US DRONE BLOWBACK

How the US drone programme in Afghanistan has been portrayed and received

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Abstract

The US-led NATO mission 'Resolute Support Mission' was active from January 2015 until August 2021. With this mission came a shift from boots on the ground to remoteness, employing drones. This thesis focuses on answering the main question: 'How has the United States' use of drone strikes had an impact on blowback in Afghanistan between 2015 and 2021?'. The central theory used in this thesis is Johnson's blowback theory. I will argue in this thesis that the negative consequences of the US drone strikes are the civilian casualties caused and the meaning given to these civilian casualties by the local actors in Afghanistan. To operationalise the meaning given within the blowback theory, I have combined the blowback theory with framing by Jabri combined with Benford and Snow. To make sense of the secrecy element of the blowback theory, I have engaged with epistemic politics, as presented by Gould and Stel. Presenting this thesis, I have provided new guiding options for operationalising the blowback theory. Often, scholars jump to recognise blowback in new Taliban recruits without first researching the meaning-making processes on the local level as to how the Taliban was able to recruit more members. I argue that the grievances that arise from the civilian casualties caused by the US drone program can be used to mobilise collective action. Nevertheless, this research is based on limited anecdotal research. I have not researched this in depth. Much more research is needed.

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List of Abbreviations

CENTCOM	United States Central Command
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CIVIC	Centre for Civilians in Conflict (CIVIC)
COIN	Counterinsurgency
DoD	Department of Defence
ISAF	International Security Assistance Force
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
RSM	Resolute Support Mission
SFA	Security Force Assistance
SIGAR	Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction
UNAMA	United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan
US	United States
USNSC	US National Security Council

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Chapter 1. Introduction

"It must be remembered that ... bombing is a terror weapon. Its major purpose is to denude the countryside of the actual and potential guerrilla supporters and destroy the traditional social fabric of the country..." ("Toys Against the People, or Remote Warfare," 1973).

After the terrorist attack on the Twin Towers in September 2001, the US response was to fight Al-Qaeda and to overthrow the Taliban regime in Afghanistan (De Graaf et al., 2016, p.23). The US responded swiftly, employing the mission Operation Enduring Freedom, together with the UK. Attacks in Afghanistan started in October 2001. Article 51 of the UN Charter was approved by the Security Council and NATO's article 5 of the Washington Treaty was invoked (for the first and only time in history) (De Graaf et al., 2016, p.23). The result was the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission pursued from December 2001 until December 2014. The ISAF mission at its height had over 130,000 troops on the ground employed by 50 different NATO countries (NATO, n.d-a). The primary objective of this mission was "to enable the Afghan government to provide effective security across the country and develop new Afghan security forces to ensure Afghanistan would never again become a safe haven for terrorists" (NATO, n.d.-b).

The start of the twenty-year long war was also the start of the US drone war. During the night of the invasion, the first drone airstrike was conducted. Within the next two months the US deployed 40 drone strikes (Woods, 2015). Over the next twenty years the US drone program would only increase. Between 2004-2021, the number of US drone patrols, globally, increased by 1,200 per cent (Chamayou, 2015, p.13). Already in 2015, more drone operators were being trained in the US "than all the pilots of fighter planes and bombers put together" (Chamayou, 2015, p. 13).

In January 2015 the NATO Resolute Support Mission (RSM) started, designed to "train, advise and assist Afghan security forces and institutions to fight terrorism and secure their country" (NATO, n.d.-c). While ISAF did deploy drone strikes, the emphasis was on boots on the ground. With the RSM mission came a big shift in the way of waging war in Afghanistan. At the height of ISAF there were 130,000 boots on the ground; during RSM, there were no more than 16,000 (Nato, n.d.-c). There came a shift to remoteness. With fewer boots on the ground there was an increase in remote warfare, air support and SFA. This was necessary to maintain power in Afghanistan. Remote warfare is explained by Gould and Stel (2022, p.61) as follows: "the essence of remote warfare is that the number of military personnel needed for and involved in attacks is minimized and kept at a physical distance". Therefore, during the RSM the US-led NATO personnel was both "minimized", from 130,00 to 16,000 boots on the ground and "kept at a physical distance" by employing drones (Gould & Stel 2022, p.61).

When the RSM started in 2015, there was a noticeable increase in drone attacks (Faizi, 2015). In that year, according to Airwars, there was a total of 175 US drone strikes in Afghanistan (Airwars News Summary, 2015), with nearly 300 casualties (UNAMA, 2016). These numbers would increase over the years of the RSM—in 2018 and 2019 there were nearly one thousand yearly air strike casualties. The data on US drone strikes as well as the civilian casualties caused is contested; different actors claim different numbers. The US drone scope during the RSM was enormous. According to the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, between 2015 and February 2020, there has been a at least 13,072 confirmed US drone strikes in Afghanistan (Rabbani, 2022). After the beginning of 2020, the data is contested due to the secrecy surrounding the US drone program.

The US was the primary operator of the drone strikes in Afghanistan; therefore, this thesis will focus on the US drone program during the RSM. The demarcation of this research begins at the start of the RSM in January 2015 and ends with the fall of Kabul in August 2021. This thesis will present different data on drone strikes and civilian casualties. Sometimes the sources do not specify if the data is on airstrikes overall, which includes aircrafts and drones, or does specify the drones. In cases where the data does not specify, I have used the term 'airstrikes'; however, when the data does include specifics, I have referred to them as 'drone strikes'.

Different scholars argue that drone warfare can influence blowback (see Waldman, 2018, Boyle, 2013, Hudson et al., 2021). Blowback was first coined by the CIA, defining it as "consequences of policies that were kept secret from the American people" (Johnson, 2000, p. 8). Later, Johnson broadens this term as "the unintended consequences of policies that were kept secret from the American people [and, in most cases, from their elected representatives]" (Johnson, 2000, p. 8). Simpson (2014) further expanded the blowback theory as: "unexpected and negative effects at home that result from covert operations overseas". Although the blowback term was created in the US and was "originally applied only to the unintended consequences for *Americans* of American policies, there is every reason to widen its meaning" (Johnson, 2000, p. 17). This means that it can be broadened to embrace unexpected negative consequences locally. I will argue that the civilian casualties caused by the US drone program, as well as the meaning given to these casualties, are unintended negative consequences. I argue that, ultimately, the local negative consequences lead over the long-term to negative consequences for the US citizens who have been kept in the dark.

The main question this research intends to answer is: "How has the United States' use of drone strikes had an impact on blowback in Afghanistan between 2015 and 2021?". To answer this question structurally, I have divided the blowback theory into three core elements: "policy", "secrecy" and "unintended consequences". I have formulated sub-questions to operationalise the blowback theory in an illustrative way:

On Policy:

1. What was the scope of the US drone program in Afghanistan between 2015-2021?

On Secrecy:

2. How did the US government publicly report on the scope of the drone program and the civilian casualties it caused in Afghanistan between 2015-2021?

Unintended consequences:

3. What impact did the US drone program have on civilian casualties in Afghanistan?
4. How were those civilian casualties given meaning by the local population, including the Taliban?

1.1.   Academic relevance

The academic debate this thesis is contributing to is the question of whether drones have an impact on blowback. Waldman (2018) observes that bombings inflict psychological trauma on civilians. These root causes can create blowback which can be identified as emergence of new recruits and a growth in insurgency. Hudson et al. (2012) argue that a blowback effect in Yemen could be recognised in more AQAP recruits that were family members of civilians killed in drone strikes. Boyle (2013) also argues that drones create blowback that can be recognised in growth in insurgency group recruitment, but he adds that it also fuels anti-Western sentiment. On the other hand, Shah (2018) argues against the notion that blowback is created by killing civilians in drone strikes. He argues that terrorist activities in countries where US drone strikes are conducted are a reaction to "political and economic grievances" and not to US drone strikes (Shah, 2018, p.47).

This research contributes to this debate and partly argues, in line with Boyle, that drones have blowback that can be recognised as anti-Western perspectives. However, it will be argued that these authors skip a step. I argue that interpretation leads to action. I argue that the Johnson's (2000) blowback theory is often not operationalised correctly, and that the focus should be on the interpretation on the ground in Afghanistan. Accordingly, this research considers the civilian casualties as well as the meaning given to civilian casualties as unintended consequences, which may eventually lead to Taliban support. I illustrate how to operationalise the blowback theory, and test this with anecdotal evidence.

The social relevance of this research is that it proves the need for greater transparency surrounding the US drone program and the civilian casualties it caused. This may assist citizens in a further 39 countries around the world with armed drone capabilities to assess their leaders' claims

that drones provide security and a precise way of waging war with less collateral damage (World of Drones, n.d.). These citizens should know how war is being waged in their name, and what impact these drones have on civilians, as well as the unintended effects it can cause.

Chapter 2. Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework of this thesis is the blowback theory by Chalmers Johnson (2000). The blowback term was first coined in the 1950s by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) "for their own internal use" (Johnson, 2000, p. 8). Blowback means "the unintended consequences of policies that were kept secret from the American people [and, in most cases, from their elected representativeness]" (Johnson, 2000, p. 8). Simpson (2014) broadens this term by explaining blowback as "unexpected and negative effects at home that result from covert operations overseas". Although the blowback term was created in the US and was "originally applied only to the unintended consequences for *Americans* of American policies, there is every reason to widen its meaning" (Johnson, 2000, p. 17). However, Johnson (p.11) adds that blowback "is not exclusively an American problem". Blowback therefore can be extended to the unintended negative consequences for the local populations where US operations and policies are being situated. This is ultimately related to when US citizens are kept in the dark about the unintended negative consequences created for the local population. This can lead, in the long term, to negative consequences for the US citizens who have been kept in the dark.

The theoretical framework therefore has three operational main elements: Policy, secrecy, and unintended (negative) consequences. Johnson provides a simplified example: "The unintended consequences of American policies in country X is a bomb at an American embassy in country Y". However, he adds that blowback is not always this straightforward (Johnson 2000, p. 17). In this example, Johnson shows that a US policy results in the unintended consequence of an anti-US perspective, where someone places a bomb at the US embassy, maybe even resulting in the negative effect of civilian casualties. Johnson (2000, p.17) explains that what triggers the unintended consequence in this example is not (always) clear to US citizens. Johnson (2000) adds that blowback is simply "another way of saying a nation reaps what it sows. Although people usually know what they have sown, (…) much of what the managers of the American empire have sown has been kept secret" (Johnson, 2000, p. 17). In this way, Johnson (2000) states that aspects of an operation are kept secret. In this thesis it will be demonstrated that much, but not all, of the US drone operation in Afghanistan has been kept secret.

One scholar that has engaged with blowback created by drone strikes is Michael J. Boyle (2013). He writes that US drone warfare creates blowback which can manifest itself in anti-Western sentiment. His main argument is that drone strikes can discredit the legitimacy of the local government. Additionally, he argues that US drone warfare can result in "anti-Americanism" and "fresh recruitment to militant networks" (Boyle, 2013, p. 28).

Boyle (2013) argues that the mobilisation of recruits and anti-Americanism are negative consequences. These claims are embedded in the discourse on the ground. For clarity, discourse is

defined by Demmers (2017, p. 133) as "discourse is action". Jabri (1996, p. 94-95) argues that discourses "do things" and therefore have "social and political implications". It is through narratives that recruits are mobilised, and anti-Americanism narratives are being legitimised. As Jabri (1996, p. 8) argues, conflict is created through social interaction; through discursive practices violent conflict is legitimised. The discursive approach therefore considers how (i) "people engage in discursive practices" to legitimate violence against the "other" (Demmers, 2017, p. 143) and (ii) how through discursive practices a group is constructed by defining the "self" and the (enemy) "other", ultimately legitimising violence through discourses resorting to violent action framed as an "inevitable and, at times, acceptable form of human conduct" (Jabri, 1996, p.4). Making discourses in violent conflict are very much related to violent action.

The blowback theory is often not adequately operationalised. This is why I argue that the interpretations on the ground (in this research, Afghanistan) is where the focus should be when we consider what the unintended or unexpected negative consequences are in Afghanistan. Johnson writes that: "The most direct and obvious blowback often occurs when the victims fight back after a secret American bombing" (Johnson, 2000, p. 9). Later, he writes that "it can also manifest itself domestically in ways that are often not evident" (p. 17). Frequently, it is argued that the number of new Taliban recruits is an unintended and unexpected negative consequence (e.g. Boyle, 2013, p. 28). Other examples of scholars that make the same jump to recruitment include Waldman (2018), who writes that blowback can be seen in new recruitment and growth in insurgency groups (Waldman, 2018, p. 19). Hudson et al. (2012, p.112) write that US blowback in Yemen can be recognized in more recruits for AQAP (Yemen delegation of Al Qaeda). But this is skipping a step; one should consider first what interpretations were given to the drone strike, and how these interpretations were used to ultimately mobilise more Taliban recruits. Thus, I argue that the interpretation leads to the action, since it is through discourses that collective action is mobilised (see Jabri 1996, Benford & Snow 200, Demmers 2017). I will focus on the three elements of blowback: policy, secrecy, and unintended consequences. The latter will be focused on the civilian casualties caused by the US drone strikes and the meaning given these civilian casualties by the local population, including the Taliban.

To research the interpretations as unintended and unexpected negative consequences, I will be using the collective action frames by Benford and Snow (2000) to complement the already existing blowback theory by Johnson (2000) with the addition of Simpson (2014). In 1992, Benford and Snow applied Goffman's (1974) "framing" concept to the study of social movement theory, advancing the proposition by arguing that there is a special category of cognitive perceptions that deals with "how social movements construct meaning" (Demmers, 2017. p. 100). They argued that a frame is an "interpretive schemata that simplifies and condenses the *world out there* by selectively punctuating

and encoding objects, situations, events, experiences, and sequences of actions within one's present or past environment" (Benford & Snow 1992, p. 137 in Demmers, 2017, p. 100). Stating that social movements are rooted in identifying grievances and creating connections between them, "constructing larger frames of meaning that will resonate with a population's cultural predispositions and communicate a uniform message to power holders and others" (Benford & Snow 1992, p. 136 in Demmers, 2017, p. 100).

Later, in 2000, Benford and Snow published their article "Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment". Here, they explore the different definitions and interpretations of collective action frames by different scholars, alongside an analysis of existing literature on the concept of framing. They explain that through the framing process something is "being done" which can evolve into a "social movement organisation or movement" (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 614). In their article, Benford and Snow identify three core framing tasks: diagnostic framing, prognostic framing and motivational framing, noting that: "By pursuing these core framing tasks, movement actors attend to the interrelated problems of consensus mobilisation and action mobilisation" (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 615).

The diagnostic frame is concerned with defining what the problem is and how it is defined. For example, the problem can be defined by the "self" group as the "enemy other" (Jabri, 1996, p. 4). Jabri (1996) emphasises why othering is such a core component in violent conflicts. According to her, during times of conflict, identities are shaped through discourses, leading to the emergence of a "dominant identity" of a group (Jabri, 1996, p. 134). This "dominant identity" draws the boundaries of "self" and "other" (Demmers, 2917, p. 131). Therefore, discourses are focused on *who we are* and *who we are not*; who is the enemy and who is the victim. In Chapter 7, it will be demonstrated how the Taliban draws these boundaries through discourse, framing the US as infidel invaders and themselves as the protector against the US.

The prognostic frame is "the articulation of a proposed solution to the problem" (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 616). It can be recognised as different counter-propositions to the problem that has been framed in the diagnostic frame. With this frame, actors "seek affirmation that their plan is both achievable and morally justified" to resort to collective violent action (Mehran et al., 2020).

The motivational frame contains the ideology of the framing movement; it is focused on mobilising the response to the framed problem. In this phase, there is a "rationale for engaging in ameliorative collective action, including the construction of appropriate vocabularies of motive" (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 617).

In this thesis, I will be using the prognostic and diagnostic frames to examine the US positioning of the US's use of drones in Afghanistan between 2015 and 2021, as well as the unintended

negative consequences of civilian casualties and anti-Western/anti-American narratives in Afghanistan. I have necessarily excluded from my research the motivational frame, which is focused on "overcoming the fear of risk" which is "associated with violence" (Mehran et al., 2020, p.398).

To make sense of Johnson's (2000) secrecy element, I have engaged briefly with the academic debate on epistemic politics. Gould and Stel (2022) explain that we can make sense of secrecy as a strategy of strategic ignorance. This strategy is used by the US government to "manipulate domestic elites and public opinion" (Carson, 2018, p. 5, cited in, Gould & Stel 2022, p. 70). This political discourse strategy uses ignorance because "deliberately unknowing does not just postpone investigation and accountability but fundamentally and indefinitely obstructs it" (Gould & Stel 2022, p.57). The concept of offensive ignorance is defined as "you don't get to know this" and is "legitimised through instances of not just denial (you don't get to know this because it never happened) or secrecy (you don't get to know this because it would compromise security)" but legitimised through "defensive ignorance (you don't get to know this because we don't know it and we can't know it)" (Gould & Stel, 2022, pp. 63-64).

Despite combining the theories of framing and epistemic politics in this thesis, the primary theoretical framework is Johnson's (2000) blowback theory. The purpose of the frame analysis in this thesis is solely to provide additional insight into the interpretations given to the US drone programme in the US as in Afghanistan. Interpretations lead to action. Therefore, I argue that it is crucial to analyse interpretations as a component of the blowback theory.

Chapter 3. Research Methodology

The research question will be solving the *processual puzzle*. The *processual puzzle* is "interested in how things change, interact and influence each other" (Mason, 2018, p.12). This puzzle fits the research question. The central question "how has the United States' use of drone strikes had an impact on blowback in Afghanistan between 2015 and 2021?" considers the blowback process. Using the blowback theory, this research will illustrate how the US drone programme influenced the blowback process on a local level. The research carried out for this thesis is qualitative in nature. In this thesis, I argue that interpretation leads to action within the blowback theory. Therefore, my ontological stance is focused on motivation and perceptions (Mason, 2018, p.5). The epistemological approach of this thesis is both the critical theory and the interpretivist (Mason, 2018, p.8). Mason (2018, p.8) explains the critical theory as "life is determined through social and historical processes and power relations". This research considers the US drone programme's social processes and power relations in Afghanistan. This research also includes the interpretivist epistemological approach. This approach is explained by Mason (2018) as a "researcher seeks out and interprets people's meanings and interpretations" (p. 8). The interpretations were researched by conducting interviews.

The research presented in this thesis is based on different data collection methods. Overall, I have conducted document analysis, and for the sub-question, "how were those civilian casualties given meaning by the local population, including the Taliban?", I have conducted interviews as part of my data collection. Furthermore, I collected field notes during a minor followed at the Dutch Royal Defence Academy and the research lab of Remote Warfare. I will first explain what documents I have sampled for the analysis, then how I have selected Interviewees and carried out the interviews, and end by sharing my field notes.

3.1 Document analysis

The research process was as follows: First, I critically gathered and selected documents per sub-question. Second, I coded the documents with concepts in the programme NVivo. Third, I critically analysed the documents and selected which documents to use.

The documents selected for this research are: First, the Office of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) reports. These US reports are written independently and are focused on "identifying problems associated with the United States' reconstruction effort and make recommendations to improve efficiency and effectiveness" (*SIGAR*, n.d.). These reports touch upon US drone use and civilian casualties.

Second, I have analysed the annual reports on civilian casualties in Afghanistan by the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), in combination with the data reports by The Cost of War project papers, to make sense of the scope of the drone programme and the civilian casualties

it caused. In addition, I have analysed reports by Airwars, the Intercept, and the reports and OSINT datasets published by the Bureau of Investigative Journalism.

Third, I have analysed White House remarks and statements made by former Presidents Obama, Trump, and current President Biden on Afghanistan, the US drone programme, and civilian casualties. This research aims to analyse the framing and policy objectives of the US government.

Furthermore, I have selected different news sources reporting on the scope of the US drone programme, the civilian casualties it caused and US/Afghan presidential interviews. These outlets vary between The New York Times, Al-Jazeera, BBC and NBC. However, I also incorporated insights from several other news sources to ensure a comprehensive analysis.

3.2 Interviews
I have conducted four interviews as part of the data collection, mainly for my fourth sub-question. For this research, it was essential to speak to Afghans who were in exile to ask how they perceived the drone strike by the US and if they saw or felt an attitude shift concerning the drones, especially after the shift that saw boots on the ground decrease in favour of a greater US air presence. I interviewed three Afghans, all of whom were present in Afghanistan during the demarcation of this thesis (2015-2021). I have selected the subjects critically; it was important to interview people who understood the political situation, the drone use by the US and the framing by the Taliban. Regarding the framing of the US drone strikes by the Taliban, it is important to note that their online messaging, within the demarcation, is challenging since their messages tend to be deleted relatively quickly. Therefore, this research relies on interviews and first-person experiences with the Taliban's framing.

Since this research is focused on Afghanistan and the US, I interviewed an American military professor who served in Afghanistan during the Resolute Support Mission (RSM). As a navy pilot, he gave insight into the shift to remoteness, and as a military professor, he offered insight into the influence of blowback toward the West.

All interviews were between 35 minutes and two hours and twenty minutes long. I have interviewed Interviewee A twice, since there was not enough time during the first interview. The first interview was online via Zoom, and the second interview was in person. The interview with Interviewee B was in person and the interviews with Interviewees C and D were online via Microsoft Teams.

The interviews were semi-structured. Before conducting the interviews, I made a topic list, as Mason suggested in her book (Mason, 2018, p. 113). However, it was important to allow the conversation to flow naturally. Before starting the interviews with the Afghan subjects, I gave the disclaimer that I had never been present in a war zone or in Afghanistan and asked them if they could

stop or correct me if I said something insensitive. I never asked about violence or sensitive first-person experiences directly.

3.3 Field notes

As part of the research lab for Intimacies of Remote Warfare, I organised a roundtable conversation between Afghan researchers. This conversation aimed to discover whether, according to Afghans, there is a gap in the academic and public debate considering the twenty-year invasion of Afghanistan. Some of the gaps in the academic and public debate that were named were: the lack of transparency, collateral damage and civilian casualties caused by NATO and the US. These three themes are at the core of this thesis project, making this thesis socially and academically relevant.

3.4 Limitations

This research has its limitations. First and foremost, as a researcher, there is a risk of researcher bias. This research studies the blowback created by the US drones in Afghanistan. As a Dutch researcher, I am very aware that the Netherlands was an ally of the US in this NATO mission. I have put my efforts into being as critical as possible of this Western positionality. I am also mindful of the limitations stemming from the fact that I am a Western researcher who has never been to Afghanistan, lived or been to a war zone. Data interpretation of qualitative data can have a subjective character, which can be impacted by biases, but I have put my efforts into being as critical as possible. The Afghan Interviewees have provided me with assistance in cultural understanding and staying as neutral as possible.

Furthermore, this research is relatively small in scope. The evidence presented is partially based on anecdotal evidence that has been collected through interviews with Afghans. I cannot provide the meaning given to the civilian casualties by all Afghans. To research this question I have selected the Interviewees carefully, and all conducted interviews have been with Afghan experts in the field who have a broad understanding of the twenty-year-long war and its effects. This can still suffer the effects of interview-selection bias, which may affect the data collection process.

3.5 Ethics

It is important to take ethics into account, especially since the data collection is partly based on interviews. In the field of conflict studies and human rights, we research sensitive topics. Interviewing subjects who are in exile from Afghanistan, it was important to take this into account. All subjects interviewed have participated voluntarily and have been informed of the character of my research project. They all asked questions about my research before participating.

A mentioned, I never asked directly about violent experiences that the Interviewees had experienced in Afghanistan. This was important since I did not want to re-traumatise respondents with this research project. Jaffe (2019, p. 392) argues that researchers should be careful around subjects of violence. I have done this in the interviews and only discussed airstrikes and/or terrorism in Afghanistan when the respondent brought this up. Even then, I let them lead in the topic and only asked clarifying questions, not in-depth follow-up questions. The questions and statements given can have a sensitive political character. Therefore, to minimise risk I have kept all subjects anonymous.

Chapter 4. The US Drone Scope in Afghanistan

This chapter focuses on the first sub-question, "What was the scope of the US drone programme in Afghanistan between 2015 and 2021?" This question focuses on the blowback theory's operational element, the "US operation or policy". The US policy this research has focused on is the drone programme during the RSM. In this chapter, I will explain the shift to remoteness, the drone programme in Afghanistan, the legitimisation of this operation, and the increase in drone strikes during this mission. For clarity on the shift to remoteness, this chapter will first give background information on drone use in Afghanistan before the start of the RSM.

4.1. Before RSM

The drone war In Afghanistan started the night of the invasion of Operation Enduring Freedom on 7 October 2001 (Williams & Deptula, 2015, p. 65). Drones, also known as "Unmanned Aerial Vehicles" (UAVs) and "Unmanned Combat Air Vehicles" (UCAVs), had been built and experimented with before starting the "drone war". In 1995, the drone was simply a "spy plane" and was first deployed in 1999 in Kosovo (Chamayou, 2015 p. 28). It was not yet capable of placing bombs; it was only capable of "filming targets, and illuminating them utilizing lasers, allowing the F-16 planes to strike" (Chamayou, 2015, p. 28-29). However, the drone's development and testing continued, with success: On 16 February 2001, at a US Air Force base, a drone successfully "fired a Hellfire AGM-114C into a target" for the first time (Yenne, 2004, p. 85).

The drones were still somewhat unreliable, as it would take a further eight months before a drone would target living individuals. On 12 October 2001, five days after the first airstrike of the drone war in Afghanistan, a US drone almost bombed a CIA team that the drone analyst had mistakenly identified as al-Qaeda members (Woods, 2015). In November, the CIA drones fired their Hellfire missiles forty times (Woods, 2015). That month, Bush stated: "The conflict in Afghanistan has taught us more about the future of our military than a decade of blue ribbon panels and think-thank symposiums". The predator is a "good example", he continued: "Now it is clear the military does not have enough unmanned vehicles" (George W. Bush, 2001, in Chamayou, 2015, p. 29).

Bush was not alone in wanting to increase the use of drones. His successor, Obama, made the drone one of the tokens of his presidency. His doctrine was "kill rather than capture" (Chamayou, 2015, p. 14), although, according to Becker and Shane (2012), "the capture part has become largely theoretical". The drone has been named Obama's "weapon of choice" (Scahill, 2015).

The number of drone attacks before the RSM is contested due to the lack of transparency. The NATO coalition was led by the US, and most drone attacks were carried out by the US. According to the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, the US has conducted at least 1,015 drone strikes between 2008 and 2012 (Woods & Ross, 2012). Chamayou (2015, p. 13) notes that the deployment of drones

by the US "increased by 1,200 per cent between 2004-2012". The number of drone strikes under the Bush administration is not publicly known. It is known that under the Obama administration, drone use increased. However, the exact number of drone bombings by the US in Afghanistan is not publicly known due to secrecy (discussed further in Chapter 5).

4.2. Fewer boots on the ground

With the RSM, there came a meaningful shift from boots on the ground to primarily air presence and Security Force Assistance (SFA). The objectives of this new mission were to "train, advise and assist Afghan security forces and institutions to fight terrorism and secure their country" (NATO, n.d.-c). Thus, it would focus on supporting the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF) (SIGAR, 2023, p.3). It is important to note that the combat mission officially ended with ISAF, but the drone programme increased during RSM.

In the previous NATO mission ISAF (that started in 2001 and ended in December 2014) that the RSM followed, there were (at its height) 130,000 troops deployed from 51 NATO countries (NATO, n.d.-a). The RSM mission began with a deployment of 13,000 troops and saw an increase to 16,000 troops in 2017. Consequently, decreasing the heavy boots on the ground.

The shift to fewer boots on the ground meant more focus on remoteness. There was a heightened focus on air support to maintain military support in the absence of the former boots-on-the-ground presence to prevent any potential power vacuum. A SIGAR report (2022) demonstrates this by explaining that there either need to be "boots on the ground" or "drones just minutes away" (SIGAR, 2022, p. 186). In comparison, drones have the advantage of having a much lower physical and financial cost than boots on the ground. Airwars (2022) reported in their 20-year war overview that the US and other NATO forces became increasingly hesitant to suffer this cost and deploy boots on the ground (Airwars, n.d.). Therefore, this new RSM mission focused on hitting specific targets primarily achieved by drone precision (NATO, n.d.-c).

It proved necessary; with this shift to remoteness, it was expected that the ANDSF during RSM would be able to help fill the gap with fewer US and NATO boots on the ground. Unfortunately, the ANDSF was not ready for this shift. A SIGAR report, published in 2023, focused on why the ANDSF failed at the beginning of RSM, noting that: "Within the first nine months of 2015, the Taliban captured the provincial capital of Kunduz (the first provincial capital to fall since the start of the war) and asserted control over the Musa Qala District in Helmand Province" (SIGAR, 2023, p.3). As a reaction to this power failure of the first nine months of the RSM, Obama deployed more air support to recapture the seized territory (SIGAR, 2013, p.3-4).

In 2015, the increase in drone attacks in Afghanistan sparked backlash. According to an Al Jazeera journalist who had formerly been the spokesperson for Afghan President Karzai, there were several drone attacks per week (Faizi, 2015). At this time, Afghanistan was already the most drone-bombed country in the world. Faizi argued: "Drones kill any chance of peace in Afghanistan" (Faizi, 2015). According to Airwars, in 2015 the number of US drone strikes was high. According to Airwars data, there were at least the following number of confirmed US drone strikes (*Airwars News Summary*, 2015):

Month	Number of strikes
January	5 (combined)
February	
March	1
April	3 (assumed)*
May	3
June	8
July	17
August	32
September	17
October	82
November	9
December	Inconclusive

* In April 2015, Airwars could not report a confirmed number as the Afghan and US media reporting was so contradictory. However, they assumed at least three strikes (although, in light of the uncertainty, they did not count this assumed figure towards the total number for 2015..

Without the data from December 2015, this comes to 174 US drone strikes in Afghanistan in 2015. Nevertheless, this number is contested; according to Faizi (2015), drone strikes were happening every week, while Airwars does not confirm this. Nevertheless, this data does support the SIGAR conclusion that airstrikes after nine months of the RSM went up (SIGAR, 2023). We can see this in the sharp rise between the figures for September and October.

Between July 2016 and March 2019, there was a greater focus on transparency about US drone deployment in Afghanistan due to Obama's 2016 transparency rule on reporting of drone strikes and drone casualties (discussed further in Chapter 5) (The White House, 2016). Nevertheless, not all data was published. Next to the US Air Force, the CIA also used drones. The agency worked in greater secrecy. In 2016, according to the Bureau of Investigative Journalism dataset, there were 127,

not all confirmed, recorded strikes (The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, n.d.). In 2016, they recorded 1071 US airstrikes in Afghanistan, which comprises drones and other airstrikes.

In January of 2017, Trump started his presidency. In his speech in August 2017, he declared that his goal was to end the War in Afghanistan with an "honourable and enduring outcome" (Trump, 2017). To gain leverage in Afghanistan, the Pentagon eased its rules of engagement for airstrikes in Afghanistan and intensified the drone programme in Afghanistan (Crawford, 2020, p. 1). A SIGAR report (2023, p.1) states that Trump granted the "DoD [US Department of Defence, (DoD)] additional authorisations to combat the Taliban"; this was done mainly by airstrikes primarily using drones. In September 2017, according to Al Jazeera (2017) analysts, Trump was already surpassing Obama's drone record. Obama had conducted one drone attack (across all countries within the Global War on Terror efforts) every 5.4 days, whereas Trump, already in his first year, deployed drone strikes every 1.25 days (Al Jazeera, 2017). It is unclear how many drone strikes there were in 2017. During this year, the US government announced it would stop publishing detailed information on airstrikes due to its sensitivity (Fielding-Smith & Purkiss, 2018). According to the Bureau of Investigative Journalism data set, there were at least 71 reported US drone strikes according to their local sources, but within this number, not all strikes were confirmed, making this number contested (The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, n.d.).

In 2018, the US started publishing on drone strikes again for a short time. According to Fielding-Smith and Purkiss (2018), this policy decision was made after a rising concern about how military transparency was reduced under President Trump. This year, the Bureau of Investigative Journalism has intel on at least 19 US drone strikes (The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, n.d.).

In 2019, during the (first, unsuccessful) peace negotiations between the Taliban and the US, there was a record number of US air strikes (7,423), which included drone strikes in Afghanistan (Al Jazeera, 2020). At the beginning of this year, Trump revoked Obama's transparency policy on reporting drone casualties (BBC, 2019). We know that this year was heavy on bombing to create pressure on the Taliban. There have been efforts to try and map the civilian casualties of this heavy airstrike year (Chapter 6), but the US drone strike number is a black spot due to the growing secrecy of the drone programme. A SIGAR (2023, p.1-2) report states that the air attacks helped the ANDSF progress in recapturing Taliban territory.

In February 2020, when the Doha agreement was signed, according to SIGAR (2023), 98 per cent of the US airstrikes had stopped. General Sadat, formerly the commander of Afghanistan's Joint Special Operations Command, expressed to the SIGAR research: "The Doha agreement's psychological implication was so significant that the average Afghan soldier felt this idea of abandonment. This meant their mind was now in survival mode and [susceptible] to accepting other offers and deals"

(SIGAR, 2023, p.95). In February 2020, the number of total confirmed drone strikes since the start of the RSM was, according to the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, 13,072 (Rabbani, 2022). This number is, according to them, a minimum.

In 2021, President Joe Biden replaced Trump as the US president. Interestingly, Biden, previously the Vice-President of the Obama administration, first continued Trump's policy on secrecy surrounding the drone strike data. Finally, at the end of 2021, he released the strike data for the last two years of the war (Piper & Dyke, 2021). The White House stated that in 2020, there were 660 airstrikes, and in 2021, 372 airstrikes; these numbers include drone strikes but the breakdown was not specified (Piper & Dyke, 2021). What is known is that in 2021, there have been several drone strikes, including the drone strike during the fall of Kabul on 29 August 2021 (Schmitt, 2021).

The drone strike data above is considerably contested and often in contrast with US numbers due to secrecy. As demonstrated, there was over the years an increase in US drone strikes in Afghanistan. The Bureau of Investigative Journalism data are retrieved from their data set "The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, n.d.". This research has only counted their expected drone strike numbers and has disregarded the other airstrike data.

4.3. Frames & legitimising drones
The scope of US drone use during the RSM was legitimised first by President Obama as a clean way of waging war. The Obama administration described the drone programme, according to Jaffe (2017), as: "Precise", "effective", "indispensable" and "the only game in town". The drone programme would focus merely on "targeting killings" (NATO, n.d.-c). John Brennan, who served as the director of the CIA during the Obama administration, called the drone programme "surgically precise" (Brennan, 2011; in Serle & Fielding-Smith, 2017). On top, the Obama administration legitimised the drone programme as "lawful", even if it was under their law (Jaffe, 2017). Trenta (2017, p. 69) argues that Obama justified his drone strikes through the concepts of "imminence, law and fighting terrorism".

Obama legitimised using drones as "lawful", "precise", "effective" and "indispensable"; these prognostic frames articulate a proposed solution to the problem (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 616). Frames are constructed of "meaning that will resonate with a cultural predisposition" (Benford & Snow, 200, p.136). Obama legitimised the drones in Afghanistan as "lawful" and" precise" by framing them in a way that is culturally accepted in the West. Diagnostic and prognostic frames are connected; Obama presents the drone programme as the solution to combat terrorism effectively in Afghanistan. The problem is already identified through a prognostic frame as the "enemy other"; the enemy other is "terrorism" (Trenta 2017). Therefore, it is lawful to use drones against this enemy.

On the other hand, Trump legitimised the drone programme first and foremost as a weapon to fight the terrorist groups in Afghanistan (Trump, 2017). Trump also focused on targeting the

terrorists. His goal was an "honourable and enduring outcome" of the war (Trump, 2017). He legitimised the deployment of drones as a power tool to put pressure on the negotiations with the Taliban (Al Jazeera, 2020). Trump framed the US drones prognostically as a weapon to fight terrorism and as a leverage tool. He frames the drones as morally justified to achieve an "honourable outcome" (Mehran et al., 2020).

The legitimisation of the drone programme did not come without critique. The former head of the US Defence Intelligence Agency, Michael Flynn, criticised the drone programme in an interview with Al Jazeera. Stating that the programme is a "failed strategy" and is "creating more enemies than [it is] removing from the battlefield" (Al Jazeera, 2016). He was not alone in this view; a former three-star US general told Al Jazeera, "When you drop a bomb from a drone (…) you are going to cause more damage than you are going to cause good" (Al Jazeera, 2016). The mentioned critique aligns with Johnson's blowback theory, stating that this US operation will create unintended negative consequences.

4.4. Conclusion
This chapter focused on the first operational element of the blowback theory, the "US operation or policy". The twenty years of war in Afghanistan were simultaneous to the first twenty years of US fighter drones. The drones were employed since the first day of the war, but it was not until the RSM that the fundamental shift from boots on the ground to heavy drone presence happened. Thomas O. Falk (2021) noted that President George W. Bush started the drone programme with so much success that every next American leader expended it. Between 2015 and February 2020, there has been a minimum of 13,072 confirmed drone strikes in Afghanistan, according to the Bureau of Investigative Journalism (Rabbani, 2022). In the last two years of the RSM, the data on the drone strikes is very contested and unclear due to the drone secrecy that Trump started and Biden continued. Biden did publish in December 2021 US airstrike data, but there is no specification between drone strikes and other airstrikes (Piper & Dyke, 2021). Drone strikes have become "the first choice in modern warfare" over the last twenty years (O Falk, 2021). Remote warfare has significantly altered the nature of warfare, particularly because drone pilots do not face any physical risks while still precision-hitting targets.

Chapter 5. Secrecy surrounding the Drone Programme

"Every April we pay our taxes, and if there are men and women out there who we're paying to kill people, we should know", American author Klay (2022) argued in the New York Times. In this chapter, I aim to answer the sub-question: "How did the US government publicly report on the scope of the drone programme and the civilian casualties it caused in Afghanistan between 2015-2021?". This is the "secrecy" element of the blowback theory by Johnson (2000), described as the "secret [kept] from the American people" (Johnson, 2000, p. 8). Johnson explains the secrecy further by stating that blowback is simply "that a nation reaps what it sows", but notes that "people usually know what they have sown, our national experience of blowback is seldom imagined in such terms because so much of what the managers of the American empire have sown has been kept secret" (Johnson, 200 p. 17). This chapter will demonstrate how the US government has communicated the drone programme and civilian casualties caused by the programme to its public and, moreover, how this secrecy is ultimately a strategy used by the US government.

5.1. Creating transparency (2013-2016)

War has always had a secretive character, but "as America shifted from lager deployments to more reliance on drones (…) that secretive side of warfare became a larger share of our [US's] global military presence" (Klay, 2022). In 2013, Obama announced that he was going to implement more transparency rules surrounding the US drone programme (Jones, 2016). Finally, in July of 2016, Obama released an executive order focused on transparency and civilian protection (*Executive Order*, 2016). The new drone order stated, among other things, that personnel would be trained to reduce civilian casualties and the US would develop new intelligence systems to gain better intel to protect civilians (*Executive Order*, 2016). On top the US would start investigating civilian casualties where all "credible" information found by "agencies, partner governments, and nongovernmental organisations" would be used (*Executive Order*, 2016). Where there were civilian casualties, the US would take responsibility (*Executive Order*, 2016). These measurements would be both for conflict zones and for outside-conflict-zones airstrikes, and included CIA airstrikes (BBC, 2019) (however, there would be more "specific reporting" on US air strikes outside of conflict zones (Jones, 2016)). Thus, this order was both on the public reporting of done strikes and the civilian casualties they created.

This executive order drew swift critique. Jones (2016) wrote in the Washington Post the same week that there were concerns about whether the report Obama published on the previous strikes was correct. This confusion started since the published numbers were an "overall estimate" instead of "estimates for individual strikes" (Jones, 2016). Seemingly, the detailed data was still kept secret. Indeed, the casualty number was much lower than estimates by NGOs (Jones, 2016). This estimate is ultimately a strategy; we can make sense of this estimate through defensive ignorance, which Gould

and Stel (2022, p.64) define as "you don't get to know this because we don't know it because we can't know it". Besides, scholars later argued that it seemed that the above-named rules never were "formally applied to Afghanistan" (Westlie & Hageraats, 2017). The question remained: how transparent was the drone programme? According to Teitler (2018, p. 22), the drone programme under Obama was still lacking transparency despite the executive order. As Birchall (2011) notes, transparency is not the binary opposite of secrecy (Birchall, 2011, as cited in Gould & Stel 2022, p. 62). According to Birchall (2011, p. 12), secrecy and transparency "are symbiotic", as also shown by this case study. Ultimately, Obama has argued to be wanting to implement transparency while guarding secrecy and has created this transparency (to a degree) with this order during his second presidential term.

Nevertheless, according to Larry Lewis the executive order was created "to understand how the U.S. deals with the risk of civilian casualties" and to deal with the civilian casualties created through airstrikes, which Lewis argues to have been achieved (Lewis, 2019, cited in Vinopal, 2019). Even though the order was critiqued and the number of casualties the US government published was contested, it was according to Marc Garlasco an "unprecedented step towards boosting transparency around secret operations" and it had "set a new standard for the US allies as well" (Garlasco, 2019, cited in Vinopal, 2019).

Another effort to improve transparency came when Obama gave the DoD more drone strike responsibility, subsequently taking this away from the CIA (Boussios, 2017, p. 21). It is unclear how much responsibility was in fact transferred to the DoD regarding Afghanistan. Some sources show that it merely concerned drones on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border (Clark, 2017, p. 1-10). Since Pakistan was not a declared battleground, and the transparency rules were often applied to strikes outside a declared battleground (Boussios, 2017, p. 22). However, when the responsibility for drone strikes in Afghanistan was reversed by Trump, it was documented by other sources that the DoD did have this responsibility (NBC News, 2016). These conflicting statements are testaments to the secrecy surrounding the US drone programme in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, the reporting on drone strikes in Afghanistan became more frequent. By the end of Obama's presidency, the Bureau of Investigative Journalism received specific monthly updates on airstrike data in Afghanistan (Purkiss & Fielding-Smith, 2018). Therefore, the Obama administration was publicly reporting on the scope of the drone programme and the civilian casualties during the demarcation of this research (2015-2021) (notwithstanding that the civilian casualty numbers and drone strike data remained substantially contested (Jones, 2016)).

5.2. Reversing policy

While Obama had put his efforts, especially during his second term, on creating more transparency surrounding drone strikes in Afghanistan, the transparency was reducing under President Trump as drone attacks increased (Al Jazeera, 2017). Trump declined to disclose information on drone strikes and did not "give regular press briefings at the Pentagon" (Klay, 2022). At this time, the US government was not publicly reporting on the scope of the drone programme in Afghanistan at all. Not only did Trump keep these details secret, he also proceeded to reverse the transparency efforts made by the Obama administration.

In 2019, Trump revoked Obama's executive order on (more) transparent strike reporting (BBC, 2019). Without giving any explanation on this reversion (Kosma, 2019). From this moment on, the US government did not have to report publicly on drone casualties anymore (Purkiss, 2019). This attracted critique from different NGOs; Rita Siemion of Human Rights First stated to the BBC that Trump administration action was a "step backwards on transparency and accountability" (BBC, 2019). At this time, the "key data" on drone strikes in Afghanistan had already been retained after the Bureau of Investigative Journalism published an article on their concern about the civilian casualties due to US drone strikes (Purkiss, 2019). In this article Purkiss and Fielding-Smith (2018b) had demonstrated that the released airstrike data of the RSM disclosed that in November 2018 "66 buildings were destroyed over the course of the 392 strikes". They argued that bombing buildings is extremely dangerous since it is hard to know who is inside, subsequently creating a higher number of civilian casualties (Purkiss & Fielding-Smith, 2018b). Two months after this article was published, the US strike data on Afghanistan ceased to be published (Purkiss, 2019).

Despite receiving strong opposition from numerous NGOs and researchers, President Trump's decision to reverse Obama's executive order gained support from both former and current US national security officials during that period (Vinopal, 2019). The spokesperson of the US National Security Council (USNSC) stated after Trump's reversal of the executive order that it stops "superfluous reporting requirements that do not improve government transparency, but rather distract our intelligence professionals from their primary mission" (Vinopal, 2019). Gould and Stel (2022) observe that secrecy is sometimes being presented as "being in the public interest", which "might be accepted as legitimate in particular situations" (p. 62). This is in essence what the spokesperson of the National Security council was doing by casting transparency efforts as an unnecessary distraction. Gould and Stel (2022, p. 62) add that "secrecy, after all, goes against both political and legal understandings of the desirability of transparency, without which accountability, and ultimately democracy are unattainable". Regardless, the US National Security council defended the reversal of transparency as being in the public interest (Vinopal, 2019). However, Johnson (2000, p. 33) argues that blowback is created for the American people through secrecy, noting that "most Americans may be largely

ignorant of what was, and still is, being done in their names". Gould and Stel (2022, p. 62) argue that secrecy makes democracy unachievable, observing a clear democratic tension in the selection of a president who is, unbeknownst to the electorate, creating civilian casualties in their name.

Lushenko (2022) argues that "the lack of international reporting standards" had helped the US to avoid accountability for the secrecy surrounding the drone programme in Afghanistan (p. 34). This was especially the case under President Trump, who returned drone strike responsibility to the CIA, essentially making all drone strikes classified information (BBC, 2019). Switching the drone strike responsibility in Afghanistan between the CIA and DoD created even more secrecy, since they operate under "different targeting criteria" (Lushenko, 2022, p. 34). Consequently, the DoD drones fly under the restrictions of title 10, "which allows public disclosure" of the drone strikes and where they operate (Lubold & Harris, 2017). The CIA do not fall under the title 10 requirements (Lubold & Harris, 2017). Therefore, Trump could lean on the classification of the CIA, while still not providing regular press briefings on the on-going war. It is important to note that drone strike responsibility was not merely reverted to the CIA (as before Obama's transparency efforts); Trump gave the CIA more drone strike authority than ever before (Schmitt & Rosenberg, 2017, see also Lubold & Harris, 2017).

President Biden continued his predecessor's secrecy policy (Klay, 2022). This is remarkable since Biden was the vice-president during the Obama administration where, as demonstrated, airstrike transparency was created. Until the US left Afghanistan, Biden had left the drone strike "loosened rules" intact (in the form Trump had implemented in 2017) (Savage, 2023). Additionally, drone responsibility remained with the CIA, also guarding secrecy (Baker, 2022).

5.3. Secrecy as strategy

Ultimately, the secrecy surrounding the drone programme and the civilian casualties it caused is a strategy. As stated above, the data on civilian casualties caused by airstrikes, published by the Obama administration, did not match the numbers from numerous NGOs (Jones, 2016). Besides, the data was an "overall estimate" instead of "estimates for individual strikes" (Jones, 2016). We can make sense of this through epistemic politics. Gould and Stel (2022, p. 63) describe "offensive ignorance" as authorities (in this case the US government) "impos[ing] ignorance on others, by obstructing their access to information or generation of knowledge" (Gould & Stel, 2022, p. 63). When the Obama administration published the overall numbers, instead of the promised specific data, they were imposing ignorance on the public.

When Trump reversed Obama's transparency rule, it was defended by the US National Security council, that this reversion stopped distracting the "intelligence professionals from their primary mission" (Vinopal, 2019). This is what Gould and Stel (2022, p. 63) recognise as "secrecy

legitimised through security logics". The USNSC is arguing that the secrecy surrounding the drone programme will improve the security of the US.

Trump subsequently switching the drone responsibility back to the CIA, while granting them more authority, and Biden keeping this policy, is again offensive ignorance. This offensive ignorance is "legitimised through (..) secrecy", defined as "you don't get to know this because that would compromise security" (Gould & Stel, 2022, p.64). The CIA, as said, has more secrecy privileges then the DoD, which in this instance is being used as strategic ignorance.

Trump not giving press conferences on the drone programme, or explaining why the Obama's transparency rule was reversed, is also a strategy. Trump was again using the strategy of "strategic ignorance" by "obstructing the knowledge of others" (Gould & Stel, 2022, p. 63). Without press conferences or statements by the president, much less US media attention is triggered. Knowing what not to say is a strategy, by doing so the president does not have to answer any questions. As Gould and Stel (2022, p. 70) note, through remote warfare it is easier "to avert political questions on how it has transformative effects on politics and society at home and abroad". It is easier to keep the public in the dark than with a heavy set of boots on the ground. Strategic ignorance "strengthened by distance" is used repeatedly as a political strategy (Gould & Stel, 2022, p.70).

5.4. Conclusion

There has been substantial secrecy around the US drone programme in Afghanistan. The secrecy maintained by Obama, Trump and Biden was a strategy. Therefore, the question: "How did the US government publicly report on the scope of the drone programme and the civilian casualties it caused in Afghanistan between 2015-2021?". Obama reduced the secrecy of his administration in his second term by publishing some drone data (notwithstanding the retained secrecy flowing from reporting only overall estimates of both the strikes as the casualties it caused (Jones, 2016), and apparent impairment of the casualty data, which not match the numbers registered by the NGOs (Jones, 2016)). Obama essentially using this as a defensive ignorance strategy. When Trump took office, he reversed the executive order on transparency. He moved drone strike responsibility in Afghanistan to the CIA, where the drone strikes were classified, creating more secrecy through strategic ignorance. Trump rarely gave a press conference or explained his actions. Consequently, he barely reported at all on the drone scope. Biden kept the drone policy implemented by Trump until the US left Afghanistan. As Johnson writes, "much of what the managers of the American empire have sown has been kept secret" (Johnson, 200 p. 17). As demonstrated in this chapter, the American government has leaned on secrecy surrounding the drone programme and the civilian casualties in Afghanistan. US citizens do not know what the country has sown. Drawing on the epistemic politics as explained by Gould and

Stel (2022), we can make sense of the secrecy as a strategy of strategic ignorance, and more particularly as offensive ignorance, where the presidents legitimise secrecy as a security matter.

Chapter 6. US Drone casualties in Afghanistan

This chapter is focused on the second sub-question of this thesis: "What impact did the US drone programme have on casualties in Afghanistan?". I argue that civilian casualties are one of the local negative unintended consequences, and interpreting this harm could lead to grievances being mobilised toward collective action (Chapter 7). The element of "secrecy" is also closely related to civilian casualties, as US transparency regarding civilian casualties has been far from optimal. Furthermore, the civilian casualty numbers discussed in this chapter are contested due to the secrecy surrounding the drone programme. Numerous NGOs have put their efforts into creating awareness about the civilian casualties caused. These numbers are significant to understanding the damage the drone programme caused and how blowback was influenced. In addition to NGO data, I will use UNAMA and SIGAR reports and data from The Cost of War project papers by Crawford (2020) to construct as comprehensive an account as possible. In Chapter 7 I demonstrate how these high civilian casualty numbers are interpreted at the local level in Afghanistan.

6.1. Not intended targets

In Chamayou's (2015, p. 141) words, "there is a crucial difference between hitting the target and hitting only the target". In 2015, Al Jazeera (2015) reported that most people killed by the US drone programme in Afghanistan were not intended targets. An anonymous whistle-blower provided the Intercept documents called The Drone Papers, which sparked numerous investigations (Scahill, 2015). The Drone Papers showed that in 5 months, 90 per cent of the people killed by US drone strikes across Afghanistan, Yemen and Somalia "were not the intended target" (Scahill, 2015). The Obama administration responded that it had been "as transparent as possible" (Al Jazeera, 2015). The White House spokesperson, John Earnest, added that "the United States certainly goes as far as any other government in factoring in the need to prevent civilian casualties when carrying out counterterrorism operations", and that the US's behaviour was in strong contrast to the Taliban (Al Jazeera, 2015).

UNAMA started documenting the overall civilian casualties in Afghanistan with a specification on airstrikes in 2009, releasing a report in respect of the prior year every February. It is essential to include the other casualties to understand the local grievances in Afghanistan. The data counts the civilian casualties for the whole of the NATO mission and does not specify the US-created casualties. Nevertheless, the US was the leading air force power. After 2017, the US conducted more airstrikes than before due to the relaxation of the rules of engagement for airstrikes in Afghanistan (ReliefWeb, 2021).

According to data from UNAMA in 2015, the first year of the RSM, the civilian casualties hit a then-new record: 11,002 civilian casualties, which included 3,545 deaths and 7,457 injured (UNAMA,

2016). 296 of the 11,002 were caused by air operations; UNAMA did not specify the civilian deaths by air operation in the 2015 report (UNAMA, 2016).

During 2016 UNAMA recorded a total of 11,418 casualties, which included 3,498 deaths and 7,920 injured. 590 of these casualties, with 250 deaths, were caused by airstrikes (UNAMA, 2017). UNAMA notes the airstrike data is "nearly double that recorded in 2015 and the highest since 2009" (UNAMA, 2017, p.9). In 2016, the UN reported a minimum of 85 deaths created just by drone strikes, while the Bureau of Investigative Journalism recorded up to 105 deaths in the same year (Purkiss & Serle, 2017).

In 2017, when the regulations surrounding the deployment of airstrikes in Afghanistan under the Trump administration were loosened to gain leverage at the bargaining table with the Taliban, causing a substantial rise in civilian causalities (Crawford, 2020). Compared to Obama's last year as US president, the number of deaths in Afghanistan due to US airstrikes rose by 330 per cent (Crawford, 2020, p.6). According to UNAMA, in 2017, the civilian causalities were 10,453, which includes 3,438 deaths. Within this data, 295 were killed by airstrikes and 336 injured; UNAMA noted that the 631 air casualties were the "highest number from airstrikes in a single year since 2009. Aerial operations accounted for six per cent of all civilian casualties in Afghanistan in 2017" (UNAMA 2018, p.2).

In 2018, UNAMA data shows that more civilians were killed than in any other year since UNAMA has recorded civilian casualty data (UNAMA, 2019, P,1). There were 10,993 civilian casualties, including 3,804 deaths. This year was the first year that UNAMA recorded over 1000 causalities (1015) through airstrikes, Including 536 deaths (UNAMA, 19, p.2). In 2019, the civilian causalities were 10,392; this included 3,403 civilian deaths. The number of causalities from airstrikes was 700 deaths and 345 injured (UNAMA, 2020, pp. 2-4).

2020 was the first year since 2013 with less than ten thousand civilian deaths; this year had 8,820 civilian casualties, including 3,355 deaths. This included 693 civilian causalities from airstrikes, with 341 killed (UNAMA, 2021, p. 16). Thus, a real decrease in deaths through airstrikes. In 2021, UNAMA stopped recording in July; this means that the attacks during the fall of Kabul are not included in the data. There was a rise in the casualties: 5,183 civilian casualties, including 1,659 killed civilians (UNAMA, 2022), and 239 killed civilians died through airstrikes (UNAMA, 2022). According to the SIGAR (2021) research, during the twenty-year intervention, at least 48,000 Afghan civilians were killed and at least 75,000 injured (SIGAR, 2021, p. 7).

The Cost of War paper notes that the data by UNAMA is contested by the US; for instance, the US only counted 97 US Air Force deaths in 2019. The number provided by UNAMA is for the whole pro-government airstrike data, but the US took up a big part of this (Crawford, 2020, p. 7). What can be analysed is the "number of condolence payments" by the US. Even though reasons for the

payments are classified, Crawford (2020) notes that it can be assumed that the "majority of those payments were for deaths or injuries that the US believed resulted from its airstrikes" (Crawford, 2020, p. 8). Since the RSM did not have a significant US "boots on the ground" presence and was more present through the air.

Year	Number of Condolence Payments in Afghanistan for Deaths and Injuries	Total paid by the US
2015	11	$47,475
2016	297	$1,370,684
2017	26	$128,389
2018	56	$163,337
2019	65	$324, 020
Total	**455**	**$2, 023, 905**

Table by the Cost of War Project: Crawford, 2020, p.9

According to the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, between 2004 and 2020, the US was responsible for 300-909 dead civilians and 4,126-10,076 were in total killed in Afghanistan through US drone strikes, including 66-184 children (The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, 2020). The Obama administration published in 2016 its numbers on civilian drone casualties (Reid, 2016), but excluded casualties within "areas of active hostilities" or "battlefields" such as Afghanistan (Al Jazeera, 2016). It is still important to this thesis to mention this publication since the published numbers were considered highly "downplayed" (Al Jazeera, 2016). Over the years, the US seemed to have only recognised and apologised for drone strikes that were publicly known and were forced to recognise and apologise for by NGO efforts. Campaigns are still being held for "known US airstrikes" that have not yet been compensated through condolence payments (Speri, 2023).

6.2. Framing and the US public response

In 2009, it became clear that the civilian casualties in Afghanistan would not be beneficial in winning the War. General Stanley McChrystal, credited for killing the leader of Al-Qaeda in Iraq, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, called out, "What is it we don't understand? We're going to lose this fucking war if we don't stop killing civilians" (McChrystal, 2013, p. 310). The General framed this prognostically by proposing a solution to stop killing civilians. The US became more cautious about creating civilian casualties in Afghanistan, creating more airstrike regulations in 2008 and 2009 (Crawford, 2020, p.2). Obama had, among other transparency efforts, restricted the authority of the CIA and had made the

Pentagon responsible for much of the drone programme (Boussios, 2017, p. 21), which meant that the DoD was responsible for more drone strikes. As discussed, this was later loosened and reversed again under the Trump administration.

Obama defended his drone use during his time in office on numerous occasions. According to Jaffer (2016), Obama legitimised the drone programme as lawful. In April of 2016, Obama stated that in the past, there had been "legitimated criticism around the legal architecture around the use of drone strikes... it was not as precise as I should have been, and there is no doubt that civilians have been killed, that should not have been [killed]", but over the last years Obama's administration "have worked really hard to avoid and prevent those kinds of tragedies from taking place". Obama adds that in war times the US should always take responsibility for mistakes that have happened *"with the best of intentions"* (CNN, 2016). At this moment, Obama used a diagnostic frame by first acknowledging the problem of the legalities surrounding the drone programme. The president carried on with prognostic framing by stating how his administration has put effort into preventing civilian casualties (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 617).

In 2020, Obama was asked in a one-on-one interview to reflect on his presidency; one of the subjects was the drone programme. Obama said that his drone programme got critiqued and was often misunderstood; "the problem with the drone programme was not that it caused an inordinate amount of civilian casualties", adding that "the drones had less collateral damage ... than when you send in troops" (CBS, 2020)—framing drones prognostically as a precise and surgical solution, as he had done during his time in office. What Obama does recognise as a problem with drone war is "that it starts giving you the illusion that it is not war" (CBS, 2020). Obama here uses the diagnostic frame; according to him, the problem is how drones create a safety illusion for the drone operator instead of collateral damage (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 617). On top of that, he argues that sending troops causes more collateral damage; from the data, I argue that this meant less American collateral damage since drones certainly created Afghan collateral damage. He prognostically framed the drones as "morally justified" and a clean way of waging war (Mehran et al., 2020).

Trump's Afghanistan policy has shown to be a "risk-averse approach centred on airpower" and "security force assistance" (Waldman, 2019, p. 172). In Trump's "strategy in Afghanistan" speech, he claimed that "the worst terrorist attack in our history was planned and directed from Afghanistan" and that the Afghan government gave "shelter to terrorists" (Trump, 2017). Trump diagnostically framed that the enemies were the terrorists in Afghanistan.

After a US airstrike in Afghanistan in 2017, Trump stated: "We have the greatest military in the world, and they [the CIA] have done their job as usual" (…) "We have given them total authorization, and that is what they are doing. And frankly, that is why they have been so successful

lately" (Crawford, 2020, p. 4). As said, Trump authorised the CIA to control the drone programme. Trump is framing this airstrike as something that is happening because he gave the authorisation away, which has led, according to the president, to military success. Trump uses a prognostic frame since he states that the solution was fighting the enemy "other" (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 616).

6.3. Conclusion

This chapter was focussed on answering the sub question "What impact did the US drone programme have on casualties in Afghanistan?". The civilian casualties caused in Afghanistan were an unintended negative consequence, that has been kept secret for the US citizens, since the numbers on civilian casualties caused by drones are contested (UNAMA has a different number on the casualties than NGOs such as Airwars and the Bureau of Investigative Journalism). As Chamayou (2015, p. 141) argued, hitting the target is different than only hitting the target. It has been demonstrated that most drone targets were not intended. The civilian casualties caused by drones were often legitimised through diagnostic frames by the former US presidents. The drones were, according to Obama, lawful, precise, and causing less collateral damage. According to Trump, drone strikes led to military success, which is defined as fighting the "terrorist" other.

Chapter 7. Meaning given to the drone casualties

This chapter focuses on the unintended negative effects of the meaning given to the civilian casualties presented in Chapter 6. This unintended consequence is focused on the local level in Afghanistan. This section will answer the sub-question: "How were those civilian casualties given meaning by the local population, including the Taliban?". This element of Johnson's blowback theory (2000), "the unintended consequences" (p.8), according to Simpson are the (2014) "unexpected and negative effects". Johnson states that these unintended (and negative) effects "originally applied only to the unintended consequences for *Americans* of American policies, there is every reason to widen its meaning" (Johnson, 2000, p. 17). Therefore, I operationalise the unintended consequences locally. The unintended consequences on the local level and the unintended consequences for Americans are inherently interrelated. In the long term, negative consequences on the local level eventually lead to negative consequences for US citizens kept in the dark. Ultimately, we can see that after twenty years of war, the Taliban is again in power. The research presented in this chapter represents limited anecdotal evidence, but based on this, I am presenting how the local actors give the US drone use meaning.

7.1. Drone presence

The shift to remoteness after December 2014 changed the perception of the war in an unintended negative way towards the US. In the eyes of the Afghan people, the war changed in 2015; instead of state building, the US and NATO presence started to feel like an invasion. "There was a gradual shift in how the war was perceived; the sense of occupation started in 2015" (Interviewee D). During the years of ISAF and the heavy presence of boots, it was visible that the effort was a collaboration between international forces and the Afghan army (Interviewee B). Often, the Afghan military was at the front; the ANDSF had at its height 300,000 troops (The White House, 2021). This was important: "It created a feeling that at least our fellow Afghans'" efforts were happening in our country (Interviewee D).

When airpower became the preferred military presence in 2014, it felt like an invasion to the Afghan majority, especially in rural areas (Interviewee C). The presence of drones meant the US or NATO, since the Afghan army did not have drones (Interviewee D). During this shift, the respondents explain that the discourse changed. "In Afghanistan, especially in the villages, the drone presence was not labelled as international support or state building, but as invaders or as the infidels" (Interviewee D). To Interviewee A, who grew up in Kabul, it felt as if the sky was always under US control. During a Taliban speech in April 2018, they described the US-led effort as an "invasion of the Afghan-Muslim

homeland" (Shahid, 2022, p. 57). In this narrative, they argue that the airstrike was "unjustified" (Shahid, 2022, p. 57).

Additionally, framing the US as an "invader" of their "Muslim land", the Taliban is putting effort into generating a strong Islamic protection reaction (Borthakur & Kotokey, 2020, p. 827). This prognostic frame the Taliban uses draws the boundaries of the US as the invading enemy and them as the citizens of the Islamic country, creating a dominant identity (Jabri 1996, p.136). Ultimately, "movement actors attend to the interrelated problems of consensus and action mobilisation" (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 615).

The shift to remoteness created, as demonstrated in Chapter 6, a massive number of civilian casualties. This created grievances for the Afghans: "Drone strikes against the Taliban is one thing, but the drone strikes always targeted regular people" (Interviewee D). This was partly because drone strikes were often conducted without correct intelligence sources (Interviewee B). "As soon as the US knew the Taliban was somewhere, it was never clear how many Taliban was present, which created a lot of civilian casualties" (Interviewee D). After drone strikes, videos would often circulate of people bringing the bodies of their deceased family members to the local government to show them what the US and coalition forces had done: "I would see these videos daily" (Interviewee D). These drone strikes enlarged the gap between Afghan civilians, the US, and the Afghan government (Interviewee C). Mainly because the Taliban would visit the families who had lost a family member in the drone attacks; they provided the recognition and help that was lacking from the US (Interviewee D). This diagnostic frame narrative that the Taliban was the protector while the US, "the invaders" attacked with drones, provided the Taliban with the opportunities to gain loyalty (Interviewee D). This ultimately created growing support for the Taliban, which is an unintended negative consequence for the US. Benford and Snow (1992, p.136) argue that social movements find their roots in grievances; the Taliban is framing the grievances of the civilian casualties to resonate with the Afghans.

Interviewee D was in close contact with family and friends who lived in rural villages; they would tell him how unforgivable the drone strikes were because they would happen repeatedly. The feeling was, "If the technology is so massively great, how can you not differentiate between armed and unarmed people? Or civilian houses and holy places like the mosque?" (Interviewee D). This was not just a feeling but was the narrative surrounding the airstrikes preached in the villages and mosques by the Taliban (Interviewee D.). In contrast to Interviewees C and D, Interviewee A was living in Kabul. According to them, the news cycles in Kabul and the discourse never emphasised the civilian casualties, and it primarily focused on how NATO was winning the war. The civilian casualties were a side effect.

Consequently, the shift to remoteness had the unintended negative effect of being portrayed as invaders. According to the Afghan subjects, this was because the Afghan army did not have drones. Therefore, it created a feeling that this was not in collaboration with the Afghan forces but an invasion (Interviewees C and D). Thus, the meaning of the war changes substantially on the ground. According to Shahid (2022, p.57), the discourse on "invasion is used to describe and undermine the attack[s] by the US-led western coalition".

7.2. The Taliban as protector

The Taliban was a smart framing opponent; they framed the US diagnostically as invaders and, above all, infidels, who are killing their wives and children with drones (Interviewee D). Naming all the Afghan wives and children as part of "their" dominant identity shows a strong "us" versus "them" divide, according to Jabri (1996, p.4); othering is a core component in violent conflict. T. E. Johnson (2018, p.24) argues that the Taliban would create their framing based on shared "values held dear by most Afghans, and by Pashtuns in particular" to gain support. The diagnostic frame is used to create a dominant identity. According to Borthakur & Kotokey (2020, p. 827), the message that the Taliban was repeating is that the "infidels", which includes the US together with the coalition forces and the Afghan government, is set to change the "the tribal structure of the Pashtun society" who are highly Islamic. This aligns with Jabri's (1996, p.134) argument that the "discourse of origins" is at the core of conflict. With this notion, they target both the Pashtun and the Islam "causing a strong reaction in the Afghan south"; historically, it has been "very easy to arouse people in defence of their Muslim nation in the advent of an attack by so-called infidels" (Borthakur & Kotokey, 2020, p. 827). Jabri (1996, p.108) argues that when people refuse to participate in violent action, in this case with the Taliban (who are diagnostically framing their efforts as an "us Muslims" versus "them infidels"), they are seen as traitors to the community and in this case to their culture and religion.

When the Taliban framed the US as infidels at the Islamic funerals of a drone bombing, this could sometimes lead to success and support shifted from the Afghan government to the Taliban (Interviewee D). The Taliban would act as the "protector" of the Afghan people against the US invaders "who were bombing their country" (Interviewee D). As Jabri (1996, p.140) argues, "Collective identity is the medium through which the individual is related to collective violence"; this collective identity is what the Taliban was playing into with their narrative. Interviewee A explained: "People were so affected by the war in the rural areas, especially in the south, that some were joining the Taliban, I mean, of course! If they would not fight the "infidels" as the Taliban named the US, they believed they would have been killed by the drone strike anyway since the Taliban would hide in their facilities".

Shahid (2022) argues that "the cognitive domain of narratives transformed the practical domain of the battlefield" (p. 55). The Taliban received support through the religious meaning given to the drones and the civilian casualties it caused, fighting "against the infidels", "invaders" and "foreigners" (Shahid, 2022, p.5). As mentioned above, this framing tactic was, according to the Interviewees (A, C, and D), used especially after drone attacks. The drones created a feeling and a narrative of an invasion instead of an Afghan-led effort. Furthermore, the Taliban framed diagnostically that the "infidels were bombing their wives and children" (Interviewee D).

Accordingly, it is argued in this section that the interpretations and narratives focusing on the anti-Western perspective are the unintended and unexpected negative consequences, which ultimately could create Taliban recruits, as Boyle (2013), Hudson et al. (2012) and Waldman (2018) argue (although this investigation falls outside the scope of this research). This narrative step is significant because this meaning-making process ultimately could lead to practice, thus creating blowback towards the US.

7.3. Puppet regime

Afghan President Karzai (president from 2002 until 2014) repeatedly spoke out against the US drone programme. In 2011, Karzai gave his "last warning" to the US military after killing children in an airstrike (France 24, 2011). In 2013, the civilian casualties created by the US drone caused a political problem between the US and President Karzai, where the White House threatened to leave Afghanistan (Roberts et al., 2013). Karzai refused to sign a security agreement with the US until they formally apologised for a US drone strike that created civilian casualties, including a young child and two women (Graham-Harrison & Pilkington, 2013). The apology letter from President Obama was published, stating the US had "redoubled our efforts to ensure that Afghan homes are respected by our forces" and "make every effort to respect the sanctity and dignity of Afghans in their homes and their daily lives, just as we do for our citizens" (Graham-Harrison & Pilkington, 2013). In spite of the letter, Karzai refused to sign and pushed the agreement until his successor would take over the presidency (Graham-Harrison & Pilkington, 2013).

Boyle (2010) argued that President Karzai went against the Taliban narrative as being a puppet government by saying "no" to the US, especially to the US drone programme (p. 351). Karzai even "called for an end to all air strikes in the country, even though this would deprive the US of a key counterterrorism tool" (Boyle, 2010, p. 351). The Taliban diagnostically frames the cooperative president as a puppet, essentially framing him as a traitor "to their culture and religion" (Jabri, 1996, p. 108).

President Ghani (2014 until the fall of Kabul in 2021) had been more cooperative with the US in the effort against terrorism than his predecessor (Page & Williams, 2021, p. 295). However, In

September 2019, a day after a US drone strike killed more than 30 civilians, Ghani vowed publicly to protect civilians against these strikes (Reuters, 2019). It is a remarkable negative political consequence to the US that the coalition Afghan president, especially Ghani (who was often portrayed as a US-puppet by the Taliban), would speak out publicly against their drone programme and civilian casualties (Page & Williams, 2021, p. 295). This political pushback was already for some time coming. Faizi (2015) wrote that Ghani's administration must act against the use of US drones, creating many civilian casualties; the president had not spoken out yet in the last years while the civilian casualty number kept rising. Ghani never realised this vow to protect civilians from US drones (Reuters, 2019). This played well into the Taliban "puppet-president" narrative: "It is an illegitimate puppet regime, as Boyle warns" (Page & Williams, 2021, p. 295).

In the years of the demarcation (2015-2021), the US counterterrorist drone programme had a negative and unexpected effect in that President Ghani was not pushing back against the US drone strikes like his predecessor, President Karzai. This played into the Taliban's puppet-regime narrative and created a sentiment of illegitimacy (Page & Williams, 2021, p. 295). According to Interviewee C, President Ghani was portrayed in the villages as an "infidel supporter". Ghani created many enemies in the rural areas, especially in the villages: "That's why he fled the country" (Interviewee A). While still having other negative unexpected consequences in Kabul, when he promised to protect civilians against the US drones in 2019, it sparked new conversation again. "Of course, we knew civilians were dying; it is a war! It felt like a resolved political point of Karzai, but then the conversation was about civilian casualties again in Kabul" (Interviewee A).

7.4. Conclusion

It has been argued that the shift to remoteness, employing US drones, changed the perception and meaning of the war locally, going from an Afghan "boots on the ground"-led effort to an invader with drones. The Taliban repeated this infidel invader diagnostic frame because cooperation with the Afghan government was not as visible anymore, especially in the rural parts of Afghanistan where drone strikes were frequent. This was especially repeated during funeral ceremonies after drone strikes, which fostered anti-US sentiment. The Taliban would provide aid after strikes, framing the Taliban as the protector and the US as the infidel invader. These framing narratives were effective on the battlefield and spoke to Pashtuns and Islamic Afghans. Furthermore, there was Afghan governmental pushback against the US drone programme. First, Karzai was vocal against the US drone policies, demanding official policies, and later, Ghani spoke out, sparking new conversations in Kabul on the topic of civilian casualties. Nonetheless, Ghani was much less vocal than his predecessor, which

had the unintended and unexpected negative effect of playing into the puppet-government narrative of the Taliban.

Chapter 8. Discussion and Conclusion

This researched has engaged with the blowback theory by Johnson (2000) in combination with the framing theory by Jabri, and Benford and Snow, and to operationalise the concept of secrecy I have engaged with epistemic politics, as explained by Gould and Stel. The aim was to answer the main question: "How has the United States" use of drone strikes had an impact on blowback in Afghanistan between 2015 and 2021?". Through the chapters I have operationalised the elements of the blowback theory. First, "policy", which this research has considered to be the US drone programme in Afghanistan between 2015-2021. Second, "that has been kept secret"; in the considered drone programme, the CIA programme was classified, in some years the pentagon was more transparent, but considerable residual secrecy has been discussed. Third, "unintended and negative consequences". The unintended negative consequences of the US drone programme were divided into two main categories: (i) the civilian casualties caused by US drones and (ii) the meaning given to those civilian casualties. The second category has three main findings: (a) the shift to remoteness created a narrative of invasion, since drones are visibly not Afghan-army led; (b) the US was named and framed as infidels, particularly at funeral ceremonies after drone strikes in order to foster anti-Western sentiment; and (c) the Afghan political consequences, evident as President Ghani spoke out less against the US drone programme than has predecessor, as a result of which he was playing into the hand of the Taliban narrative. This research has presented the civilian casualties caused by the drone programme as crucial context to understand the damage of the (mainly classified) US operation.

Analysing these insights, I argue that the blowback the US drone programme has created are the narratives and meaning given to the airstrikes on the ground in Afghanistan. The linkage between the civilian casualties caused by the drone strikes and the framing of the US as infidel and invader seems to be strong. The findings have shown that the anti-Western narratives would be preached after drone strikes. Therefore, I argue that this anti-Western perspective is a form of blowback—the interpretation and the narratives are already the blowback. The blowback can, in some cases, lead to violent action and mobilisation. However, it can also remain in the form of anti-US perspective. This is still an "unintended unexpected negative consequence" and thus blowback. Johnson writes: "The most direct and obvious blowback often occurs when the victims fight back after a secret American bombing" (Johnson, 2000, p. 9), but adds that "it can also manifest itself domestically in ways that are often not evident" (p. 17). Based on the limited, anecdotal evidence presented in this research, I argue that the meaning given on the local level to the civilian casualties caused by US drones could be framed by the Taliban to mobilise support and potentially influence blowback. While I have not investigated this in sufficient depth to support a firm conclusion, there appears to be a compelling basis for undertaking further research.

In case this mobilisation happens, it could be recognised in new Taliban recruits (as Waldman (2018), Boyle (2013) and Hudson et al (2012) argue). Boyle (2013) partly suggests that drones can fuel anti-Western sentiment. The main argument shares this view with Boyle (2013), but I take it a step further by arguing that this anti-US sentiment is the blowback. This research has argued that the way these scholars operationalise the blowback theory is impaired because they skip the critical step of the meaning-making processes.

With this thesis I have offered a new guiding option for operationalising the blowback theory, without immediately "jumping to conclusions" and skipping the step as to "why" the Taliban was able to recruit more members. The main guideline is that blowback, as Johnson (2000) has suggested, can be manifested "in ways that are not always so evident" (p. 17). Increased Taliban recruitment is often perceived as dangerous blowback for the West, but a failure to engage sufficiently with the creation on the ground of an environment in which this can be successfully pursued risks missing the irreducible core of the "danger" that the blowback theory seeks to identify. If we seek to minimise blowback, this thesis submits that we must focus intently on understanding the framing and meaning-making process. Accordingly, further research on the civilian casualties caused by US drones and how they are given meaning on the local level is needed. In particular, we should consider how they have been framed by the Taliban to mobilise violent collective action. The extent of the anti-US sentiment should be established with a focus on the perspective of survivors of US drone strikes in Afghanistan. Without these insights, we should not expect to be able intelligently to inform a durable change in military and political behaviour capable of consistently and meaningfully reducing blowback.

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Appendices
Appendix 1: Topic list   56

Topic list used during the interviews:

- *What years were you in Afghanistan?*

- *What was your perspective on the US/NATO invasion in 2001/ before 2015*

- *Did you see a change in Afghanistan when the mission changed from ISAF (heavily boots on the ground) to RSM (more SFA, more drones, both for surveillance as attacks)*

- *How were the drones perceived by you, your peer group/family?*

- *How was the media reporting on the drones? Was it in the media a lot?*

- *Was civilian casualties (heavily) discussed in the media/ your surroundings*

- *What interpretations were given to the air attacks*

- *Did you recognize any blowback towards the West*

- *Was there blowback caused by air strikes according to you?*

- *Did attitude towards the West change?*

Appendix 2: Overview interviews

Overview of the conducted interviews for this research

Code	Profession	Nationality	Date
Interviewee A	Advocate for women's rights in Afghanistan Currently researching the Taliban take-over	Afghan	04-05-2023 16-05-2023 Two interviews, first one on Zoom and second one in person.
Interviewee B	Military Professor (National Security Affairs department), US Naval War College. Former Air Force pilot, deployed in Afghanistan	American	23-05-2023
Interviewee C	Former researcher at the Ministry Project in Kandahar, and professor in International Relations and Political Science at Mirwais Neeka University in Kandahar, Afghanistan	Afghan	02-06-2023
Interviewee D	Contributed to international missions, serving as a political advisor and training coordinator for the European Union Police Mission in Afghanistan (EUPOL) and as a cultural advisor and translator for ISAF	Afghan	04-06-2023