

Drones, Civilians, and Human Rights

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The United States Department of Defense and CIA use armed drones with the intent to make America secure by killing terrorists, but this decision has resulted and continues to result in the death of many civilians. The time has come for us to remember and recognize the lives of those who are not American but have nevertheless suffered from American drone strikes. The time has come for us to not only apologize for the harm that we have caused through armed drones, but to adopt security practices that create alliances communities of concern. The time has come for us to renew our commitment as a nation to human rights and to reinforce a resolve to use technology for the benefit of others whether or not they are American. The United States' current use of drones has stripped the foundation of freedom from many in the human family and as Americans we cannot allow this situation to continue.

If there is to be a just peace, we must remember the lives of those who are not American but nevertheless have suffered from American drone strikes. In the article *"I Saw Pieces of Bodies": Afghan Civilians Describe Terrorization by US Drones* Alex Edney-Brown discusses the harmful impact of armed drones on countries like Afghanistan where they are used frequently.¹ He records the story of the bombing of the town of a 39-year-old Afghani civilian named Saifullah. Edney-Brown records that in this particular attack 21 civilians were killed including Saifullah's younger brother. Saifullah said recounting the attack, "I saw pieces of bodies flying, even pieces the size of this cup... It is very difficult to see that situation with your own eyes, even for me to say it now."²

Edney-Brown notes that this attack and the knowledge that drones still fly over Afghanistan have resulted in Saifullah leaving university and not returning even several years after the attack. Saifullah is not the only one whose livelihood suffers from the threat of armed American drones. In fact, there are many accounts of terrorized villages where people have given up sports, jobs, and other public gatherings to avoid the menacing eye of an armed American military drone.

Additionally, Saifullah's experience as a civilian near the blast of a drone strike is not a rare exception in drone warfare. According to drones.pitchinteractive.com between 2004 and 2015 at least 534 civilians and 190 children have been killed by armed American drones. This statistic is especially worrying when one takes into account that president Trump has expanded the use of armed drones and opposed measures that would make the application of these drones more transparent such as turning armed drones over to the department of defense. Lack of accountability and sometimes transparency means that the American public must sometimes use non-governmental sources to learn specifics about the way drones are used, which makes democratic dialogue and decision making more difficult. The lack of accountability and stretching of rules regarding armed drones also makes America seem dishonest and irresponsible in the eyes of the international community. If the American government will not remember and

¹ <http://www.truth-out.org/news/item/41127-i-saw-pieces-of-bodies-afghan-civilians-describe-terrorization-by-us-drones>

² Ibid.

take responsibility for its actions then it is up to us citizens in this representative democracy to take action. In remembering Saifullah and the other 533 civilians plus the 190 children we must remember that all people are created equally and endowed by their creator with inalienable rights and dignity. Such memory does not permit us who live in the guilty country and have the ability to speak up to be silent.

If there is to be a just peace, America must apologize for the harm we have caused by our use of drones and develop practices that build up communities. As the drone program continues it is appalling to read about families, some of whom are American, who have not been able to get an apology or some form of payment for those of their loved ones who were wrongfully killed by drone strikes.

In 2012 the ACLU filed on behalf of American family members a lawsuit against the U.S. government for the killing of three U.S. citizens in Yemen including Anwar Al-Aulaqi, Samir Khan, and Abdulrahman Al-Aulaqi who was only 16 years old. Anwar Al-Aulaqi was born in New Mexico, Abdulrahman Al-Aulaqi was born in Colorado, and Samir Khan was a naturalized U.S. Citizen in North Carolina, yet these three were killed in 2011 without due process.³ It is important to note that no evidence has been brought to the courts to justify the killing of the Al-Aulaqis or Khan.⁴ However, despite all the evidence of wrongdoing on the part of the U.S. government Anwar Al-Aulaqi's case was dismissed by the court. Such court cases have set a dangerous precedent that the government cannot be challenged on who it kills with drones in the name of security even in the case of American citizens.

In order to restore peace and trust in the government to use technology wisely a reliable system of accountability must be set in place. Many have suggested starting by taking armed drones from the CIA and putting them in the exclusive use of the Department of Defense in order to promote transparency. While this is a good first step it is still far from a body of law that could prosecute the government for killing innocent people over-seas with drones. Better yet would be policies that use drones to build up local communities over-seas and use the friendships built to track down terrorists and limit the places they can hide.

If there is to be peace, we as a nation must renew our commitment to human rights. The Declaration of Independence says, "We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men (sic.) are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness..." It is important that the use of the word "all" in the Declaration of Independence literally applies to everyone regardless of citizenship, culture, religion, or color. As a country, we further committed to human rights in helping to craft and agreeing to the United Nation's *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* which says, "recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world..."⁵

³ <https://www.thenewamerican.com/usnews/constitution/item/18019-federal-court-drone-killing-of-u-s-citizens-is-constitutional>

⁴ <https://www.aclu.org/cases/al-aulaqi-v-panetta-constitutional-challenge-killing-three-us-citizens>

⁵ <http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/index.html>

As it stands, the United States denies dignity to many members of the human family by defining combatant so broadly as to include any male of fighting age whether or not they have any intent to fight. The United States refuses the inalienable right to life to many civilians by killing without trial and maintaining policies that make killing easier than capture. The United States refuses the inalienable right to liberty to many civilians by performing signature strikes, which determine “appropriate” targets by criteria that does not always include illegal behavior. The United States refuses the inalienable right to the pursuit of happiness of creating conditions of terror such that blue skies and innocent recreation like sports is seen by civilians as potentially dangerous. The United States has been seen by some as the leader of the free world, but by standards in documents written and accepted by the United States itself we are a nation that has stripped members of the human family of the foundation for freedom, justice, and peace in the world.

It is a time for change when civilians are afraid to support their own livelihood because a foreign military perpetually holds missiles over them. It is a time for change when innocent civilians cannot get an apology or reparations for the wrongful killing of innocent family members. It is a time for change when human rights have taken a backseat to security concerns. The time is now for peace loving citizens to learn what America is doing and hiding in the name of security and to stand up for the dignity and humane treatment of all people.