political, legal, and ethical calculus of using force. Gusterson, an anthropologist, elucidates how this technology changes perceptions of who is and is not a legitimate foe. McDonald's *Known and Unknown* highlights how changes in the strategic environment and the threats the US faced after 9/11 motivated its interest in targeted killings. Shane, a journalist whose work has been important in detailing the evolution of targeted killings, tells the story of how an American citizen became a leading member of a transnational terrorist group, and how the US came to target and kill him.

These books develop a range of explanations for the rise of targeted killings. In this review, I frame and discuss their explanations around the 'demand' for and 'supply' of this tactic. All four of the books suggest that, after 9/11, the Bush and Obama administrations came to the realization that conventional military forces and tactics were ineffective in the face of the threat posed by a transnational, loosely organized, and clandestine militant movement, creating a demand for new military and nonmilitary approaches. Concerns about the domestic political costs of military casualties and the perceived failure of invasion and state-building in Afghanistan and Iraq made them eager for new doctrines, organizations, and weapons of targeted killings. These innovations—especially the arming of drones—were a product, not a driver, of the strategic and political developments of the rise of targeted killings.

The use of targeted killings for over a decade presents an opportunity to begin to assess their operational and political consequences. The works under review here, as well as other recent scholarship, present a complex and appropriately nuanced picture of these consequences. There is some evidence that targeted killings are effective in achieving their objective of degrading militant groups, but the case is not ironclad. Furthermore, targeted killings can cause unexpected and unwanted responses by the militants they target, leading to more terrorism and other forms of violence directed against noncombatants. Targeted killings reduce the costs of conflict for the US by minimizing American military casualties and the need for the occupation and governance of weak states that harbor militants. This raises the concern that the public will be quick to endorse targeted killings, making it politically easier for presidents to use this

military tactic. While targeted killings, especially when carried out by drones, do receive widespread popular support, there is emerging evidence that the public does not see it as a panacea that can alone solve the strategic problems that the US faces when countering militants overseas.

What is targeted killing?

There is no widely accepted definition of targeted killings. Most uses of the term include two elements.¹ First, targeted killings have as their goal the death (rather than retreat, surrender, or incapacitation) of the target.² Second, targeted killings are directed 'against an individual or individuals specifically identified in advance by the perpetrator'.³ In some cases, the objective is to kill a specific individual, often a leader or high-ranking member of an armed group, such as in the special forces raid that killed Osama bin Laden in Pakistan in 2011, or the drone strike that killed Anwar al-Awlaki in Yemen in the same year, described in detail in Shane's *Operation Troy*. Other targeted killings may not identify a specific individual to be killed, but instead target victims that meet narrowly defined criteria specified in advance, such as traveling in vehicles or staying in locations known to be used by an armed group.

It is not clear how targeted killings differ from assassinations or extrajudicial killings.⁴ This ambiguity explains the adoption of the term over the last two decades. Assassinations and extrajudicial killings violate international norms and laws, and assassinations by the US government were banned by a 1976 Presidential executive order. But the US now regularly engages in the use of force against militants, using the term 'targeted killings' rather than 'assassinations' to stay within the bounds of international law and executive orders. American officials as late as 2001 publicly objected to what Israel described as its targeted killings of Palestinian militants believed to be planning attacks on Israeli targets (Gusterson, 12). A decade later, the US' Attorney General would conclude that 'it is entirely lawful to target specific senior operational leaders of al Qaeda and associated forces'.⁵

Targeted killings can be carried out in several ways. Osama bin Laden was killed in a covert raid by special operations forces. Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the leader of al Qaeda in Iraq, was killed by bombs dropped from American aircraft. Many, perhaps most, contemporary targeted killings by the US

¹Philip Alston, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial, Summary Or Arbitrary Executions: Addendum, Study on Targeted Killings* (United Nations General Assembly 2010).

²Some include capturing senior leaders of an armed group; see, for example, Audrey Kurth Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends: Understanding the Decline and Demise of Terrorist Campaigns* (Princeton UP 2011).

³Alston, *Report*.

⁴Stephanie Carvin, 'The trouble with targeted killing', *Security Studies* 21/3 (2012), 529–555.

⁵Attorney General Eric Holder Speaks at Northwestern University School of Law, United States Department of Justice, 5 March 2012 <<https://www.justice.gov/opa/speech/attorney-general-eric-holder-speaks-northwestern-university-school-law>>.

today are carried out by ‘drones’—aircraft that are remotely piloted via communication links with a distant command station, equipped with cameras and other surveillance equipment that allow their controllers to monitor targets in real time, and armed with weapons such as Hellfire missiles that can be guided to targets such as a specific vehicle or a room within a building. Drones allow the US to carry out targeted killings without placing its soldiers at in harm’s way. Although drones reduce the immediate costs and risks of using force, their development and use was not a forgone conclusion. Instead, the changed nature of the strategic situation the US faced after 9/11, and the desire of many political elites and much of the public to avoid long-term military commitments in unstable countries, drove both the arming of drones and their widespread use in targeting militants.

Why targeted killing now?

The US has engaged in large-scale targeted killing campaigns in the past. During the Vietnam War, American intelligence agencies and military forces implemented the Phoenix Program, designed to destroy the Viet Cong’s ‘political infrastructure’ by killing, or capturing and interrogating, insurgent leaders and sympathizers.⁶ The US occasionally collaborated with and trained local forces that engaged in targeted killings, such as the Colombian military unit that killed drug cartel leader Pablo Escobar, but largely avoided using the tactic itself.⁷ During the 1980s and 1990s, successive administrations sought the capture and extradition, not killing, of terrorists who had attacked Americans overseas. Indeed, as mentioned above, they explicitly opposed Israel’s policy of targeted killings. As late as 2001, the Director of Central Intelligence expressed deep concerns about the possibility of using drones to target terrorists overseas.⁸ Yet within a decade, the US would carry out hundreds of targeted killings.⁹ What explains this remarkable change in policy?

The books under review offer three interrelated explanations. The first is the nature of the enemy, which increased the demand for targeted killings. Prior to the 9/11 attacks, the US primarily planned for and used military force against states—the invasion of Iraq in 1991, Serbia during and after the breakup of Yugoslavia, and ‘rogue states’ such as Iran and North Korea.

⁶While designed to target individuals affiliated with the Viet Cong, Phoenix resulted in the death or imprisonment on many innocent people. Compare Mark Moyer, *Phoenix and the birds of prey: Counterinsurgency and counterterrorism in Vietnam* (University of Nebraska Press, 2007); Nick Turse, *Kill anything that moves: The real American war in Vietnam* (Macmillan 2013); and Stathis Kalyvas and Matthew Adam Kocher, ‘How “free” is free riding in civil wars? Violence, insurgency, and the collective action problem’, *World Politics* 59/2 (2007), 177–216.

⁷Mark Bowden, *Killing Pablo: The Inside Story of the Manhunt to Bring Down the Most Powerful Criminal in History* (Atlantic Books 2012).

⁸Marc A. Celmer, *Terrorism, U.S. Strategy, and Reagan Policies* (Greenwood Press 1987).

⁹A small number of airstrikes from manned platforms also took place in Somalia and Yemen, and special operations forces were used in counter-piracy operations.

Although military operations against non-state armed actors increased in frequency after the end of the Cold War, most were of short duration, involved only a fraction of the military's force structure and attention, and occurred in the context of peacekeeping and humanitarian operations that did not pose an immediate and direct threat to the US' core interests. Al Qaeda's attacks changed this perception, leading the US to declare a 'war on terrorism' and to reorient its diplomatic and military effort toward countering the group and its allies across the Middle East, Africa, and Asia.

Enemies Known and Unknown documents how this new foe posed a fundamentally different strategic and military challenge. After the rapid overthrow of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan in late 2001, the militants affiliated with al Qaeda organized clandestine cells that hid in rough terrain and blended in with the civilian population to avoid detection. Their leaders fled to other countries. This made it difficult for the US to bring to bear its extraordinary advantage in conventional military power. It proved unable to translate the large numbers of 'boots on the ground' after the invasions of Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003 into decisive victories against armed groups. This new enemy was not only clandestine but also transnational, a point that McDonald emphasizes. While much of al Qaeda's leadership was based in Pakistan, it came to collaborate with armed groups as far afield as southeast Asia, northern and eastern Africa, Yemen, and Iraq. The organization of these transnational networks became increasingly complex. Some groups, such as al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, worked closely with al Qaeda 'Central' (AQC) led by Osama bin Laden. Others, such as al Shaabab in Somalia, appeared to share some religious and ideological goals with AQC, but in large part operated autonomously and pursued distinct local objectives. AQC had difficulty managing some affiliated groups such as the Islamic State in Iraq, led by al Zaraqwi, which preferred to devote more of its efforts to sectarian objectives. Most famously, the Islamic State movement in Syria and Iraq broke formal ties with AQC in 2014, creating a self-declared caliphate that the movement's putative leaders in Pakistan thought was premature and unwise.

Attacking this new enemy required detailed intelligence about the identity and location of its members, and military units and weapons systems designed to attack and kill these militants while minimizing harm to the civilian population they used to hide their activities.

While the changed nature of the threat influenced the 'demand' for targeted killings, a key influence on leaders' willingness to 'supply' such actions was domestic politics. As Gusterson documents, the number of targeted killings carried out by drone strikes expanded dramatically beginning in 2008. One factor influencing this timing was the American experience in Afghanistan and Iraq. In both countries, a quick military victory over the Taliban and Iraqi military forces did not translate into success in

destroying or dismantling militant groups. In Afghanistan, the American troop presence weakened but did not eliminate the Taliban. AQC retreated to Pakistan, where it was beyond the reach of conventional forces. Iraq experienced the development of many armed groups, some affiliated with AQC or with Iran, that mounted attacks on American military personnel. The expectation that American military involvement could be drawn down quickly as stable and effective Afghan and Iraqi government institutions were created proved inaccurate, meaning the US faced a choice between sustaining a long-term presence in both countries, or reducing its footprint and risk seeing its local allies overthrown. American casualties mounted in both theatres, and increasingly the public and political elites began to conclude that American attempts to build effective states were a long-term, uncertain, and costly exercise. Targeted killings were one way to respond to these concerns. As Shane documents, these considerations influenced candidate and then President Barack Obama's approach to countering the militant organizations that threatened the US. Shane (130) describes Obama's embrace of targeted killings upon taking office in the following terms:

What if you could kill the terrorists without killing anyone else? What if you could do it without putting American lives at risk? The armed drone seemed to provide exactly the necessary third choice between doing nothing, on the one hand, and invading countries, on the other. For a presidential candidate whose main ambitions lay in the domestic arena, the drone seemed a godsend. It could lower the American profile in the Muslim world, depriving al Qaeda of the foil that had allowed it to recruit an Iraqi branch of the terror network and reinvigorate anti-American passions. It offered the opportunity to take decisive action without the agony of American casualties.

The books under review also emphasize how domestic politics has influenced policymakers' willingness to elevate targeted killings role in contemporary American counterinsurgency and counterterrorism doctrine. The Bush administration's experience in Iraq in the years following the invasion of the country in 2003 made targeted killings a more attractive strategy. The invasion had the support of the president's Republican allies and some Democrats in Congress, and initially by a majority of the public. But the onset of militant violence, mounting American military casualties, and the feeling that the administration lacked a clear plan for victory or a withdrawal on reasonably favorable terms, undermined the president's position. Members of Congress from both parties increasingly criticized the conduct of the war, and public support for continuing the conflict, and for the president, declined.¹⁰

¹⁰Matthew A. Baum and Tim Groeling, 'Reality asserts itself: Public opinion on Iraq and the elasticity of reality', *International Organization* 64/3 (2010), 443–479.

This motivated both the incumbent administration and its critics of the war, including then candidate for president Barack Obama, to search for alternatives that would provide a way to bring force to bear against militants. In this context, targeted killings offered a way to continue to use military force with lower domestic political costs. Military casualties sap public support for conflict,¹¹ but the public is willing to pay this cost if it will bring about victory on the battlefield.¹² Targeted killings seemed to square the circle, allowing the US to bring force to bear without risking American lives. Kaag and Kreps (77) demonstrate that majorities of respondents in a large number of public opinion surveys express support for drone strikes. Air strikes against militants with no effective anti-aircraft weapons place air crews in little danger. Special operations forces that undertake targeted killings face considerable risk of death or injury, but their small units and experience limit the number of potential casualties compared to other types of ground forces. A targeted killing campaign could also be carried out with a lighter 'footprint' of military forces stationed at bases overseas, reducing the number of troops in combat zones exposed to danger and easing relations with host countries. Drones, strike aircraft, and special operations forces can be quickly redeployed as new conflicts arise. Eliminating, or at least containing, militants through targeted killings also seemed more feasible than building partner state's capacity to carry out effective counterinsurgency campaigns, and seemed to reduce the need to cooperate with potentially unreliable allies.

Central to this account of the rise of targeted killings is the development of the armed drone. Predator and Reaper drones were initially developed as surveillance aircraft. Their key advantage over airstrikes and the use of special operations forces for targeted killings are the absence of an onboard crew, which permits them to remain aloft and on station over targets for longer periods and to venture into areas that might expose a crew to the danger of being shot down. Their light airframes meant that these drones could not carry weapons utilized by larger, manned strike aircraft. But it did prove possible to arm them with small guided munitions. As Gusterson and Kaag and Kreps observe in the sections of their books that provide useful thumbnail histories of drone warfare, drones could not operate effectively without the simultaneous development of a satellite communications

¹¹Eric V. Larson, *Casualties and Consensus: The Historical Role of Casualties in Domestic Support for U.S. Military Operations* (RAND 1996); John E. Mueller, 'Trends in Popular Support for the Wars in Korea and Vietnam', *The American Political Science Review* 65 (June 1971), 358–375; and John Mueller, *War, Presidents, and Public Opinion* (Boston MA: Wiley 1973).

¹²Christopher Gelpi, Peter D. Feaver, and Jason Reifler, 'Success matters: Casualty sensitivity and the war in Iraq', *International Security* 30/3 (2005) 7–46; and Christopher Gelpi, Peter D. Feaver, and Jason Reifler, *Paying the human costs of war: American public opinion and casualties in military conflicts* (Princeton UP 2009).

networks, which allowed controllers to pilot the aircraft and to receive video and communications intelligence in real time. By the early 2000s, the US thus had the opportunity to bring together drones, surveillance technologies, and communications infrastructure to satisfy the goal of identifying and targeting militants with lethal force at great distance and at no risk to American military personnel.

But the creation of this capacity was not exogenous to the demand and supply factors. Global satellite communications, the global positioning system, high-resolution cameras, and other sensors were developed during the 1990s to serve both commercial interests and the conventional needs of the military. The confluence of a transnational clandestine network of militants targeting American interests and the failure of 'nation building' to contain violence in Afghanistan and Iraq created the strategic and political incentives to combine these technologies with simple, propeller-driven airframes to create targeted killing machines. While the story of the rise of targeted killings is in large part the story of the rise of the drone, politics rather than technology drove both developments.

The demand side: does targeted killing 'work'?

Collectively, the books under review document how the US came to rely on targeted killings as a key tactic in its 'war on terrorism.' They devote less attention to whether armed groups have been weakened or neutralized by this tactic. *Objective Troy* describes how targeted killings of AQAP's leaders weakened the group but also created powerful grievances against the US that allowed it to better mobilize supporters. The author, however, does not come to definitive conclusions about which result was most important in the group's evolution. The remaining three books summarize and contribute to the efficacy- and ethics-based arguments of those who endorse and criticize targeted killings, respectively, but they devote less attention to evaluating how successful the US' targeted killing campaigns have been in degrading armed groups while minimizing civilian harm.

Evaluating the success or failure of targeted killings is difficult. Targeted killings do not occur in isolation from other tools used to degrade militant groups. While the US was using targeted killings to undermine al Qaeda in Iraq during the 2007–2008 'surge,' for example, it also used conventional forces against the group, sought to counter its propaganda efforts, encouraged economic development and reconstruction in regions of the country where it drew popular support, and enlisted Sunni tribes to its side. It is not clear if the setbacks the group suffered were due to one or a combination of these efforts. Armed groups also likely differ in their ability to persist in the face of targeted killings; if this is the case, the tactic may be effective against groups with some characteristics, but not others. Related to this is the fact

that the use of targeted killings is not random. Instead, the US uses the tactic against the most-threatening groups, especially those in areas where other tactics such as the use of conventional forces or economic development could not be carried out for logistical or political reasons. Witness the militant groups, including AQC, located in the tribal areas of Pakistan, whose government would not permit the US to use ground or manned air units in the area and circumscribed efforts to promote economic development. This means that armed groups do not face an equal likelihood of being targeted, and the factors that influence the US' decision to target a particular group might also shape the effectiveness of this form of military force. Finally, those that are subject to targeted killings respond strategically, altering their use of violence and other tactics in ways that may create more problems for the US.

Academic studies have begun to tackle these issues, using sophisticated research designs and data on a large number of groups or from sustained targeted killing campaigns to determine if there are general patterns in the effectiveness of targeted killings. Patrick Johnston's careful study of targeted killings directed against armed groups finds that successful decapitations (which includes both the killing and capture of senior militants) lead to reductions in violence.¹³ Johnston's starting point is that the success or failure of an attempted targeted killing depends on many idiosyncratic factors. A good example is a failed attempt to kill AQAP militant al-Awlaki in 2011, while he was traveling in a nighttime convoy in Yemen. In his discussion of this attack, Shane writes that the Hellfire missiles used to target al-Awlaki were accurate against fixed targets, but had more difficulty hitting moving targets such as vehicles. The missile fired at the vehicle in which al-Awlaki rode missed its target by a few feet, leaving him unharmed. The outcome of targeted killing attempts, then, is something of a natural experiment; a range of unpredictable factors influence whether or not an attempt kills its target. Johnston exploits this to analyze how targeted killings that do decapitate a group's leadership influence conflict outcomes, concluding that successful targeted killings increase the likelihood that the conflict will end and that the government will win, and reduces the number and intensity of later militant attacks. Bryan Price similarly finds that targeted killings lead to shorter conflicts, especially if the group is targeted early in its lifespan.¹⁴

Others, though, find that targeted killings have little, or even positive, effects on subsequent violence. A series of papers by David Jaeger and coauthors, analyzing the use of targeted killings by Israel against Palestinian

¹³Patrick B. Johnston, 'Does decapitation work? Assessing the effectiveness of leadership targeting in counterinsurgency campaigns', *International Security* 36/4 (2012), 47–79.

¹⁴Bryan C. Price, 'Targeting top terrorists: How leadership decapitation contributes to counterterrorism', *International Security* 36/4 (2012), 9–46.

militants, concludes that targeted killings do reduce militant violence in the short term. But Israeli violence that kills noncombatants, including inadvertent victims of targeted killings, leads to the radicalization of Palestinian public opinion.¹⁵

Targeted groups also vary in their ability to persist in the face of targeted killings. Path breaking work in this vein concludes that larger, older, and religious armed groups are less likely to collapse when senior leaders are killed.¹⁶ Larger and older groups develop bureaucratic structures and undertake leadership succession to manage their operations, which also shields them from collapse when senior members are targeted, while popular and communal support, which groups motivated by religion foster, provides them with resources that increase their resilience.¹⁷

The evidence assembled to date suggests that targeted killings can weaken militant organizations, but that their consequences depend on characteristics of the group, such as its age and size. This last point is an important one. Groups subject to targeted killings are quite heterogeneous in terms of their resilience to attacks aimed at their leaders, and it would be valuable to explore further how group characteristics influence their ability to continue operations. It would also be worthwhile to investigate how the rules of engagement for the targeted killings influence resilience. Campaigns of targeted killings vary in terms of who they target. Some seek only to eliminate the most senior leader or leaders of militant groups, on the assumption that their death will substantially undermine the groups' ability to function effectively. Other campaigns target leaders as well as foot soldiers. Targeted killings by special operations forces in Iraq during the surge, as well as in Afghanistan, were directed at lower-level commanders, militant propagandists, bomb-makers, and so on. Drone strikes in Pakistan—the theater in which they have been used most often—are the most ambitious attempt to systematically target rank-and-file militants. Prior to mid-2008, the US launched drone strikes when it identified the location of a named individual leader of a militant group. These 'personality strikes' were few in number; two were launched in 2006, and four in 2007. These rules of engagement were altered in early 2008 to allow attacks against groups of armed men that bore the 'signatures' of militants (Gusterson, 93–103). Shortly after this shift in policy, the number of drone strikes increased to

¹⁵David A. Jaeger and M. Daniele Paserman, 'The shape of things to come? On the dynamics of suicide attacks and targeted killings', *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* 4/4 (2009), 315–342; and David A. Jaeger, Esteban F. Klor, Sami H. Miaari, and M. Daniele Paserman, 'The struggle for Palestinian hearts and minds: Violence and public opinion in the Second Intifada', *Journal of Public Economics* 96/3 (2012), 354–368.

¹⁶Jenna Jordan, 'When heads roll: Assessing the effectiveness of leadership decapitation', *Security Studies* 18/4 (2009), 719–755.

¹⁷Jenna Jordan, 'Attacking the leader, missing the mark: Why terrorist groups survive decapitation strikes', *International Security* 38/4 (2014), 7–38.

34 in 2008, 53 in 2009, and 119 in 2010. Classified assessments of most drone strikes conducted from 2006 to 2008, and in 2010 and 2011, identify many of the targets as unidentified individuals labeled 'foreign fighters' or 'other militants' or as members of militant groups, such as the Pakistan Taliban and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, who have not regularly targeted the US.¹⁸ Beginning in early 2012, the US developed new procedures to govern drone strikes in Pakistan. Many of these focused on ensuring that no civilians were likely to be harmed by drone strikes as it became clear that civilian deaths were attracting increasing criticism from political parties and other groups within Pakistan as well as in the US. This move to tighten and institutionalize the conditions under which it was permissible to launch drone strikes was associated with a decline in their use to 73 attacks in 2011 and 48 in 2012.

It appears that this sustained campaign has influenced the quantity and quality of militant violence. As McDonald observes, AQC has sought to but been unable to carry out many attacks on Western targets since the onset of drone strikes. One careful study finds that drone strikes lead to less militant violence in tribal areas where most strikes occur.¹⁹ Another concludes that while drone strikes targeting militant organizations that operate in both Afghanistan and Pakistan do not reduce their attacks in the former country, they do lead to an uptick in violence in Pakistan immediately following strikes, followed by a decline in militant attacks.²⁰ These works focus on the short-run consequences of drone strikes. But drone strikes in Pakistan did not lead to a reduction in propaganda output by AQC, suggesting that these attacks were ineffective in undermining the group's capacity to engage in important activities that require close coordination and communication among group leaders, potentially exposing their identity and location to US intelligence agencies.²¹

While the drone campaign appears to have had some effect in limiting militant violence, it has also influenced the 'quality' of the violence that targeted militant groups employ. Killing militant commanders weakens the organization's ability to monitor rank-and-file members to ensure that they engage in acts of violence consistent with the group's overall strategy, freeing the latter to undertake attacks on civilian rather than military targets that expose them to a lower risk of being killed or captured.²² It also leads

¹⁸Jonathan S. Landay, 'Obama's drone war kills "others", not just al Qaeda leaders', *McClatchy Newspapers*, 9 April 2013 <<http://www.mcclatchydc.com/news/nation-world/world/article24747826.html>>.

¹⁹Patrick B. Johnston and Anoop K. Sarbahi, 'The impact of US drone strikes on terrorism in Pakistan', *International Studies Quarterly* 60/2 (2016), 203–219.

²⁰David A. Jaeger and Zahra Siddique, 'Are Drone Strikes Effective in Afghanistan and Pakistan? On the Dynamics of Violence between the United States and the Taliban', unpublished ms., November 2016.

²¹Megan Smith and James Igoe Walsh, 'Do drone strikes degrade Al Qaeda? Evidence from propaganda output', *Terrorism and Political Violence* 25/2 (2013), 311–327.

²²Max Abrahms and Philip BK Potter, 'Explaining terrorism: Leadership deficits and militant group tactics', *International Organization* 69/2 (2015), 311–342.

armed groups to engage in more terrorist attacks in urban areas, where their members are less vulnerable to drone strikes and can use violence to weaken popular support for the government.²³

These effects operate in the short run, measured in days or weeks. We know little about the long-run consequences of targeted killings on militant's organizational capacity and violence. Do targeted killings cause armed groups to splinter into smaller, more radical factions? Do they deter potential recruits from joining militant groups, or foster grievances that motivate individuals to support armed opposition to the authorities? The most fundamental question is what happens *after* a successful targeted killing campaign. Militant organizations arise out of particular social and political conditions. Targeting militants may eliminate the immediate threat that they pose, but do not address these underlying conditions. Can the authorities establish effective structures of governance once the militants are eliminated? Can they, or will they, address the grievances and opportunities for rebellion that gave rise to armed groups in the first place? The experience of the surge in Iraq does not suggest that there are easy answers to these questions. While the surge used targeted killings, as well as other counterinsurgency tactics, to undermine Sunni militants' ability to engage in violence, it did not establish legitimate governance in the regions of the country that sustained the militants, allowing the militants to exploit the chaos of the civil war in Syria to reconstitute themselves as the Islamic State and quickly capture large cities in Iraq beginning in 2014.

The supply side: domestic politics of targeted killings

Targeted killings, especially those carried out by drones, seemed like the ideal tactic when Obama took office—as discussed above, they inflict costs on the militant groups they target, but decrease the costs of sustaining political support for conflict at home. This presents two dangers that Kaag and Kreps highlight. If Congress and the public view targeted killings as an especially cheap way to wage war, it raises the possibility that presidents could undertake large-scale targeted killings campaigns with few political constraints. These lower costs also create the possibility of moral hazard: the incentive to authorize military actions that have a low likelihood of achieving their objective because their failure creates few strategic or political costs such as unwinnable occupations of foreign countries or American military casualties. As Kreps writes in a subsequent book:

But because they [drones] imposed no risk on the country that used them, they could also create a moral hazard, being used in ways, times, and places that might not otherwise be used were these actors to use the caution that

²³Erik Gartzke and James Igoe Walsh, 'The drawbacks of drones', unpublished ms., 2017.

goes along with having skin in the game with manned aircraft or ground troops.²⁴

Survey and experimental research on public opinion paints a more complicated picture. The public offers support, but not unqualified support, for targeted killings carried out by drones.²⁵ When given the choice of drones, manned aircraft, and ground operations, individuals offer the strongest support for drone strikes. But sizable factions of respondents do not support the use of force in any form. Among those willing to endorse military action, drones are no more or less popular than are air strikes and receive only modestly more support than the use of ground troops. Furthermore, other factors, such as the likelihood of mission success and of civilian casualties, exert as or larger an influence on individuals' willingness to support the use of military force. Targeted killings from drones, then, do not lead to wholesale support for military action. Individuals recognize that even tactics that do not place military personnel in danger can create other costs and difficulties for the US such as civilian casualties that tarnish the reputation of the US in the international community and strengthen grievances among the civilian populations on whose behalf militants claim to fight.²⁶ Each of the books reviewed here, as well as much of the elite discussion of drones in particular and targeted killings more generally, usefully develop reasons to believe that the tactic is not a cure-all for the strategic problems that the US faces in countering militant groups.²⁷ Much of the public, it appears, shares these concerns, suggesting that strategic and ethical criticisms of targeted killings could find traction in debates about the wisdom of the tactic. The Obama administration took these critiques seriously, and as Gusterson details, developed its own guidelines to ensure that targeted killings by drones were employed in accordance with its interpretations of the legal precepts of proportionality and distinction.

Citizens' opinions about targeted killings sometimes reflect concern about international laws and norms regarding the appropriate use of force. In other work, Kreps shows that the high levels of support for drone strikes found in standard questions used in public opinion surveys influence responses. Many media reports state or imply that drone strikes only kill militants and leave noncombatants unscathed. She finds that reframing survey questions to suggest that drone strikes are incompatible with international humanitarian law leads to noticeable reductions in support for their

²⁴Kreps, *Drones: What Everyone Needs to Know*, ii.

²⁵Little work in this vein has assessed how the public thinks about targeted killings carried out by special operations forces; this is a promising area for future research.

²⁶James Igoe Walsh, 'Precision weapons, civilian casualties, and support for the use of force', *Political Psychology* 36/5 (2015), 507–523; and James Igoe Walsh and Marcus Schulzke, *Combat Drones and Support for the Use of Force* (The University of Michigan Press forthcoming).

²⁷See, for example, the early critique of drone strikes by two well-known foreign policy experts David Kilcullen and Andrew Exum, 'Death from above, outrage down below', *New York Times* 16 May 2009.

use.²⁸ Drones' effectiveness is less important than making sure drone strikes are consistent with international legal obligations to use proportional force, and distinguishing between legitimate targets and innocent civilians.²⁹ Furthermore, there is some evidence that drones' perceived ability to better distinguish between militants and civilians actually leads to greater regret when civilians are inadvertently killed in drone strikes. In other words, the public's expectations that this form of targeted killing is more capable of striking militants, and only militants, lead to heightened expectations of civilian protection and increased disappointment when civilians are killed. This means that drone technology, in particular, does not simply allow political leaders to engage in more violence, but actually tightens the constraints that they face.

The future of targeted killings

Targeted killings are here to stay, even though the tactic has been criticized as ineffective, immoral, and illegal. The adaptation and continued use of the tactic by the most powerful state in the international system raises questions about how other countries will respond to threats that they face. Will they follow the American lead and expand their own use of targeted killings? Will they develop technologies such as drones that permit the use of force against individuals over long distances? Will they employ these technologies with as much attention to international humanitarian principles? Will its own innovation in the use of the tactic make it more difficult for the US to criticize or punish states that use drones and similar technologies less discriminately? Both democratic and authoritarian regimes have strong incentives to develop combat drones, the former to minimize the risk of casualties and the latter to centralize their control over the use of force at the most senior level.³⁰ The rapid proliferation of this technology raises important and unanswered questions about how countries other than the US will put these weapons to use.

Earlier decades saw the gradual adoption of domestic and international norms against assassination. Powerful states initially discouraged assassination as a way to strengthen their position vis-à-vis smaller countries and non-state actors such as rebel and terrorist groups. Over time, this effort led to the development of laws and norms that have rendered assassination illegitimate and rare. This development has had

²⁸Kreps, 'Flying under the radar'.

²⁹Sarah E. Kreps and Geoffrey PR Wallace, 'International law, military effectiveness, and public support for drone strikes', *Journal of Peace Research* 53/6 (2016), 830–844.

³⁰For drones, see Michael C. Horowitz, Sarah E. Kreps, and Matthew Fuhrmann, 'Separating Fact from Fiction in the Debate over Drone Proliferation', *International Security* 41/2 (2016), 7–42; and Matthew Fuhrmann and Michael C. Horowitz, 'Droning On: Explaining the Proliferation of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles', *International Organization* 71/2 (2017), 397–418.

important consequences for international conflict, discouraging states from seeking to assassinate their foes and to instead use conventional warfare and economic coercion to achieve their aims.³¹ The US' use of targeted killings may contribute to the reversal of these normative and political developments, encouraging others to expand their use of targeted killings against non-state armed actors and, perhaps, state actors as well. Over time, this diffusion of targeted killings could have difficult-to-foresee consequences for the US as well as for attempts to govern and restrain the use of force.

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³¹Ward Thomas, 'Norms and security: The case of international assassination', *International Security* 25.1 (2000): 105–133.

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