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Drone Warfare: An Illegal Tactic Sure to Perpetuate U.S.-Muslim War Indefinitely

By William Pfaff

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It is a profound but nearly universal mistake among Americans (and others) to think that the withdrawal of American forces from Afghanistan in 2013 or 2014 will end the American war with the Muslim world that began on September 11 in 2001. It seems that the current administration in Washington and much of the American foreign policy community are determined to validate a version of Samuel Huntington's unfortunate forecast in 1993 that the "next" world war would be a war between civilizations.

The two main candidates for the American presidency seeking election next Tuesday have each indicated a commitment to pursuing this war through measures of programmed unilateral killing of selected individuals in Muslim society, thus guaranteeing the war's indefinite continuation by whatever methods of retaliation as may be at the disposition of that society. The international illegality of these killings seems certain to increase the growing political isolation from its present allies and the international disrepute the United States currently suffers.

The principal challenger to President Barack Obama, Mitt Romney, was asked in the final presidential debate, "what is your position on the use of drones?" Mr. Romney replied, "I believe that we should use any and all means necessary to take out people who pose a threat to us. ... [I

feel] the president was right to up the usage of that technology, and believe that we should continue to use it ... [against] the people who represent a threat to this nation and to our friends.”

The unmanned drone bomber is a weapon precisely suited to what has become the American military style and aspiration, which is to say a potentially ubiquitous weapon of great range which kills people at no risk whatever to the American operator, who is seated behind his computer screen in the United States. Drones are used to kill according to the president’s pleasure, based on a list of persons identified as enemies, regularly amended and extended for the president’s personal use by a currently expanding bureaucratic staff in Washington that employs secret criteria and that is subject to no judicial review.

As a method of war, this is convenient, comfortable, efficient, totally illegal and totally unconstitutional, since the United States has not formally declared war on these people (only the Senate constitutionally possesses power to declare war, a formality now discarded in the United States), it has no legally tenable evidence of their wrongdoing or threat to Americans, and it violates the Fifth Amendment of the United States Constitution, which declares that “No person shall ... be deprived of life, liberty or property without due process of law.”

The use of this weapon in circumstances of international illegality is—unhappily—consistent with the other illegal practices of the American military, such as the use of enriched uranium artillery munitions and bombs containing multiple fragmentation bomblets, “shock and awe” tactics against civilian populations, torture or the delivery of captives to torture, illegal sequestration and rendition of persons, and indefinite imprisonment of captives without trial. For these reasons, the United States also rejects the jurisdiction of international war crimes tribunals.

The indefinite duration of this war against Muslims is assured by its arbitrary and illegal character and its inevitable generation of resistance and retaliation by whatever available means, thereby reinforcing the American contention that it is threatened by terrorism. There have been no significant terrorist acts inside the United States since the attacks on the World Trade Center towers and the Pentagon in 2001, and none against American allies in Western Europe since the Madrid and London train and Metro bombings not long afterwards.

The original New York and Washington bombings were, according to their author, Osama bin Laden, acts of revenge for America’s insistence on stationing armed forces on the “sacred” territory of Saudi Arabia following the 1990 Gulf War against Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait. There seems no reason not to expect a continued pattern of retaliatory acts by Arab or Muslim activists in the future.

There are an estimated 1.6 billion Muslims in the world, most of them in Asia and Africa. Some 15 percent of them are Arabs, who together with the Muslims of Pakistan and Afghanistan, where the United States and its allies now are fighting, as well as the considerable number of African and other Muslims in sympathy or solidarity with the Arabs, make up a population somewhat smaller than the present American population, now totaling some 315 million people. The United States currently is intensifying its military activities in the West African sub-Saharan region, and in the Horn of Africa, and extending its global base system.

These numbers suggest a roughly man-on-man (person-on-person, to be politically correct)—Americans against Arabs—war forever, steadily replenished by natural population increase. Except (as Kipling once noted) we have the Gatling [machine] Gun. Or to update that, we have the drone unmanned bomber of omniscient surveillance and destruction—and we have the nuclear weapon.