

1800 K Street, NW  
Suite 400  
Washington, DC 20006

**Phone:** 1.202.775.3270

**Fax:** 1.202.775.3199

**Email:**  
acordesman@gmail.com

**Web:**

[www.csis.org/burke/reports](http://www.csis.org/burke/reports)



# The U.S. Air War in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan

**Anthony H. Cordesman and MARRISA ALLISON**  
Arleigh A. Burke Chair in Strategy

**CSIS**

CENTER FOR STRATEGIC &  
INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

Burke Chair  
in Strategy

*Revised October 14,  
2010*

[www.csis.org](http://www.csis.org) |

## Putting the Air War in Pakistan in Perspective

**Anthony H. Cordesman**

It is scarcely a secret that the US is fighting an air war in Pakistan at at least four different levels. It is using unmanned combat aerial vehicles (UCAVs) to support US forces in “hot pursuit” in the border area. It is using them to attack Taliban and other insurgent forces near the border to limit their capability to operate in Afghanistan. It is striking at insurgent and terrorist leaders and training camps inside the tribal areas in Waziristan, and it sometimes support Pakistani forces in strikes against the Pakistani Taliban. The New York Times, Washington Post, Wired, and the Long War Journal have all published articles on the details of these supposedly secret operations.

What has been far less clear, however, is the context. Some reporting makes this look like a massive bombing campaign, and one producing large numbers of unnecessary civilian casualties. Other reporting somehow makes it seem illegitimate or talks about a Pashtun honor code as if US forces can only fight insurgents face to face with their weapons on their terms.

One has to be very careful about unclassified statistics, but the Long War Journal reports that the number of strikes against cadres in Pakistan is very limited. It reports only one strike a year in 2004 and 2005, three in 2006, five in 2007, 35 in 2008, 55 in 2009, and 77 in the first nine months of 2010. This rise in strike numbers is a kind “surge,” but it adds up to all of 175 strikes over the entire war, and these strikes (65%) have been concentrated in North Waziristan where the Pakistani army has been unwilling or unable to act, and almost all of the other 35% have been in areas in South Waziristan where the Pakistani Army and Air Force cannot bring anything like the some intelligence, targeting, and precision strike assets to bear.

There is certainly a steady rise in strikes, but talking about it as “intense combat” is absurd. Wired says USAF reports it flew a peak of 19,500 close air support sorties in the Iraq War in 2007, and has flown 4,620 so far in 2010. Wired reports that the USAF reports it flew an average of over 2,000 a month in Afghanistan in 2009, and over 2,500 a month in 2010. The total number of UCAV strikes in Pakistan over the entire war is a fraction of the air strikes per month in Afghanistan and Iraq and a tiny number by the standards of any previous air war.

It is also important to stress that UCAVs are simply the tip of the spear. The UCAV strikes against the insurgent and terrorist networks are the result of one of the most massive and sophisticated targeting efforts in history. They are targeted as a result of the use of

virtually every intelligence asset the US has from satellites to manned aircraft, to human intelligence, and the use of unarmed unmanned combat vehicles. They are subject to careful review to minimize civilian losses, and they still manage to be extremely effective. If one looks at the estimates in the Long War Journal, the 77 UCAV sorties flown through September in 2010 killed 18 senior insurgent leaders, including nine with at least some links to Al Qa'ida.

As for casualties that are inflicted, one only has media reports to draw upon, but there are several things to consider. We have no alternative way to fight and all of the other options would be far worse even if they were available. The US can sometimes send in small Special Forces elements and specially trained local fighters, but only in very small operations near the border. Moreover, Special Forces are far safer – and inflict far fewer civilian casualties – when they can use UCAV sorties than in direct combat.

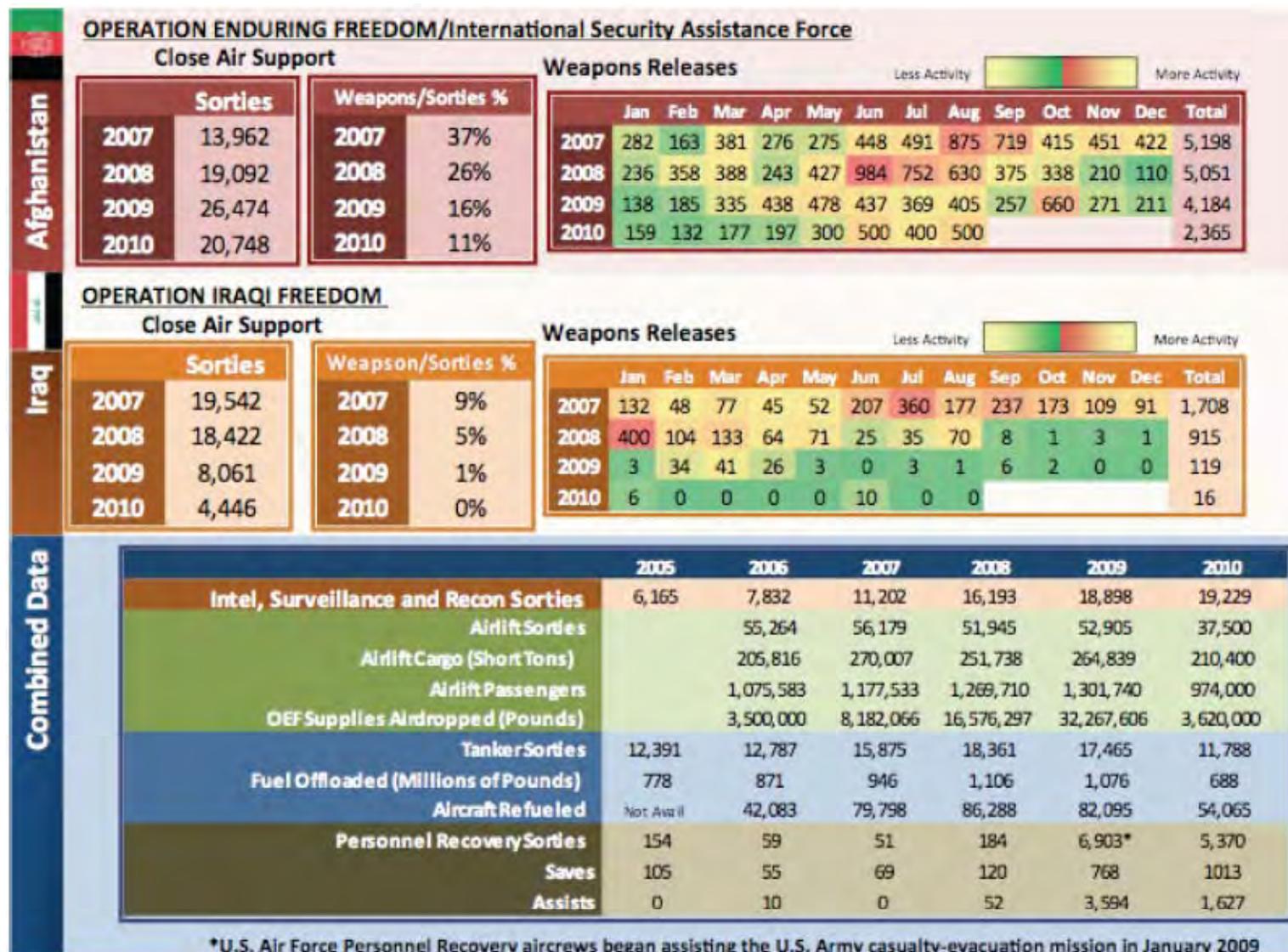
Moreover, any land operation that crosses the border and becomes public, and even the most limited helicopter attacks, become a political crisis. Flying manned US fighter aircraft into Pakistan could push Pakistan into shutting down all of its cooperation, and would inevitably inflict much higher casualties. High speed jet fighters can't linger over a target for hours to try to verify a target, and do as much as possible to strike at a time that ensures civilian casualties are kept to a minimum. Even if Pakistani land forces did take over the job, we have already seen in Swat and South Waziristan that they would have to fight their way in and the end result would be far more Pakistani casualties – and at least ten times more civilians killed and thousands or ten of thousands displaced.

In contrast, reporting in Wired indicates that all of the UCAV strikes made between 2006 and the present have killed a total of 1,490 insurgents and 104 civilians. Improvements in the rules of engagement has actually cut civilian casualties: The 53 strikes in 2009 killed 463 insurgents and 43 civilians. The 77 strikes in 2010 killed an estimated 546 insurgents and 10 civilians, which is 0.12 civilians per sortie versus 0.8 civilians per sortie in 2009. If these number are even roughly accurate, no other form of modern war has come close to being this lethal against the enemy and this humane in terms of civilian casualties.

War remains horrible and still kills the innocent as well as the enemy. *But*, we need to be realistic. Pakistan is at best a tenuous and divided ally. Pakistan was unwilling to attack Afghan Taliban targets and conduct a major campaign against Al Qa'ida before the flood, elements of the ISI remain tied to the Taliban and Al Qa'ida; and its civilian government has far too many elements that are corrupt, incompetent, and unwilling to act. Fighting a war in Afghanistan that gives the enemy a sanctuary in Pakistan, and Al Qa'ida immunity in Pakistan, has little point. More bluntly, if Pakistan cannot provide at least enough cooperation to passively allow such strikes, it is not an ally, it is a major strategic liability.

Source: This analysis appeared on the web site of the National Interest on October 4, 2010.

# US Airpower Statistics in Afghanistan and Iraq: 2007-2010



Source: USAFCENT Public Affairs Directorate as referenced in Noah Shachtman, U.S. Air War Soars in 'Post-Combat' Iraq, Danger Room, Wired, September 20, 2010, <http://www.wired.com/dangerroom/2010/09/u-s-air-war-soars-in-post-combat-iraq/>

## US Air Sorties in Iraq: 2005-2010

<b>Operation Iraqi Freedom</b>	<b>2005</b>	<b>2006</b>	<b>2007</b>	<b>2008</b>	<b>2009</b>	<b>2010</b>
CAS	16870	15630	19500	18380	8800	4620
ISR	4380	5330	7360	10900	10040	6200
Weapons	350	180	1650	880	90	10
Airlift	54680	54450	38060	33400	27930	17910
PAX	854300	1066000	930000	965000	844000	470000
Cargo (sTons)	132000	201500	216000	113300	103600	52700
Fuel offloaded (pounds)	130650	270560	464460	428860	196990	83670
Receivers	11150	25460	46820	46790	23690	11480

Noah Shachtman, U.S. Air War Soars in 'Post-Combat' Iraq, Danger Room, Wired, September 20, 2010, <http://www.wired.com/dangerroom/2010/09/u-s-air-war-soars-in-post-combat-iraq/>

# US Air Operations in Afghanistan: 2007-2010

## OPERATION ENDURING FREEDOM/International Security Assistance Force

### Close Air Support

	Sorties
2007	13,962
2008	19,092
2009	26,474
2010	23,748

### Weapons Releases

Less Activity More Activity

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Total
2007	282	163	381	276	275	448	491	875	719	415	451	422	5,198
2008	236	358	388	243	427	984	752	630	375	338	210	110	5,051
2009	138	185	335	438	478	437	369	405	257	660	271	211	4,184
2010	159	132	177	197	300	500	400	500	700				3,065

	Weapons/Sorties %
2007	37%
2008	26%
2009	16%
2010	12%

### ISR - OEF

Aug- end OIF	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	YTD
19,229	2,100				21,300

Combined Data

	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
Intel, Surveillance and Recon Sorties*	6,165	7,832	11,202	16,193	18,898	19,229
Airlift Sorties		55,264	56,179	51,945	52,905	41,000
Airlift Cargo (Short Tons)		205,816	270,007	251,738	264,839	228,200
Airlift Passengers		1,075,583	1,177,533	1,269,710	1,301,740	1,076,000
OEF Supplies Airdropped (Pounds)		3,500,000	8,182,066	16,576,297	32,267,606	40,200,000
Tanker Sorties	12,391	12,787	15,875	18,361	17,465	13,388
Fuel Offloaded (Millions of Pounds)	778	871	946	1,106	1,076	784
Aircraft Refueled	Not Avail	42,083	79,798	86,288	82,095	61,665
Personnel Recovery Sorties	154	59	51	184	6,903*	6,864
Saves	105	55	69	120	768	1,418
Assists	0	10	0	52	3,594	2,110

\*U.S. Air Force Personnel Recovery aircrews began assisting the U.S. Army casualty-evacuation mission in January 2009

Combined data includes OND and OEF

POC: AFCENT/AFFOR (CAOC) Public Affairs – DSN 318-436-1624

# US Air Sorties in Afghanistan: 2009

CAS	January	February	March	April	May	June	July	August	September	October	November	December
Operation Enduring Freedom/International Security Assistance Force Close Air Support	1,790	1,905	2,236	2,132	2,196	2,100	2,300	2,500	2,400	2,400	2,200	2,200
Operation Iraqi Freedom Close Air Support	1,272	915	782	767	725	571	536	740	649	662	629	172

Weapons Releases	January	February	March	April	May	June	July	August	September	October	November	December
OIF	138	185	335	438	478	417	369	400	250	700	300	200
OIF	3	34	41	26	3	0	3	1	6	2	0	0

Drill Down	January	February	March	April	May	June	July	August	September	October	November	December
OEF ISR	360	408	477	490	603	577	730	900	900	900	800	800
OIF ISR	836	733	695	764	792	727	735	900	900	900	800	800
Airlift Sorties OEF	1,200	1,200	1,500	1,700	1,900	1,700	1,800	1,800	1,700	2,100	2,000	2,300
Airlift Sorties OIF	2,800	1,600	1,600	1,600	1,500	1,500	1,500	1,500	1,500	1,500	1,600	1,600
Airlift Cargo (Short Tons) OEF	9,700	9,000	10,800	11,200	13,100	11,700	11,700	13,400	11,400	14,000	13,900	17,800
Airlift Cargo (Short Tons) OIF	10,900	9,100	9,400	9,400	8,500	7,900	7,100	800	7,300	6,500	8,300	6,800
Airlift Passengers OEF	26,000	24,000	31,000	29,000	36,000	32,000	34,000	30,000	33,000	48,000	46,000	43,000
Airlift Passengers OIF	82,000	72,000	75,000	62,000	78,000	58,000	68,000	78,000	77,000	54,000	70,000	70,000
OEF Supplies Airdropped (Pounds)	1,000,000	800,000	1,200,000	1,400,000	1,400,000	2,600,000	2,600,000	3,600,000	3,600,000	2,800,000	2,600,000	3,800,000
Tanker Sorties	1,400	1,301	1,425	1,272	1,547	1,501	1,572	1,700	1,700	1,500	1,400	1,200
Fuel Offloaded (Millions of Pounds)	96	86	91	85	91	84	86	93	97	97	92	81
Aircraft Refueled	7,714	6,972	7,057	6,448	6,714	6,119	6,346	7,300	7,300	7,300	7,000	6,000

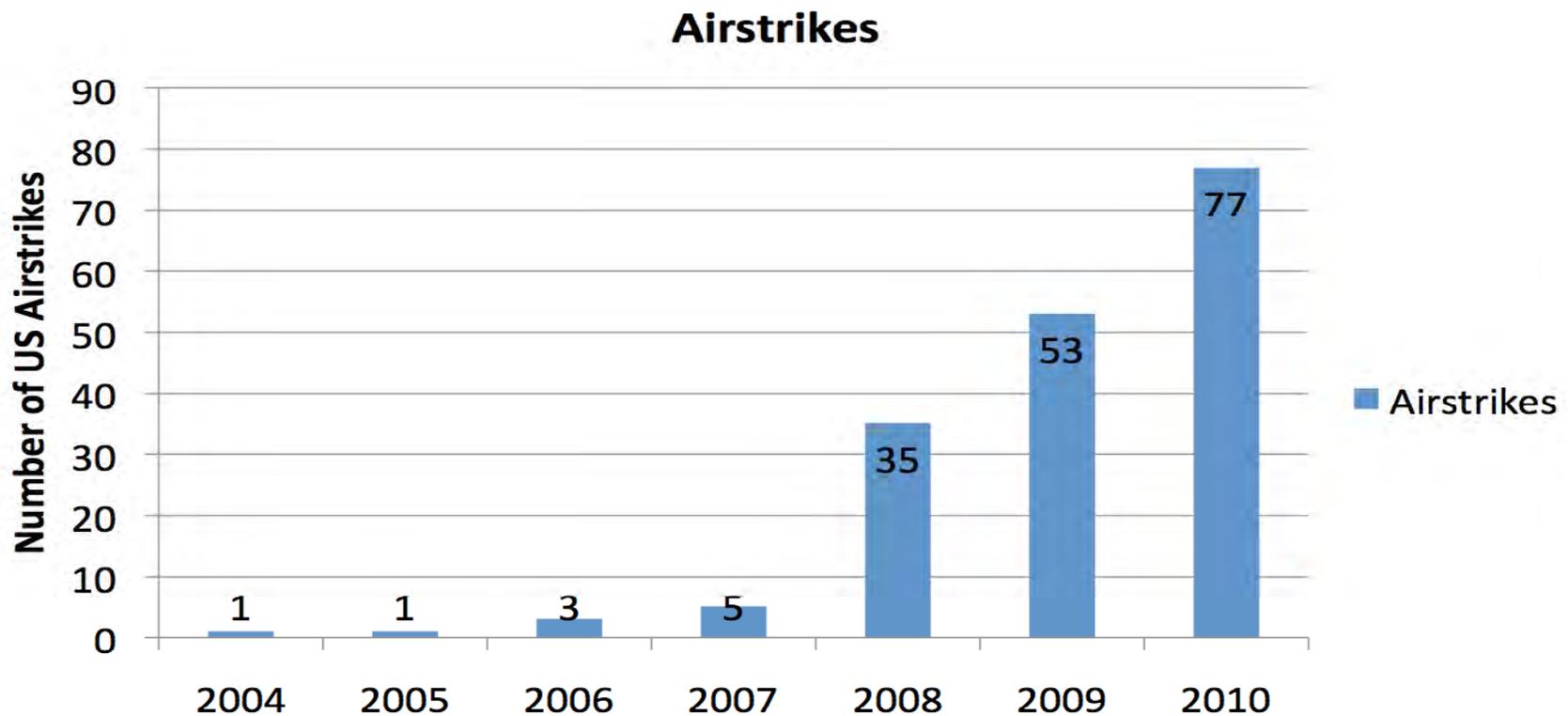
Noah Shachtman, U.S. Escalates Air War Over Afghanistan, Wired, September 20, 2010, <http://www.wired.com/dangerroom/2010/09/u-s-air-war-soars-in-post-combat-iraq/>

# US Air Sorties in Afghanistan: 2010

CAS	January	February	March	April	May	June	July	August	September	October	November	December
Operation Enduring Freedom/International Security Assistance Force Close Air Support	2,400	2,000	2,600	2,450	2,600	2,600	2,900					
Operation Iraqi Freedom Close Air Support	500	500	500	600	500	500	600					
Weapons Releases	January	February	March	April	May	June	July	August	September	October	November	December
DEF	159	132	177	197	300	500	400					
OIF	6	0	0	0	0	0	0					
Drill Down	January	February	March	April	May	June	July	August	September	October	November	December
DEF ISR	900	1,000	1,350	1,350	1,600	1,600	1,900					
OIF ISR	800	800	900	800	800	750	700					
Airlift Sorties DEF	1,900	1,800	2,000	2,900	2,900	2,900	2,900					
Airlift Sorties OIF	1,500	1,900	2,500	1,500	1,400	14,000	1,500					
Airlift Cargo (Short Tons) DEF	20,200	20,600	23,300	22,400	18,800	17,300	18,000					
Airlift Cargo (Short Tons) OIF	6,200	6,600	8,600	7,600	6,200	5,300	4,400					
Airlift Passengers DEF	46,000	49,000	62,000	56,000	68,000	55,000	62,000					
Airlift Passengers OIF	72,000	53,000	61,000	62,000	57,000	55,000	64,000					
DEF Supplies Airdropped (Pounds)	3,400,000	3,000,000	3,200,000	4,200,000	4,000,000	6,000,000	6,400,000					
Tanker Sorties	1,350	1,200	1,400	1,600	1,500	1,500	1,700					
Fuel Offloaded (Millions of Pounds)	85	67	79	86	97	87	94					
Aircraft Refueled	6,500	5,100	6,700	6,100	7,290	6,300	7,300					

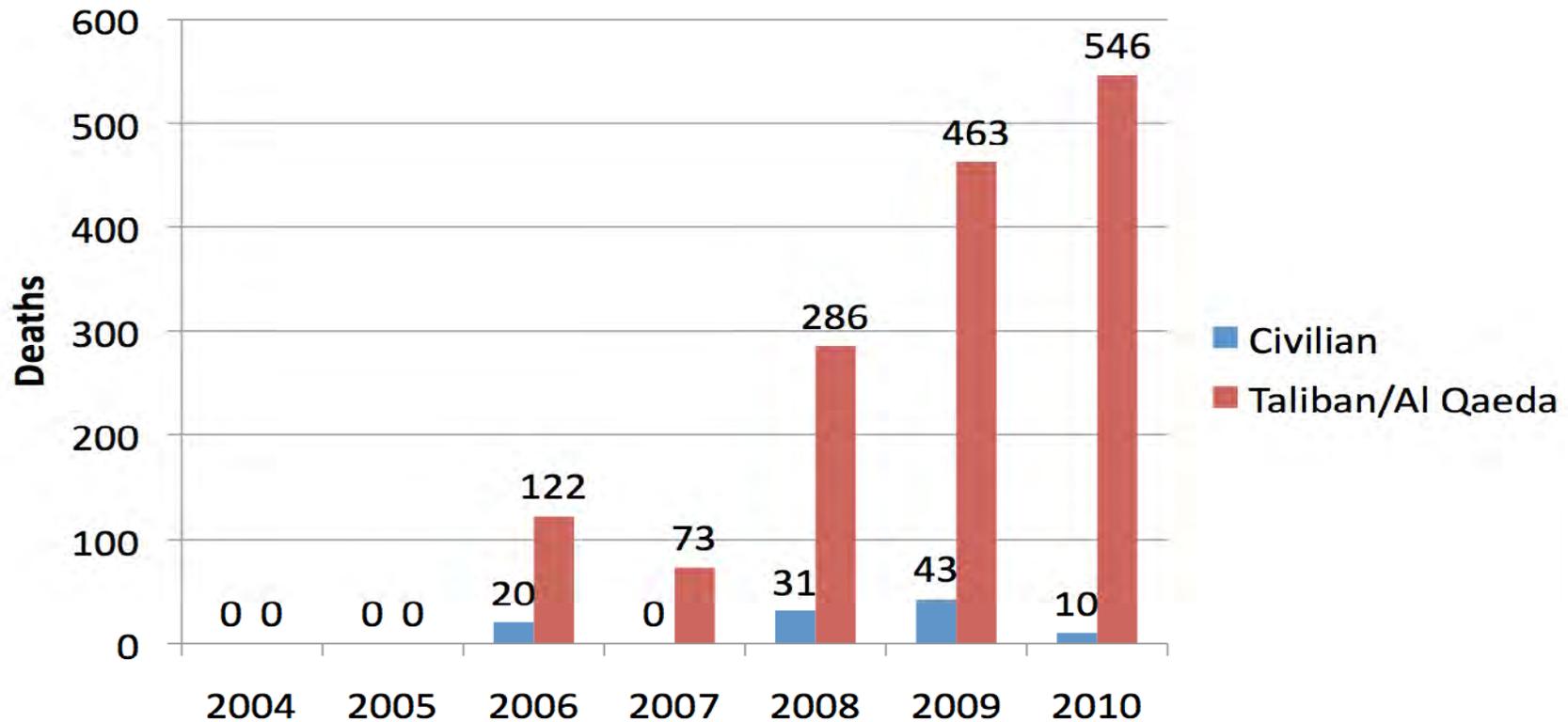
Noah Shachtman, U.S. Escalates Air War Over Afghanistan, Wired, September 20, 2010, <http://www.wired.com/dangerroom/2010/09/u-s-air-war-soars-in-post-combat-iraq/>

## Number of US Airstrikes in Pakistan 2004-2010



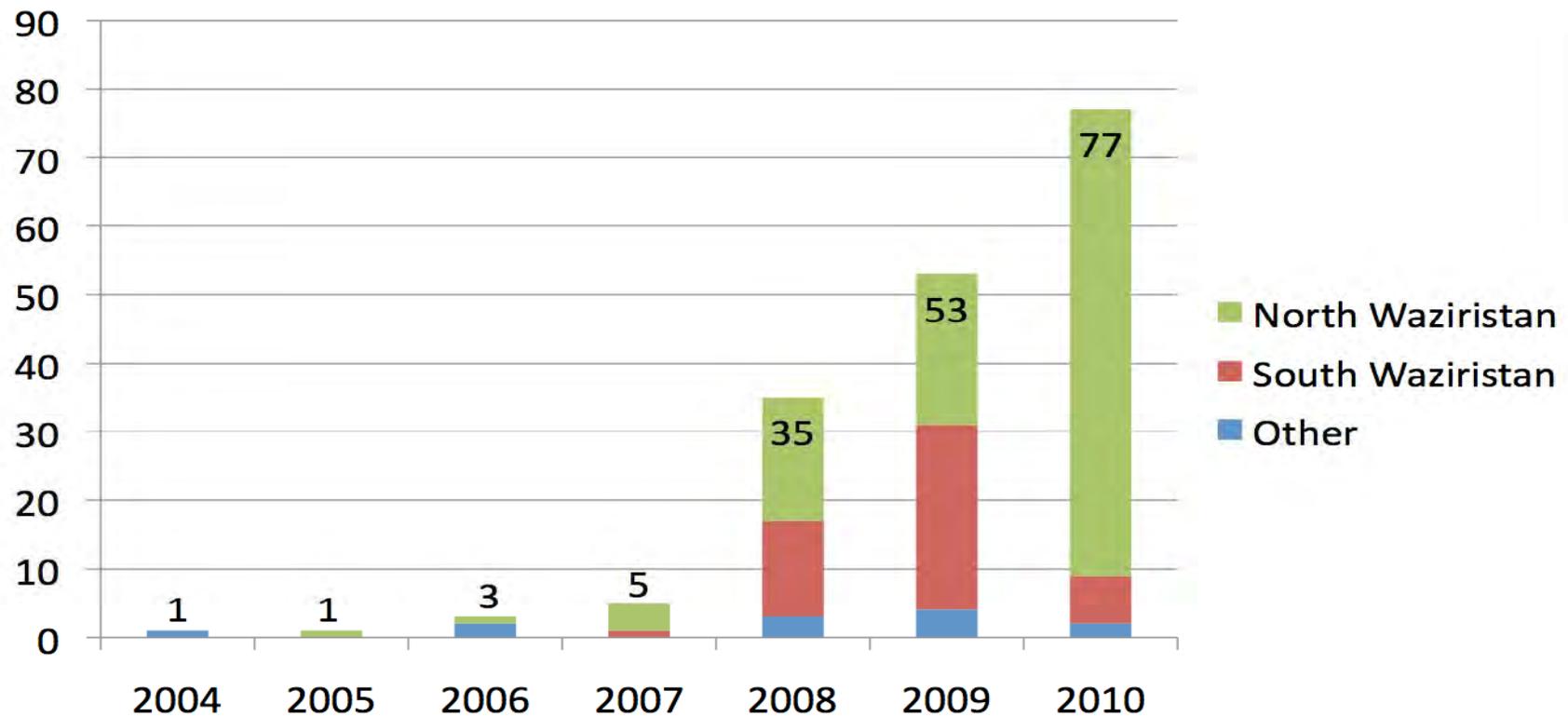
*The Long War Journal*, "Charting Data for US Airstrikes." Updated October 2, 2010. <http://www.longwarjournal.org/pakistan-strikes.php>

# Civilian v. Taliban/Al Qaeda Deaths in US Airstrikes 2004-2010

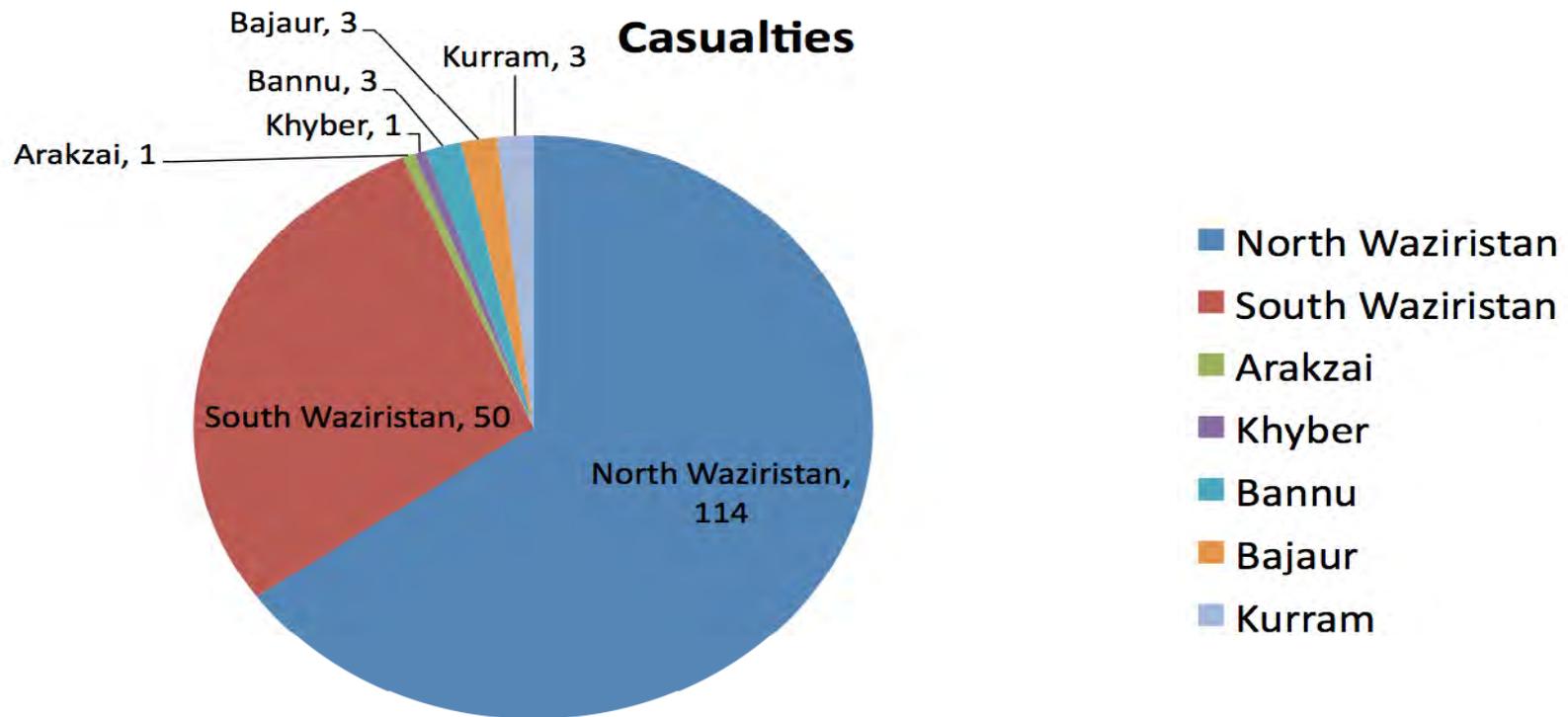


The Long War Journal, "Charting Data for US Airstrikes." Updated October 2, 2010. <http://www.longwarjournal.org/pakistan-strikes.php>

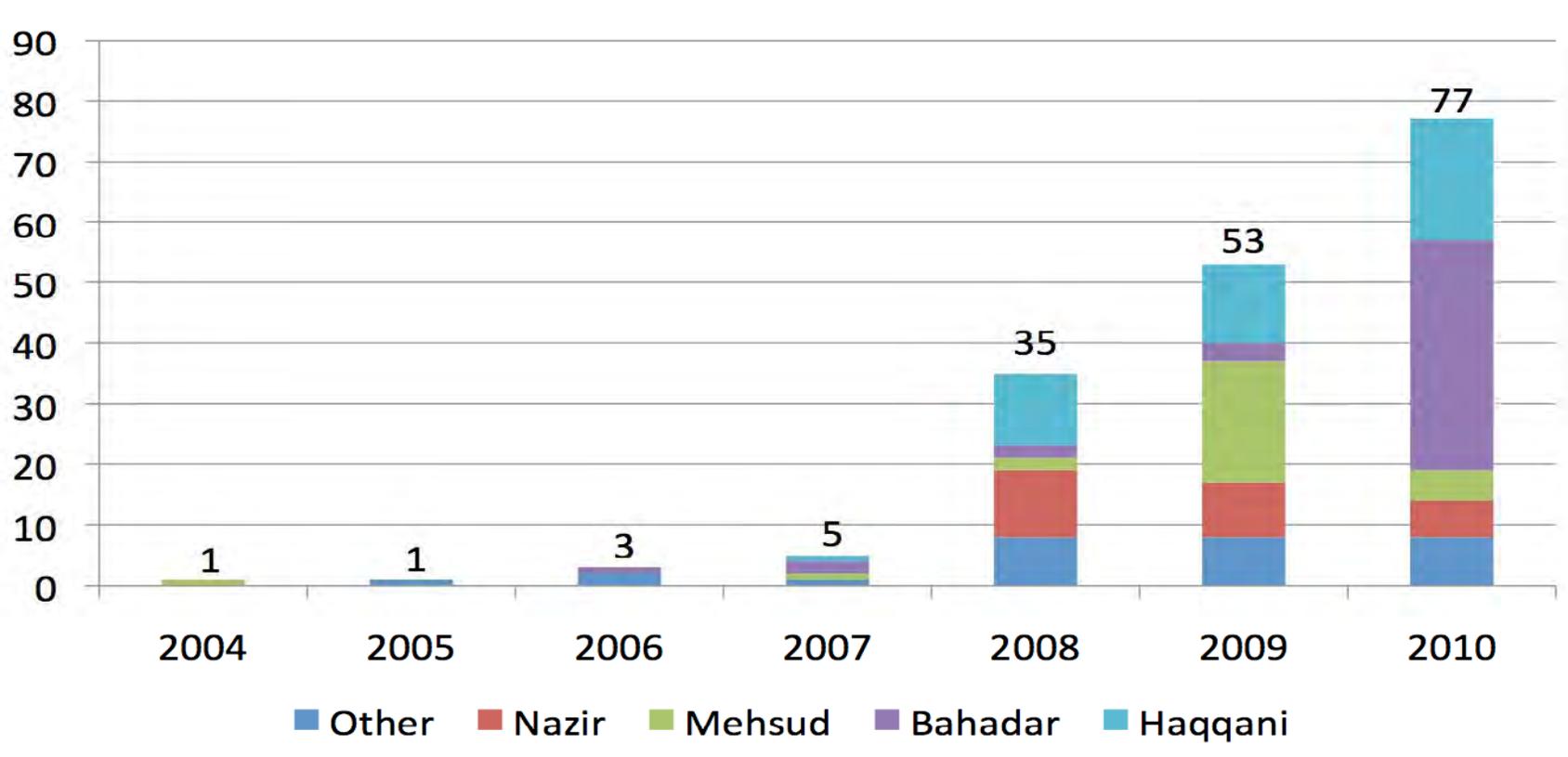
## Number of US Airstrikes In Pakistan by District



## Number of US Airstrikes in Key Districts of Northwest Pakistan

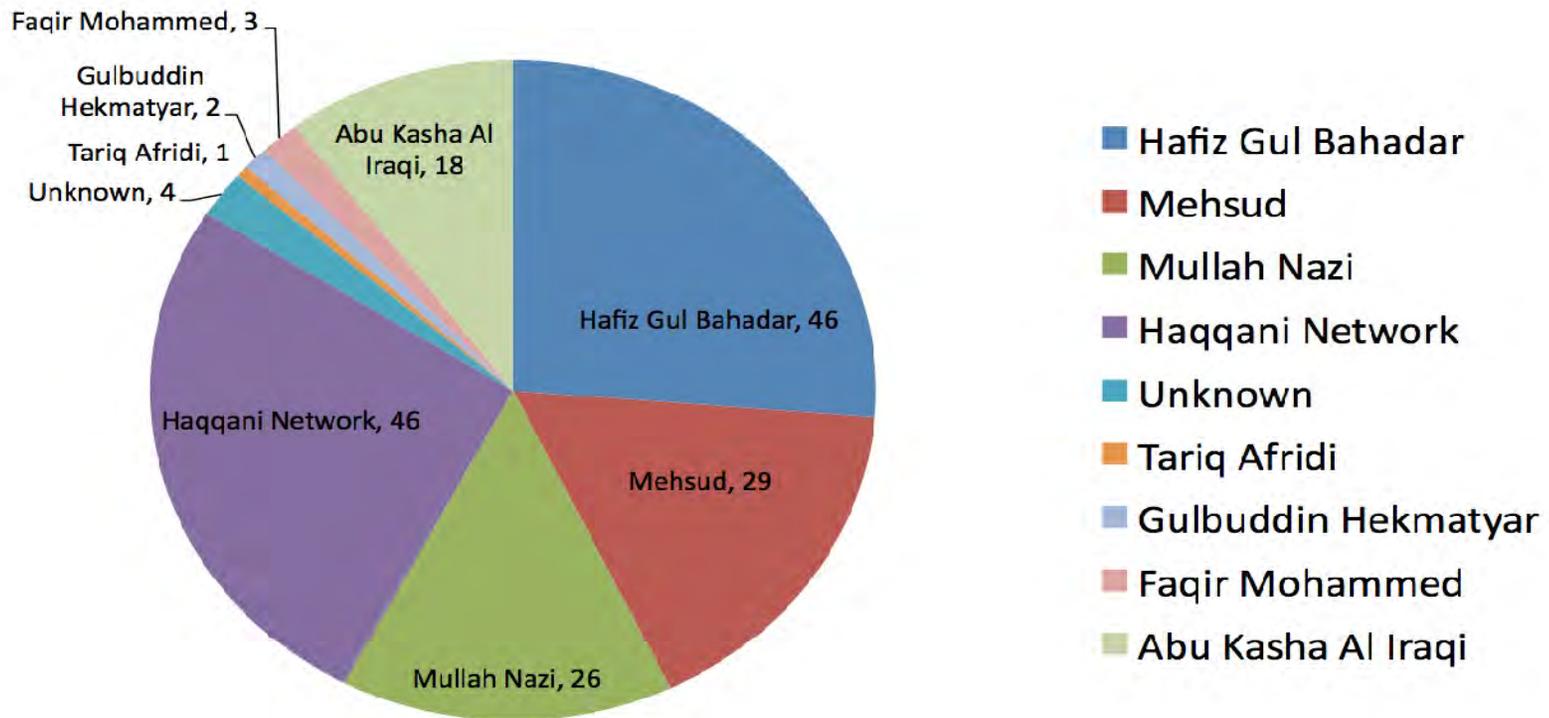


## Number of US Airstrikes in Territories of Taliban/ Al Qaeda Factions in Pakistan



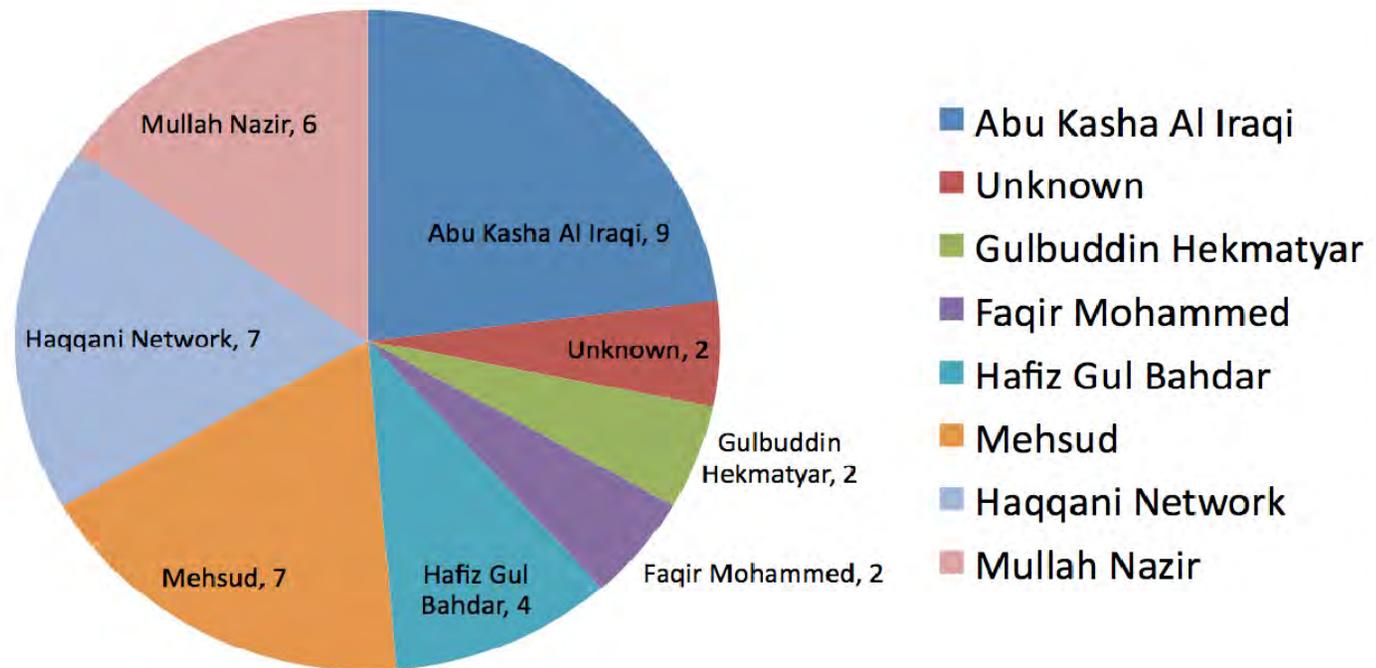
*The Long War Journal*, "Charting Data for US Airstrikes." Updated October 2, 2010. <http://www.longwarjournal.org/pakistan-strikes.php>

## Number of US Airstrikes in Territories of Various Taliban/Al-Qaeda Factions in Pakistan



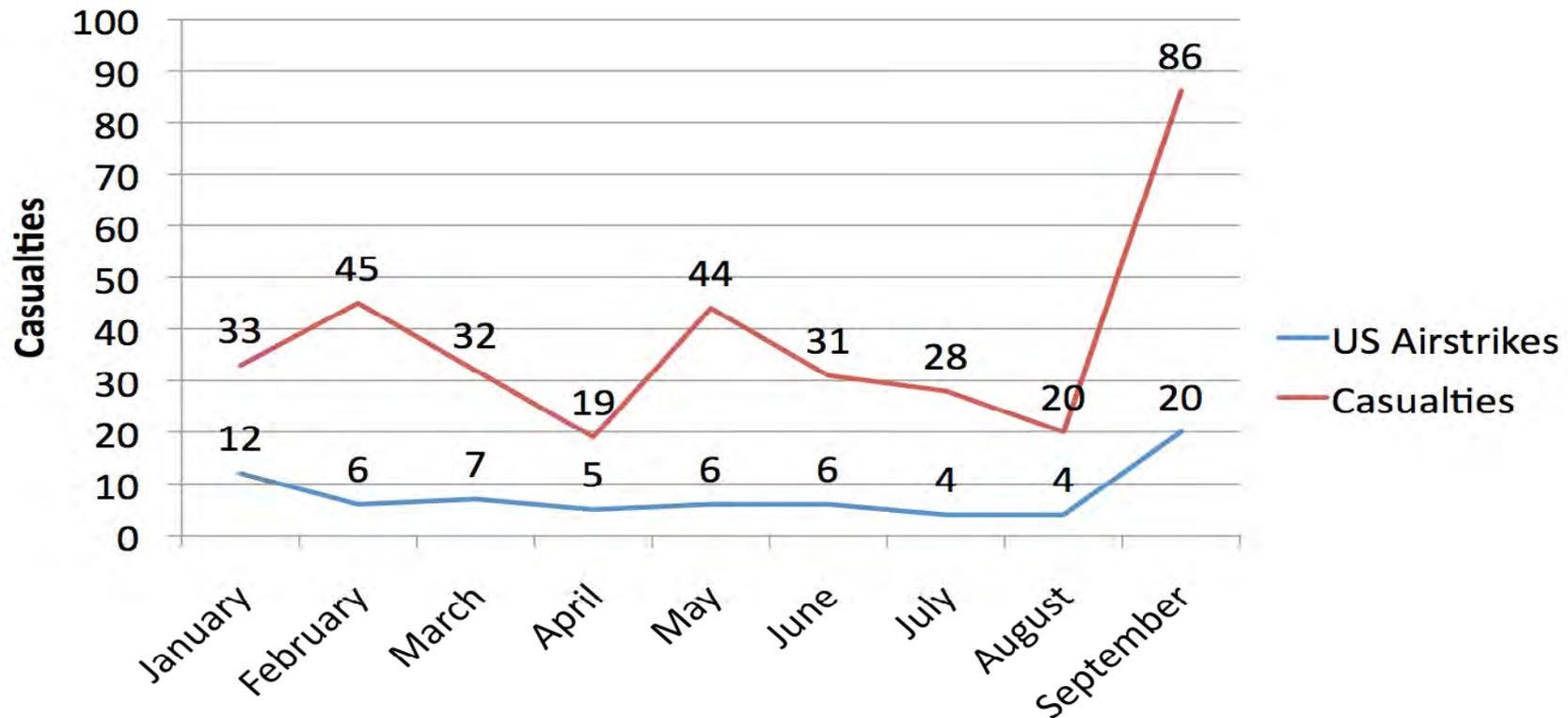
*The Long War Journal*, "Charting Data for US Airstrikes." Updated October 2, 2010. <http://www.longwarjournal.org/pakistan-strikes.php>

## Number of Taliban/Al-Qaeda leaders killed in Territories of Various Taliban/AQ Factions in Pakistan



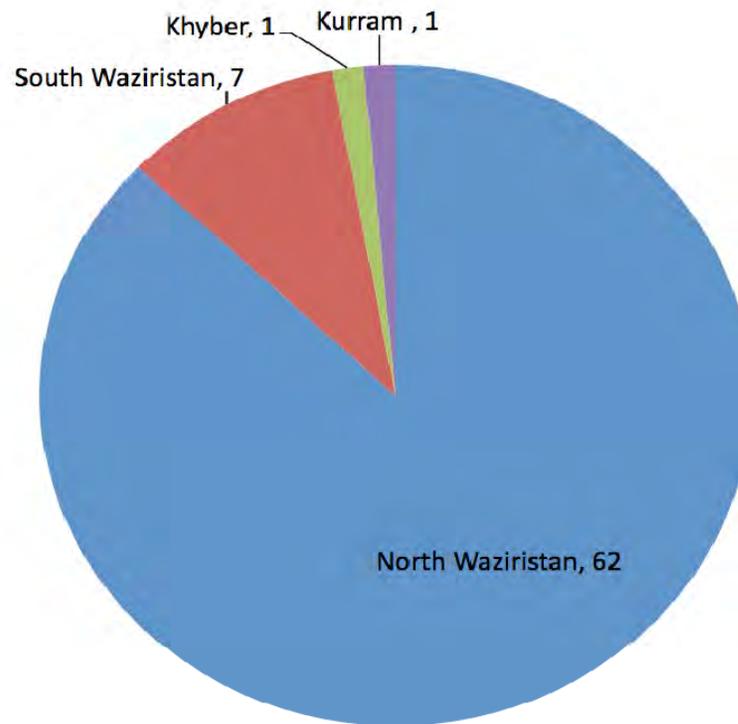
*The Long War Journal*, "Charting Data for US Airstrikes." Updated October 2, 2010. <http://www.longwarjournal.org/pakistan-strikes.php>

# Casualties in US Airstrikes by District, 2010



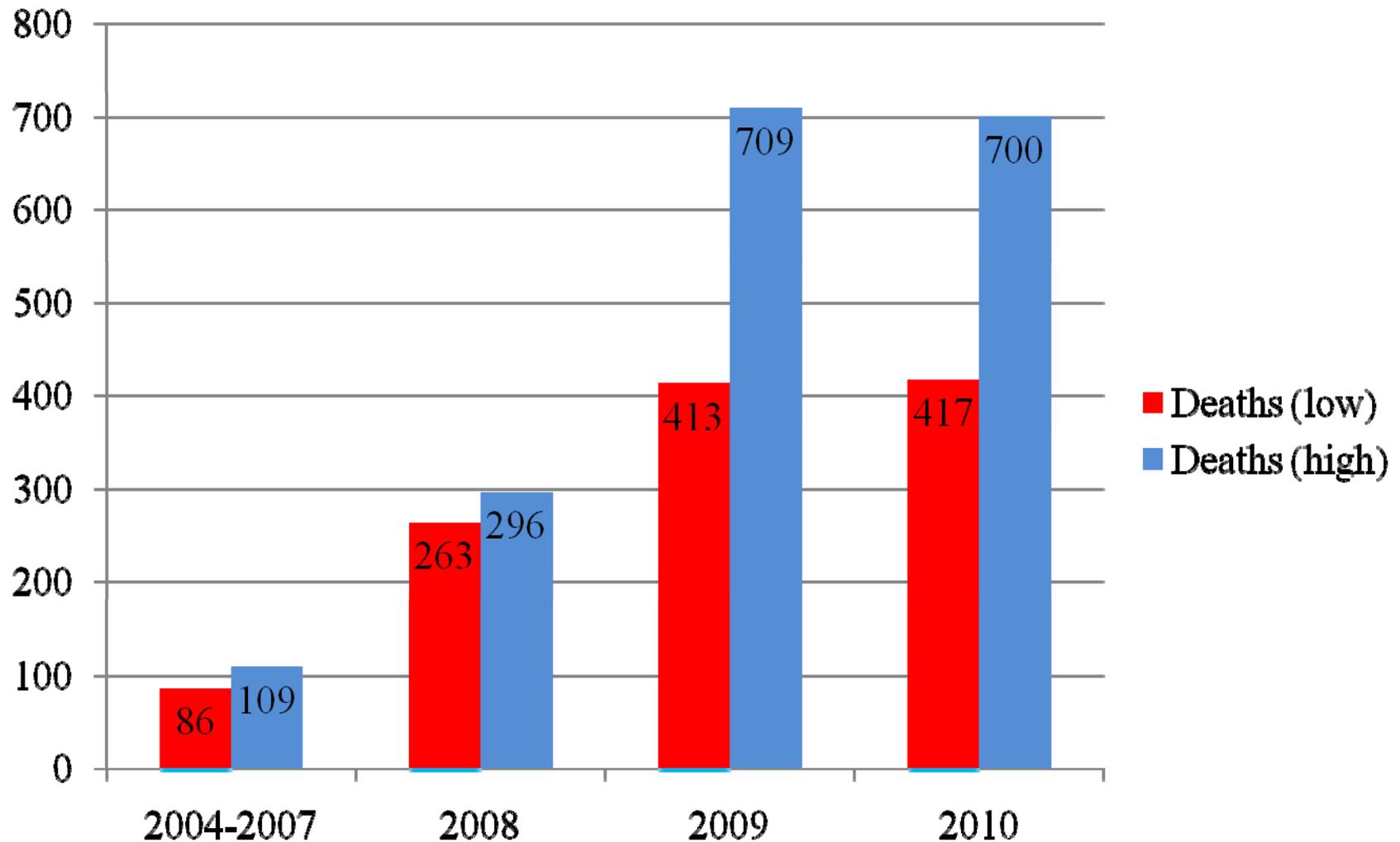
Source: ABC Foreign News

# Number of US Airstrikes in Pakistan by District, 2010



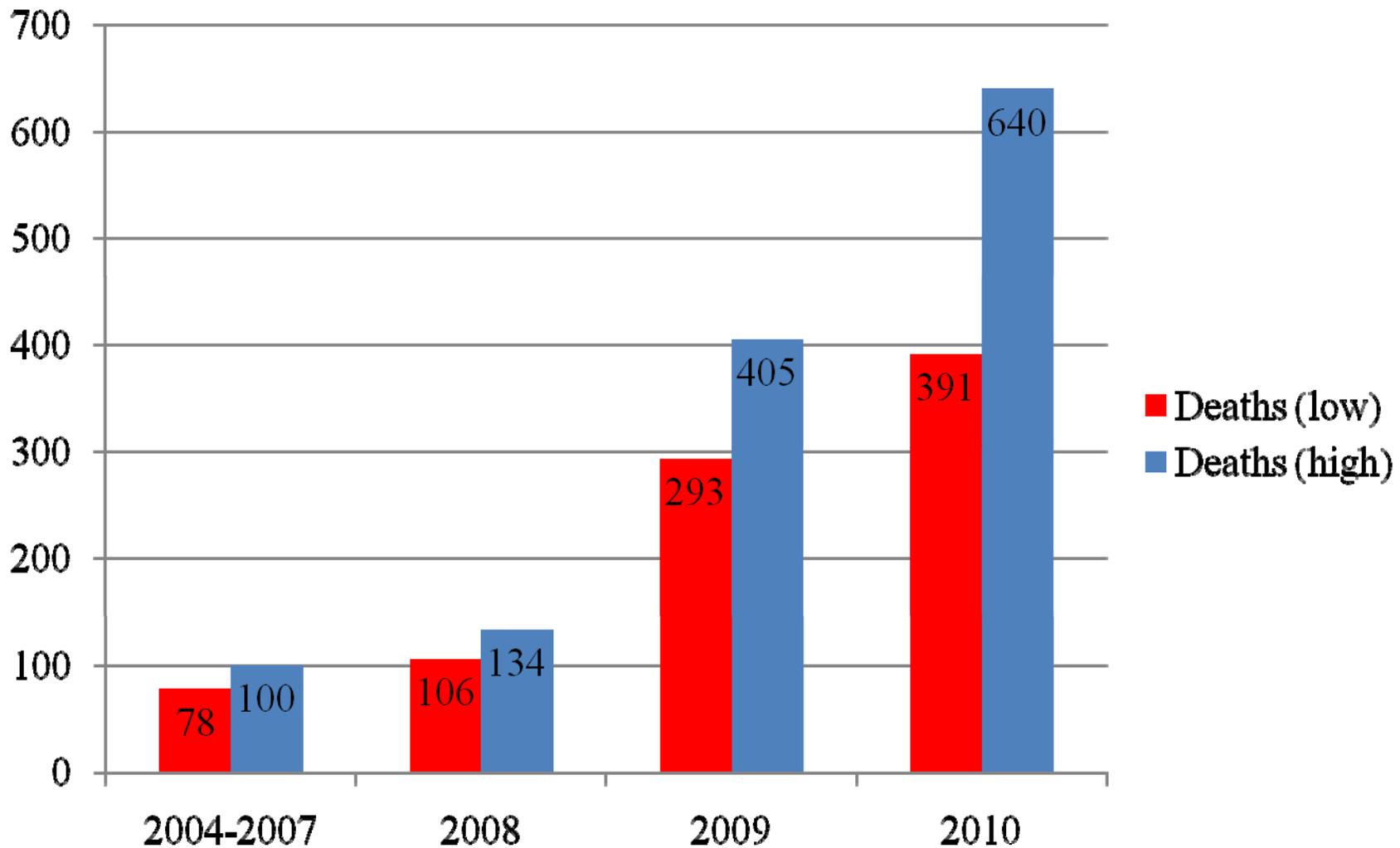
Source: ABC Foreign News

## Estimated Total Deaths from US Drone Strikes in Pakistan, 2004-2010



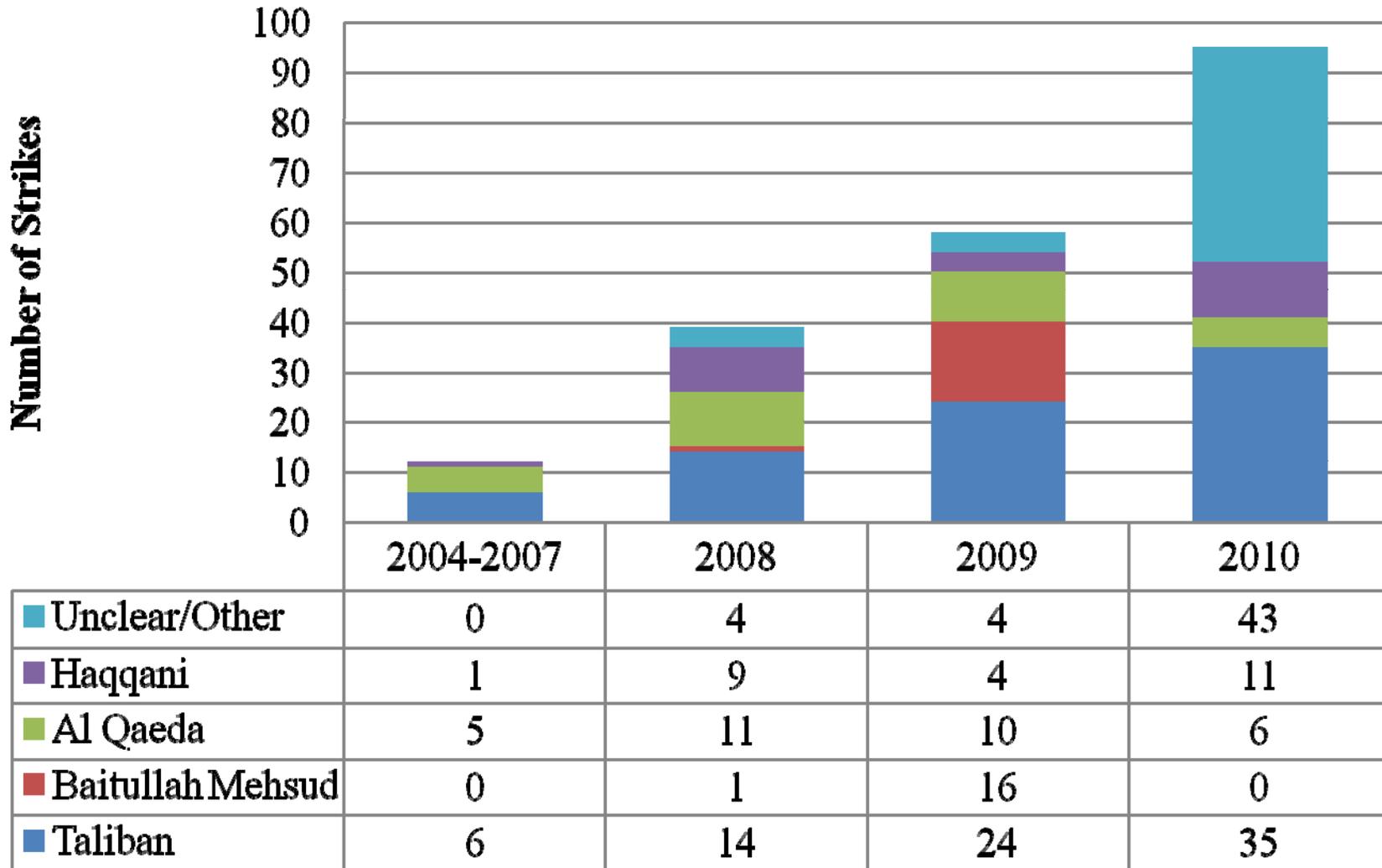
New America Foundation Counterterrorism Strategy Initiative, "The Year of the Drone, An Analysis of U.S. Drone Strikes in Pakistan, 2004-2010," <http://counterterrorism.newamerica.net/drones>

## Estimated Militant Deaths from US Drone Strikes in Pakistan, 2004-2010

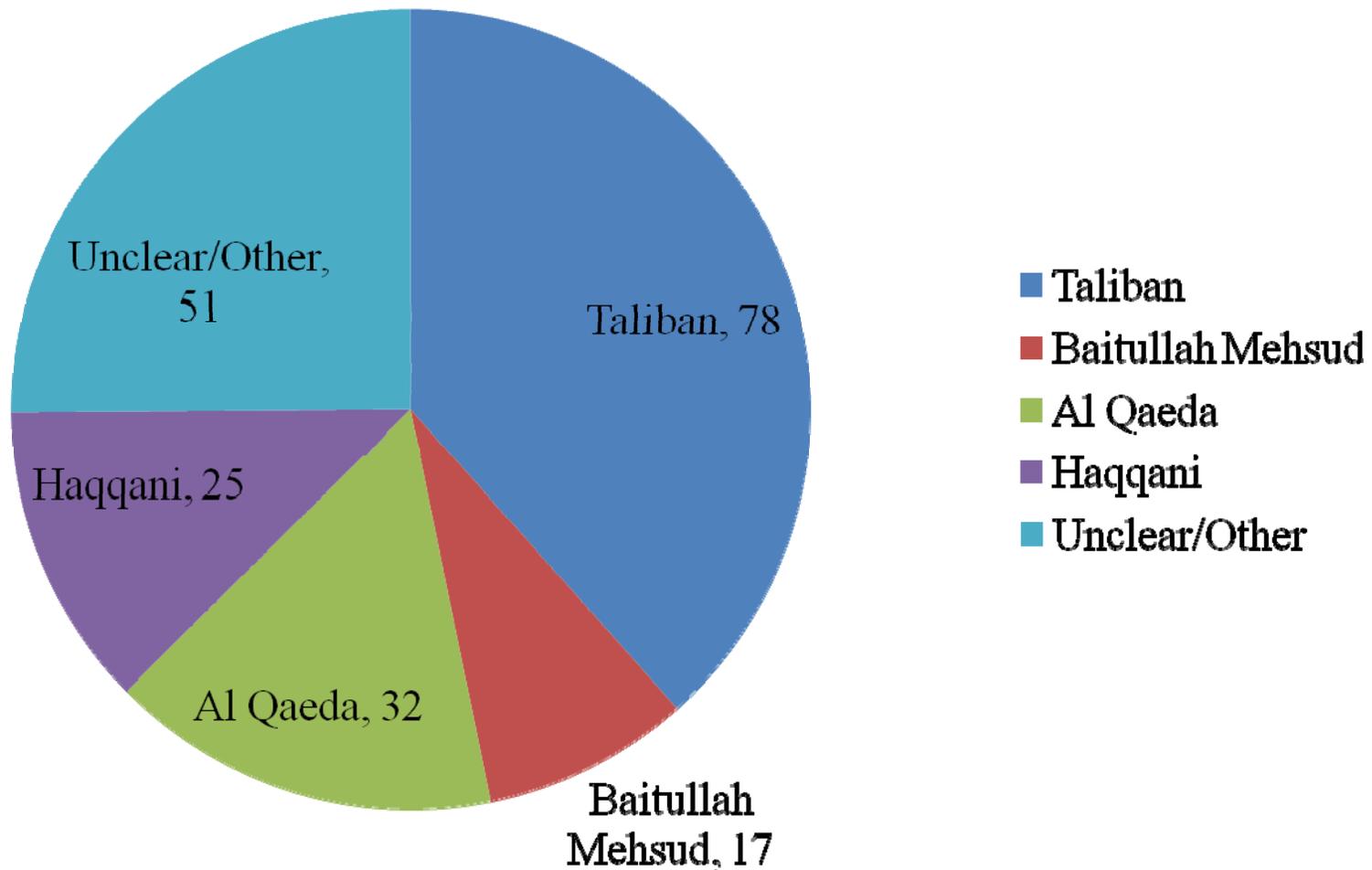


New America Foundation Counterterrorism Strategy Initiative, "The Year of the Drone, An Analysis of U.S. Drone Strikes in Pakistan, 2004-2010," <http://counterterrorism.newamerica.net/drones>

## Number of Strikes by Target, 2004-2010



## Total Strikes by Target, 2004-2010



New America Foundation Counterterrorism Strategy Initiative, "The Year of the Drone, An Analysis of U.S. Drone Strikes in Pakistan, 2004-2010," <http://counterterrorism.newamerica.net/drones>