

A recent report from Medact looks at drones from a public health perspective. The report considers the human cost of their use, the moral and ethical issues raised by 'targeted killings', and their dubious status under international law. Tomasz Pierscionek discusses some of its findings, and echoes the call for greater parliamentary and public scrutiny of the UK's policy.

In the last 10 years, we have seen a huge increase in the spread and use of armed Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), commonly known as 'drones'. For the first time in history, it's possible to attack an enemy thousands of miles away without fear of retaliation.

At the moment, 76 countries are thought to possess some type of drone. Most only have small drones used for surveillance. Only Britain, the US and Israel are known to own and use armed drones, such as the Predator and the Reaper, which are used to eliminate targets in Afghanistan and Pakistan. However, considering the rapid proliferation that has taken place within the past decade and that even organisations such as Hezbollah have access to surveillance drones, it isn't hard to imagine a new arms race spiralling out of control.

In addition to the hundreds of deaths and injuries of innocent civilians they cause, there is mounting evidence that people living under the constant threat of drone attack suffer psychologically.

Up to the end of September 2012, Britain had carried out over 300 drone strikes in Afghanistan. There are plans to double the UK's fleet of Reaper drones from five to 10 and to open a second drone control station at RAF Waddington in late 2012. Britain's drone fleet is currently operated from Creech Airforce Base, Nevada. It is run by the RAF's 39 squadron, with personnel from all three branches of the armed forces. A fleet of 10 Reaper drones would enable the UK to have three drones flying over Afghanistan 24/7.

A joint British-French drone, Telemos, could also be developed by 2015-2020 as a planned project between BAE systems and Dassault Aviation.

Drone strikes can be based on an 'imminent threat' and potentially inaccurate intelligence, in situations where one side has these weapons, while the other does not.. Far from defeating terrorism, drone attacks appear to act as a recruiting agent, and there is even some evidence that they may increase suicide missions.

We often hear praise for their ability to kill senior leaders of Al-Qaeda and the Taliban. However it has been reported that only 2% of deaths from drone strikes are senior militant leaders. Many of the other deaths are civilians, including children.

The UK only used drones in Afghanistan and had a much smaller drone fleet than the US. However, as the situation in Afghanistan does not appear to be improving, it is worth asking

what is to be gained by drone strikes. Using them will not change the outcome of the war. On the contrary, it is likely to lead more people into the ranks of the militants the drones are meant to kill. Indeed, Taliban propaganda refers to the West forces as a 'cowardly bully' unwilling to put men on the ground but happy to launch war from afar.

There is a worry that politicians may see drones as a way of avoiding the impact on public opinion of seeing soldiers coming home in coffins. The wars in Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan, now regarded as irredeemable failures, partly lost popular support as a result of the endless stream of bodies and wounded veterans. Drones allow for a 'cleaner' war to be waged - at least for those deploying drones from thousands of miles away, with little risk to their own side. In the long term, the implications of more drones being deployed across the globe mean that one country will be able to launch an attack against individuals in another without fear of suffering casualties. Also, the relative ease of acquiring drones could lead to a global battlefield where no one is safe.

In our report, Drones: the physical and psychological implications of a global theatre of war, we call for greater parliamentary and public scrutiny of the use of drones in combat, we call for them to be included in arms limitation treaties, and we want to stop further automation in their operations. We believe it is time for the UK government to stop purchasing, developing and deploying armed drones.

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For a copy of Drones: the physical and psychological implications of a global theatre of war, see www.medact.org