Bypassing the People: How Technology Decouples Effectiveness from Legitimacy in

Counterterrorism

Tyler Benjamin Gray

Georgia Tech

Why did al-Qaida in Waziristan invest heavily in local legitimacy while the United States forces operating in the same territory achieved effectiveness without it? This paradox seems to reveal a fundamental debate in security studies: Do armed actors require civilian cooperation to succeed? Civilian-centric scholars argue legitimacy is essential. Martha Crenshaw identifies "loss of popular support" as a critical strategic cost of terrorist violence (Crenshaw, M. (1990), p. 17). Moghadam and Wyss, however, demonstrate that nonstate sponsors prioritize proxies primarily as "political ancillaries" to enhance legitimacy rather than military capability (Moghadam, A., & Wyss, M. (2020), pp. 121 – 122). Yet Mir's study of United States drone warfare in Pakistan directly challenges this consensus, showing that states achieved sustained effectiveness through technology-driven intelligence gathering rather than civilian collaboration (Mir, A. (2018), p. 48). This essay examines this tension and argues that the debate reveals a fundamental asymmetry in that nonstate actors remain constrained by legitimacy requirements while technologically advanced states can bypass them entirely. This finding has troubling implications for both counterterrorism doctrine and civilian protection norms.

Crenshaw frames terrorism as strategic choice constrained by civilian attitudes. Terrorist organizations resort to violence because they "lack the potential to attract enough followers" through conventional mobilization, yet violence risks "loss of popular support" when it may "alienate a citizenry predisposed to loyalty to the government" (Crenshaw, M. (1990), pp. 11, 17). Even where "supporters exist but cannot reveal themselves" until regime change, groups must calculate effects on latent backing. Terrorism emerges from organizational weakness but requires some baseline support for survival (Crenshaw, M. (1990), pp. 13).

Moghadam and Wyss extend this logic specifically to nonstate sponsors employing proxies. They argue that unlike state sponsors who view proxies primarily as military instruments, nonstate sponsors use proxies principally as "political ancillaries" centered on "enhancing their quest for legitimacy," with military support remaining "secondary to the

proxy's value as a political asset" (Moghadam, A., & Wyss, M. (2020), pp. 121 – 122). This legitimacy imperative stems from exogenous constraints, that is to say that nonstate actors suffering from legitimacy deficits deliberately select proxies that appear "attentive to local needs and attuned to local norms" to broaden their political appeal (Moghadam, A., & Wyss, M. (2020), pp. 133 – 134). The pattern holds across ideological divides such as Islamist, secular, and hybrid actors. These actors prioritize proxies for political legitimation over battlefield effectiveness.

Three cases demonstrate this legitimacy-first logic. AQAP rebranded as "Sons of Hadramawt" and "deliberately blurred lines" between members and sympathizers to lower support thresholds (Moghadam, A., & Wyss, M. (2020), pp. 139 – 142). The YPG employed the Christian MFS to provide "a link between Kurds and Arabs" (Moghadam, A., & Wyss, M. (2020), pp. 145 – 147). Even militarily powerful Hezbollah created Saraya during its "al inftah" phase to appeal beyond its Shia constituency (Moghadam, A., & Wyss, M. (2020), pp. 148 – 151).

Mir directly challenges civilian-centric theories, arguing that "states can collect information by aligning their own capabilities with the L&S" rather than relying on civilian collaboration (Mir, A. (2018), p. 48). The Legibility and Speed-of-Exploitation System (L&S) comprises two independent dimensions. Legibility captures the state's depth of knowledge about population through technological surveillance such as communication interception, aerial monitoring, and database aggregation of civilian identities and behaviors. Speed measures how rapidly states exploit this intelligence through drones, flat command hierarchies, and streamlined targeting approval (Mir, A. (2018), pp. 50 – 54). High L&S enables states to identify and strike targets through purely technical capabilities, rendering civilian cooperation strategically unnecessary. This capability-centric framework explicitly rejects the premise that counterterrorism effectiveness requires winning the hearts and minds of the people.

The United States campaign in Waziristan demonstrates this logic empirically. During 2004 – 2007, low L&S yielded campaign ineffectiveness, both al-Qaida and the Taliban expanded operationally, established new bases and recruited extensively. After 2008, technological investments and ISI cooperation produced high L&S, systematically degrading both organizations despite unchanged civilian attitudes. Critically, Mir found "only limited support" for the civilian-informant thesis. Instead, the "CIA depended primarily on technology and cash incentives to members of armed groups" (Mir, A. (2018), p. 80). Civilian-centric theories predict that casualties fuel recruitment, yet "multiple interviewees from al-Qaida and the Pakistan Taliban denied a surge in recruitment in response to drone strikes" (Mir, A. (2018), pp. 80 - 81). The campaign proved effective despite remaining tremendously unpopular among Pakistani civilians.

The Waziristan case exposes a theoretical contradiction. Moghadam and Wyss document AQAP's legitimacy investments to compensate for weakness, yet Mir shows the U.S. degraded al-Qaida without local legitimacy. Three resolutions emerge: First, asymmetry rather than contradiction where nonstate actors need legitimacy due to resource deficits while technologically advanced states bypass this requirement entirely. Second, Mir may be incomplete in that ISI cooperation provided hidden local buy-in. Last, temporal mismatch. Legitimacy's importance depends on the opponent's capability level rather than being universally required. Al-Qaida's local support proved valuable against low-capability United States operations but became insufficient once high L&S technology overwhelmed these advantages.

Technology enables well-resourced states to decouple effectiveness from legitimacy. This is a capability asymmetry exempting them from constraints binding nonstate actors. As Mir notes, civilian protection becomes a normative obligation rather than a strategic necessity (Mir, A. (2018), p. 83).

References

Crenshaw, M. (1990). The logic of terrorism: Terrorist behavior as a product of strategic choice.

In W. Reich (Ed.), *Origins of terrorism* (pp. 7 – 24). Woodrow Wilson Center Press.

Mir, A. (2018). What explains counterterrorism effectiveness? Evidence from the U.S. drone war

in Pakistan. *International Security, 43*(2), 45 – 83.

Moghadam, A., & Wyss, M. (2020). The political power of proxies: Why nonstate actors use

local surrogates. *International Security, 44*(4), 119 – 157.