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Poll: US strikes unpopular in Pakistan tribal belt

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ISLAMABAD -- Most people in [Pakistan's](#) tribal regions strongly oppose U.S. missile strikes in their territory, with nearly half believing they kill mainly civilians, according to a rare opinion poll that may raise doubts about a key plank of the Obama administration's anti-terror strategy.

Despite their dislike of the United States, most surveyed also expressed resentment of the al-Qaida and Taliban fighters the missiles are targeting.

The poll's release coincides with a dramatic increase in drone-fired missile strikes in the border region near [Afghanistan](#) last month. Western officials have said the surge in attacks is aimed in part at disrupting a terror plot against European cities.

U.S. officials, who rarely acknowledge the covert CIA-run program, have in the past said it is a critical tool that has killed several top al-Qaida and Taliban commanders. But across Pakistan, concern is high for civilians who die during the strikes. The Pakistani government, while officially against the strikes, is believed to secretly provide intelligence for at least some of them.

The poll by the New America Foundation and Terror Free Tomorrow was described as "the first comprehensive public opinion survey covering sensitive political issues" in the tribal belt, a lawless stretch where Pakistan's central government has little influence. It was based on face-to-face interviews with 1,000 randomly chosen adults in 120 towns and other locations in all seven tribal districts.

The interviews were conducted from June 30 to July 20, before the massive flooding that affected millions in Pakistan. The Pakistani military is continuing operations against Islamist insurgents in parts of the tribal belt that have forced hundreds of thousands to flee the region for other parts of the country.

The results are relatively unsurprising, given past polls taken of Pakistanis elsewhere in the country and general anti-American sentiment and conspiracy theories rife in the media and among the population.

Some advocates of the drone strikes have suggested in the past that people in the region are not free to express their views because of the Taliban presence and actually support the strikes because they are accurate. The pollsters, however, said respondents were

forthcoming and often went beyond simple responses to discuss their perceptions on different issues.

Nearly nine of 10 people surveyed opposed the U.S. taking action against militants in the tribal belt.

The U.S. role in the tribal regions has become especially sensitive over the past week, with NATO helicopters alleged to have crossed into Pakistani territory on three occasions, killing three Pakistani soldiers Thursday. In apparent retaliation, Pakistan closed a major border crossing used by supply trucks heading to U.S. and Western forces in Afghanistan.

More than three-quarters of the tribal residents surveyed oppose the U.S. missile strikes, with nearly half thinking they kill mainly civilians. And 40 percent, a plurality, believe the U.S. is most responsible for the violence in their territories. Asked if suicide bombings against the U.S. military are justified, 59 percent said they often or sometimes are.

Opponents of the missile strikes often argue that they not only violate Pakistan's sovereignty, but also anger people and lead more to become militants.

Hostility toward the U.S. does not equate to love for the Islamist militants who have established strongholds in parts of the tribal regions. Some 77 percent said they oppose al-Qaida's presence in their areas, and more than two-thirds are unhappy with the Pakistani Taliban's presence.

The one group that received generally high marks was Pakistan's military, with 70 percent of those polled saying they supported its pursuit of Islamist militants in their region. Nearly 80 percent of tribal belt residents surveyed said they would support army rule of their region, whose semiautonomous status is considered by many to be unsustainable in the long run. The opposition to missile strikes falls by about half if the Pakistani army were to carry them out.

Pakistan's tribal regions are some of the most impoverished, undereducated areas in the world.

Tribal customs and councils have long governed life in the seven districts, and foreigners' access to the territory is severely restricted. The people are almost all ethnic Pashtuns and are deeply conservative Muslims. Women are largely kept out of public life, and only 20 percent of those surveyed said they were working full-time.

In fact, the survey found that tribal residents' most pressing concerns revolved around jobs, health care, infrastructure and education, not militancy and missile attacks. A majority said their opinion of the U.S. would improve if it gave tribal belt residents educational scholarships and visas to America, or gave more aid in the area of health.

A majority also said a U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan or a U.S.-brokered peace deal between Israelis and Palestinians would boost their opinions of America.

The poll's margin of error is 3 percentage points.

The poll was paid for by the U.S. Institute of Peace, an organization financed by Congress that tries to end international conflicts. Field work was conducted by the Community Appraisal and Motivation Program, an Islamabad-based private organization that tries to improve conditions in the tribal areas.

The New America Foundation is a nonprofit public policy institute based in Sacramento, California, that has a bipartisan board of directors. Terror Free Tomorrow is a nonprofit, bipartisan group based in Washington, D.C., that studies terrorism.