

Drone Warfare: A Religious and Moral Perspective

Interfaith Working Group on Drone Warfare

Recommendations for the Biden Administration

The decision to take lives through war or other uses of force carries profound moral implications that have been the subject of thousands of years of theological and ethical thinking. This thinking has informed domestic law and international treaties around the use of force, and it should play an ongoing role in informing decisions regarding the use of force as tactics and technology evolve.

The widespread adoption of armed drones and their battlefield use by both state and non-state actors has already begun to change past norms for armed conflict. U.S. use of armed drones, by both the military and the CIA, to carry out targeted killings of people well outside the traditional battlefield suggests that drones have also affected policy-makers' calculus as to the costs and benefits of carrying out what many see as a policy of targeted assassinations.

In the past, soldiers personally experienced the full brutality of what they and their opponents did to each other and to civilians. Conflicts were terrible, but people on both sides were personally and spiritually scarred by them - they and their friends and families came away with a real understanding of exactly how terrible war is.

Drones are not the first technology to enable soldiers to kill an enemy without having to personally experience the brutality of that action. But the increasing ease with which drones enable killing at a distance means that our country, and an increasing number of other nations as well as non-state actors, are more and more able to kill without having to face the moral consequences of that choice. As drone surveillance and targeting capabilities improve, and as the technology is applied to other platforms (boats, submarines, drone swarms, armed autonomous vehicles, etc.), human decision makers will only be further isolated from the effects of their actions.

U.S. use of lethal drone strikes to address the threat of terrorism has been unnecessarily secretive, caused an unacceptable number of civilian casualties, eroded human rights norms, created long-term hostility in affected communities toward U.S. interests, and contributed to the U.S. being mired in its longest ever war. We must rethink our policies for the use of armed drones now.

As representatives of various faith communities, we believe that the current drone program runs counter to the tenets of our respective faiths and violates the values held by most Americans; therefore, in order to reduce physical and moral harm caused by the drone program, we recommend that the next Administration:

1. Reconsider a reactive force-based approach to security threats, including the threat of terrorism. Fund and pursue other means of mitigating threats - including engagement with international partners, negotiated peace processes, and support for international development.

2. Establish a government-sponsored commission of independent experts to investigate the long-term impacts of lethal drone strikes, including the political, economic, and psychological impacts on affected countries and communities, the long-term impact on U.S. strategic interests, the effects on regional support for terrorism, and the psychological health of drone operators.
3. End the CIA's authority to carry out lethal drone strikes and consolidate all drone strike capability and authority into the Department of Defense.
4. Disclose all legal and policy standards for the use of armed drones, whether by the military, another government agency or contractor, or in support of partner forces. This should include clear, readily understood standards for determining who is targetable and a definition of "imminent threat" that reflects the common understanding of the word "imminent" and clear evidence of a specific actual or imminent attack.
5. Ensure that U.S. drones are not used to support partner forces that violate human rights or harm civilians.
6. Ensure that requirements for authorizing a lethal drone strike are substantively more onerous than the requirements for authorizing an attempt to capture an individual so that drone strikes are truly a last resort after all other possible means of addressing the situation have been exhausted. Evidence that the requirements for authorizing a lethal strike are in fact more onerous would be a sustained increase in the ratio of attempts to capture suspected terrorists as opposed to attempts to carry out a lethal strike against them.
7. Conduct thorough and impartial investigations into allegations of civilian harm, provide appropriate redress (including compensation and apologies) and make the results of those investigations public.
8. Release detailed assessments of all civilian and combatant casualties that result from all U.S.-operated drone strikes whether they occur on or off the "battlefield" and no matter what agency conducts the strikes.
9. Embed in policies around the use of armed drones an understanding that the use of force should always be a last resort and that even though drones have made it politically and psychologically easier for U.S. decision-makers to order the use of force, killing people remains as morally fraught as ever.
10. Ensure that specific humans are responsible and accountable for all strike decisions and have the real-time ability to stop any strike that is likely to result in death or injury to any person up to the moment the strike is taken. Any human responsible for a strike decision should also fully understand the reasoning and evidentiary basis for designating a particular target.
11. Proactively prevent future drone strikes by addressing the root causes of extremism and violence. In particular, provide additional development support to troubled areas to encourage economic development, reduce social and political exclusion, combat discrimination, provide access to education and employment, promote human rights and the rule of law, and otherwise

mitigate circumstances that can foster extremism. Support local programs to address the physical, economic, and psychological harm caused by drone strikes.

12. Lead in establishing international standards for the lethal use of drones. These standards should reflect the other recommendations in this document as well as steps the U.S. has previously already taken to restrict its lethal drone program. Additionally the standards should be transparent, conform to international law, include readily understood criteria for who can and who cannot be targeted, provide clear lines of authority and responsibility for a state's decision to carry out a lethal strike, ensure that humans have meaningful control over each specific strike decision, provide procedures for redress if the standards are violated, and create procedures for monitoring state adherence to these standards.

Background:

As faith leaders, we are deeply concerned that by distancing people from kill decisions, drones lower the political and psychological costs of killing. They make it easier for politicians and other high-level decision-makers, who no longer have to order soldiers into a hostile situation in order to use lethal force, to choose violence. Using armed drones for targeted killings makes it easier for conflicts to escalate and may make it easier to go to war.

As technologies advance, the development of artificial intelligence capabilities and autonomous weaponry might result in drones and other weapons being built that are capable of targeting people on their own. Also, in the absence of a determined effort to ensure meaningful human control and responsibility for all strike decisions, algorithms may increasingly be used to determine targets without any human fully understanding the evidentiary basis for why a person is targeted. Humans, even at the operator level, may end up largely removed from what becomes a mechanized process of killing.

We believe strongly that while drones lower the political and psychological costs of killing, the moral failure of killing people remains as real as ever. We believe that those who order, authorize, or operate the remote killing of targeted people in a far-off land ought to wrestle with the moral consequences of that decision every bit as much as a commander who has just ordered his or her troops into battle. Killing should not be an abstraction to those who are ultimately responsible for it.

We are also concerned that, in the absence of extraordinary restrictions on the use of armed drones, they will become the default means of addressing perceived security threats. While governments may state a preference for capture over killing, in real terms an operation to capture someone will always pose a risk to involved personnel. Drones can be used without risk to the aggressor. As such, states may find themselves using drone strikes to kill people in situations where, prior to widespread availability of drones, they would have been targeted for capture and questioning.

Over 100 countries now have military drones, including 30 or more that have or are acquiring armed drones. As a leading developer of drone technology, the U.S. has a special responsibility to set ethical standards for the use of drones. Regrettably, the U.S. instead continues to use

drones without transparent policies and practices in asymmetrical war against mostly non-state actors. In doing so, we have set an extremely low bar for who can be killed with a drone strike. If we do not begin setting a higher standard for the use of armed drones, we will likely come to regret that choice as drone technology proliferates and the U.S. may itself become the target of drone attacks.

As members of the faith community, we encourage the next Administration to uplift the importance of human life and human dignity by adopting the above recommendations for limiting the use of lethal drone strikes.

Presbyterian Church (USA)

Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns

Church of the Brethren, Office of
Peacebuilding and Policy

Friends Committee on National Legislation

Columban Center for Advocacy and
Outreach

United Church of Christ, Justice and
Witness Ministries

Franciscan Action Network

American Friends Service Committee

National Council of Churches

The United Methodist Church – General
Board of Church and Society

ICNA Council for Social Justice

Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association

National Advocacy Center of the Sisters of
the Good Shepherd

Reformed Church in America Commission
on Christian Action

Leadership Conference of Women Religious
Pax Christi USA

NETWORK Lobby for Catholic Social
Justice

Coalition for Peace Action

Interfaith Network on Drone Warfare

Alliance of Baptists

T'ruah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights
Center on Conscience & War

Sisters of Mercy of the Americas – Justice
Team

Christian Reformed Church Office of Social
Justice

American Sikh Council

National Religious Campaign Against
Torture