Armed Drones: time to call a halt

The UK Ministry of Defence, in common with the defence policies of other states, is increasing its development, manufacture and use of armed drones. In a report published earlier this year, it stated that 'a technological tipping point is approaching that may well deliver a genuine revolution in military affairs'. The revolution is happening in and because of a climate of enormous and escalating government debt. Most states that follow the militaristic path have paupered their citizens in their desire to go to war and to supply themselves with more and more weapons with which to fight those wars.

Both the US and the UK, and by association all the other NATO countries, have vastly overspent on their invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan and now Libya, not to mention all the other areas of overspill. Where Iraq and Afghanistan are concerned, one result has been a steady return to our shores of severely damaged soldiers. The medical and social support that these people and their families will need for many years to come is already a drain on the public purse, something we can barely pay for now. But – we will not give up fighting wars.

It is not just the love of technology driving the push towards the increasing use of drones. Ordinary people everywhere, faced with job losses, high taxes and price rises, are beginning to seriously question the cost of war. They know much more now about the waste of resources for very little return. Governments can no longer justify wasting the publics' money on their adventures. They will try but people's unthinking acquiescence cannot last forever. So one can imagine the delight with which unmanned armed drones were greeted by the mandarins in Whitehall and the Pentagon. 'Such an economical way of fighting war' must have been their reaction.

Cut down the number of personnel, saving lots of wages; no medical care, compensation or pensions for soldiers returning from war; no expensive deployment of troops; no catering in the field; no worries about shipping supplies; no expensive replacement of equipment. One only has to look at the difficulty of supplying fuel to the NATO forces in Afghanistan to understand the waste and the costs of the current conflict. It all has to go in overland, and many of the fuel trucks never reach their destination, so good are the insurgents at attacking and blowing them up.

How easy to start replacing all that with a few trained 'pilots' sitting miles away from the target. How clean, how neat, how cheap. The Ministry of Defence will probably tell us they are being financially responsible by using drones instead of armies. The costs of course are met by those at the other end. Despite all the assurances of 'precision targeting' civilian casualties far outnumber the supposed deaths of 'terrorists'. And we can never be sure that those insurgents who are reported as killed actually are those killed. Too many mistakes are made and too many lies told for us to know the truth. All that is clear is that drones are responsible for a terrible loss of life. And all this is against the law.

In her testimony to a sub-committee of the US Congress in April last year, Professor Mary Ellen O'Connell made it clear how illegal armed (combat) drones are. The following month she took part in a debate on the subject at Chatham House, London. She made the following points:

- Terrorist acts are criminal offences, and therefore properly dealt with by law enforcement agencies.
- Drones are battlefield weapons.and are not lawful for use outside combat zones.
- Outside such zones, police are the proper law enforcement agents and police are generally required to warn before using lethal force.
- Drones cannot comply with police rules for the use of lethal force away from the battlefield. In law enforcement it must be possible to warn before using lethal force (in war-fighting this is not necessary, making the use of bombs and missiles lawful).

She did believe that the fighting in Afghanistan was taking place in a 'combat zone', thus in her view making the use of drones legal there. However, under international law a state can only legally wage war in response to it being militarily attacked by another state. The US and the UK went into Afghanistan in response (or so we are told) to the terrorist attack on the Twin Towers. No state was responsible for that attack. Therefore in some lawyers' eyes, our presence was and still is unlawful, and there is some argument about whether it comes under the rules of International Armed Conflict or not. But we have turned the whole of Afghanistan into a battlefield even though we are not, and never have been at war with Afghanistan. So targeting a domestic Afghan compound, even if a Taliban leader is inside, with a combat drone could and should be considered illegal.

Even more illegal is the use by the US of these weapons in Pakistan, the Yemen, and Somalia. They are not at war with these countries. They are still chasing terrorists in the form of Al Qaeda, which they say they are 'at war' with and as O'Connell stresses, that is a matter of law enforcement. And to make it even more illegal, the drones are often controlled, not by the US military (who can only legally use them as battlefield weapons) but by the CIA who have no legal right at all to use them anywhere, at any time. And now drones are being used in Libya too.

Last month a report on the illegality of drones was published by the Oxford Research Group. It makes for interesting reading. For instance, 'combatants' in a combat zone may be legally targeted. However, the people we are targeting cannot be considered as regular soldiers. They are for the most part insurgents. Combatants can only be regarded as such while they are physically engaged in combat activities. At all other times they revert to being civilians who must be protected from attack. So an Afghan Taliban who has slipped over into Pakistan to see his relatives (and for most of them that border does not exist) is no longer a combatant but a civilian.

The report also goes into the obligations of those who wield the weapons, when it comes to recording all the casualties, both dead and living, caring for the wounded and ensuring proper burials for the dead. The only people at the moment who are counting the dead are the neighbours and surviving relatives. The US operatives do not visit the scenes of their drone attacks, and other parties such as human rights groups find it very difficult to get permission to gain access. The reason given is that it is too dangerous on the ground – and so it is with armed drones in the skies. No one knows how many have really been killed by drone attacks, even though innocent families know only too well how many they are grieving for.

Armed drones were first used in late 2001. In less than 10 years they have become the weapon of choice for killing those who disagree with us, causing untold casualties. Their users insist they are accurate in their targeting, yet there are no complete records of how many and who they have killed. And the accuracy depends all too often on faulty intelligence and operators who are not only many miles away from the target, but quite likely to be unable to interpret what the cameras tell them, because they are ignorant of the living conditions and culture of the people in their sights. We cannot go on fighting these dirty wars while fooling ourselves that we are keeping our own hands clean. In 1997 public pressure achieved the Convention against Land Mines. In 2010 that same pressure resulted in the Convention against Cluster Munitions. It is now time to start pressing for a Convention against Armed Drones. Before all of us are afraid to look up into the sky.

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This article was first posted on Global Research on 18/07/11 and Uruk.net and Dissident Voice on 19/07/11 . On 19/07/11 news was released that thousands of regular UK soldiers were going to be replaced by reservists. The figures given showed that while the British army was 196,150 strong in 2006, it is planned that by 2020 this figure will have been reduced to 82,000. Link this scaling down of 'boots on the ground' with the increase in the production and use of armed drones, and you begin to see how the financial crisis is driving how we fight wars. There appear to be no plans to scale down the wars for economy's sake!