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Pandora and the Drones

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Israeli drones. Wikimedia Commons

In November 2001, when the CIA assassinated al-Qaeda commander Mohammed Atef with a killer drone in Kandahar, Afghanistan, the U.S. held a virtual monopoly on the technology of lethal robots. Today, more than 70 countries in the world deploy drones, 16 of them the deadly variety, and many of those drones target rural people living on the margins of the modern world.

Armed drones have been hailed as a technological breakthrough in the fight against terrorists who, in the words of President Obama, “take refuge in remote tribal regions...hide in caves and

walled compounds...train in empty deserts and rugged mountains.” But much of the butcher’s bill for the drones has fallen on people who live in those deserts and mountains, many of whom are simply in the wrong place at the wrong time or get swept into a definition of “terrorist” so broad it that embraces virtually all adult males.

Since 2004—the year the “drone war” began in earnest—missile-firing robots have killed somewhere between 3,741 and 5,825 people in Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia, and injured another 1,371 to 1,836. The London-based Bureau of Investigative Journalism estimates that this death toll includes between 460 to 1,067 “civilians” and as many as 214 children.

But, because how the U.S. defines “civilian” is classified, it is almost impossible to determine exactly who the victims are. Up until recently, it appears that being between the ages of 18 and 60 while carrying a weapon or attending a funeral for a drone victim was sufficient to get you incinerated.

In his May address to the National Defense University, however, President Obama claimed to have narrowed the circumstances under which deadly force can be used. Rather than the impossibly broad rationale of “self-defense,” future attacks would be restricted to individuals who pose a “continuing and imminent threat to the American people” and who could not be “feasibly apprehended.” The President added that there had to be a “near certainty that no civilians would be killed or injured.”

As national security expert and constitutional law professor David Cole points out, the new criteria certainly are a more “demanding standard,” but one that will be extremely difficult to evaluate since the definition of everything from “threat” to “civilian” is classified. Over the past year there has been a drop in the number of drone strikes, which could reflect the new standards or be a response to growing anger at the use of the robots. Some 97 percent of Pakistanis are opposed to the use of drone strikes in that country’s northwest border region.

The drones that roam at will in the skies over Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia are going global, and the terror and death they sow in those three countries now threatens to replicate itself in western China, Eastern Turkey and northern Iraq, highland Peru, South Asia, and the Amazon basin.

Drones have become a multi-billion dollar industry, and countries across the planet are building and buying them. Many are used for surveillance, but the U.S., Britain, Sweden, Iran, Russia, China, Lebanon, Taiwan, Italy, Israel, France, Germany, India, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates all own the more lethal varieties. The world’s biggest drone maker is Israel.

For a sure-fire killer you want a Made-in-the-USA-by-General-Atomics Predator or Reaper, but there are other dangerous drones out there and they are expanding at a geometric pace.

Iran recently unveiled a missile-firing “Fotros” robot to join its “Shahad 129” armed drone. China claims its “Sharp Sword” drone has stealth capacity. A Russian combat drone is coming off the drawing boards next year. And a European consortium of France, Italy, Spain, Sweden,

Greece and Switzerland is developing the armed Dassault nEURon drone. Between 2005 and 2011, the number of drone programs worldwide jumped from 195 to 680. In 2001, the U.S. had 50 drones. Today it has more than 7,500.

While drone promoters claim that robot warfare is the future, they rarely mention who are the drones' most likely targets. Except for surveillance purposes, drones are not very useful on a modern battlefield, because they are too slow. Their advantage is that they can stay aloft for a very long time—24 to 40 hours is not at all unusual—and their cameras give commanders a real-time picture of what is going on. But as the Iranians recently demonstrated by downing a U.S. RQ-170 stealth drone, they are vulnerable to even middle-level anti-craft systems.

“Predators and Reapers are useless in a contested environment,” says U.S. Gen. Mike Hostage, chief of Air Combat Command. “I couldn't [put one] into the Strait of Hormuz without putting airplanes there to protect it.”

But over the tribal areas of Pakistan, the rural villages of Yemen and the coast of Somalia they are virtually invulnerable. Flying at an altitude beyond the range of small arms fire—which, in any case, is highly inaccurate—they strike without warning. Since the drone's weapon of choice, the Hellfire missile, is supersonic, there is no sound before an explosion: a village compound, a car, a gathering, simply vanishes in a fury cloud of high explosives.

Besides dealing out death, the drones terrify. Forensic psychologist Peter Schaapveld found that drones inflicted widespread posttraumatic stress syndrome in Yemeni villagers exposed to them. Kat Craig of the British organization Reprieve, who accompanied Schaapveld, says the terror of the drones “amounts to psychological torture and collective punishment.”

But do they work? They have certainly killed leading figures in al Qaeda, the Haqqani Group, and the Taliban, but it is an open question whether this makes a difference in the fight against terrorism. Indeed, a number of analysts argue that the drones end up acting as recruiting sergeants by attacking societies where honor and revenge are powerful currents.

In his book “The Thistle and the Drone: How America's war on Terror Became a Global War on Tribal Islam,” anthropologist Akbar Ahmed argues that the drone war's major victims are not ideologically committed terrorists, but tribal people. And further, that when a drone sows death and injury among these people, their response is to seek retribution and a remedy for dishonor.

For people living on the margins of the modern world, honor and revenge are anything but atavistic throwbacks to a previous era. They are cultural rules that help moderate inter-community violence in the absence of centralized authority and a way to short circuit feuds and war.

Kinship systems can function similarly, and, in the case of Afghanistan and Pakistan, the drone war ends up creating a broader base for groups like the Taliban. The major target of drones in those countries is the Pashtun tribe, which makes up a plurality of Afghanistan and a majority in Pakistan's tribal areas. From the outside, Pashtun clans are a factious lot until they encounter an outsider. Then the tribe's segmentary lineage system kicks in and fulfills the old Pashtun adage:

“Me against my brother; my brother and me against our cousins; my brother, me and our cousins against everyone else.”

Occupying someone else’s lands is dangerous and expensive, hence the siren lure of drones as a risk-free and cheap way to intimidate the locals and get them to hand over their land or resources. Will the next targets be indigenous people resisting the exploitation of their lands by oil and gas companies, soybean growers, or logging interests?

The fight against “terrorism” may be the rationale for using drones, but the targets are more likely to be Baluchs in northwest Pakistan, Uyghurs in Western China, Berbers in North Africa, and insurgents in Nigeria. Some 14 countries in Latin America are purchasing drones or setting up their own programs, but with the exception of Brazil, those countries have established no guidelines for how they will be used.

The explosion of drone weapons, and the secrecy that shields their use was the spur behind the Global Drone Summit in Washington, titled “Drones Around the Globe: Proliferation and Resistance” and organized by Codepink, the Institute for Policy Studies, The Nation Magazine, the Center for Constitutional Rights, and the National Lawyers Guild. The Nov. 16 meeting drew anti-drone activists from around the world to map out plans to challenge the secrecy and the spread of drones.

Zeus gave Pandora a box, and her husband, Epimetheus, the key, instructing them not to open it. But Pandora could not resist exploring what was inside, and thus released fear, envy, hate, disease and war on the world. The box of armed drones, but its furies are not yet fully deployed. There is still time to close it and ban a weapon of war aimed primarily at the powerless and the peripheral.