

# British public divided on merits of drone strikes, says new study

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Fifty-five per cent of the British public would support the UK Government assisting in a drone missile strike to kill a known terrorist overseas, but support drops substantially if innocent casualties are likely, according to a new study.

The findings come from a joint study from University of Surrey's Centre for [International Intervention](#) (cii) and the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), in collaboration with YouGov.

Polling data also established British public support for drone missile strikes rose significantly if an imminent terrorist attack against the UK could be stopped, with many agreeing that [drones](#) can help to reduce casualties compared to other weapons, but feared that drones could make military intervention too easy.

However, Britons were divided on whether drones strikes are ultimately leaving the West more safe by making it easier to target known terrorists, or less safe by turning public opinion against us in other countries.

The new findings feature in a joint cii/RUSI Whitehall report *Hitting the Target? How New Capabilities are Shaping International Intervention*, which addresses the debate surrounding 'drones'; how much is known or understood by the public about this new technology and the capability it provides.

The YouGov poll examines to what extent the British public support or oppose the UK Government assisting in a drone strike and whether this is affected by several independent variables, including the hypothetical context of imminent threat, the targeting of UK citizens, and the likelihood of varying [civilian casualties](#).

In each case respondents were first shown the following explanatory text: "It was recently reported that the UK Government might be passing information to US authorities to help them carry out missile strikes from [unmanned aircraft](#) called "drones" to kill known terrorists overseas in countries like Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia".

Overall support for the UK Government assisting in a drone strike against a known terrorist increased slightly to 60 per cent if the person being targeted was a UK citizen. Moreover, if it was guaranteed that no innocent civilians would be killed by a drone strike, support increased again to 67 per cent.

However, support for a drone strike dropped substantially to 43 per cent, with 41 per cent opposed, when it was suggested that 2-3 innocent civilians might be killed. Support for a drone strike dropped further still to 32 per cent if it was 'likely that 10-15 innocent civilians might be killed'; conversely opposition rose to 46 per cent.

When presented with a scenario that a terrorist attack against the UK was imminent and could be stopped by a drone missile strike against a known terrorist in Yemen, overall support remained notably less sensitive to casualty numbers. In this context support for a drone missile strike dropped from 74 per cent to 64 per cent among respondents overall when the scenario was a casualty-rate of 2-3 innocent civilians instead of none, and dropped further to 60 per cent when it included a casualty-rate of 10-15 innocent civilians. But in each case, overall support retained a strong majority.

On the broader question of whether drone missile strikes in countries like Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia are helping or hindering Western security, the British public is divided. 32 per cent of respondents said drone strikes had made the West safer overall by making it easier to target known terrorists; 31 per cent said the West was less safe and turning public opinion against us in countries where drones are used; 37 per cent selected neither of these options or didn't know.

Nevertheless, a 57 per cent majority agreed overall that drones help to reduce casualties 'by removing the need to send people on the ground'. A significant plurality (47 per cent) also agreed that drones help to reduce casualties 'because of their accuracy compared with other weapons'.

Dr Joel Faulkner Rogers, Academic Director of YouGov, whose research is published in *Hitting the Target?* said: "As public debate now seemingly plays catch-up with a decade of evolving policy on drones, public opinion on the subject has been variously portrayed and oversimplified on a scale between nonchalantly for and hysterically against."

"The British public are clearly divided on whether the current use of drones is ultimately doing more harm or good to Western security. But there's also a distinction between attitudes to the weapon and the way it's used, which go beyond binary moral judgements about 'drones-good' or 'drones bad'. The findings show notable public concern that drones could make foreign intervention too easy. But a majority of Brits also support the policy, at least in principle, of targeted drone strikes against known terrorists, with many who support a view that drones can help to reduce, as well as cause, casualties if military action is required."

Professor Sir Michael Aaronson, Director of cii, commented: "This research demonstrates that the British public has a reassuringly sophisticated understanding of the benefits and dangers of the precision

strike capabilities that drones provide. They are not soft on counter-terrorism, but they are uneasy about the wider foreign policy implications of the power these capabilities give Western governments."

"This report is an important contribution to the debate about drones, where there is often more heat than light. It is important that the public is properly informed about the issues if governments are to harness the power of technology in a socially responsible way."

**More information:** To view the YouGov analysis on British attitudes to drone warfare and targeted killing please visit

[www.rusi.org/downloads/assets/...ov\\_Drones\\_Survey.pdf](http://www.rusi.org/downloads/assets/...ov_Drones_Survey.pdf)

A complete embargoed copy of 'Hitting the Target? How New Capabilities are Shaping International Intervention, can be viewed at

[www.rusi.org/downloads/assets/...tting\\_the\\_Target.pdf](http://www.rusi.org/downloads/assets/...tting_the_Target.pdf)

Provided by University of Surrey

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