

# FACT SHEET

# WHY BAN KILLER DRONES?

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## WHAT THEY ARE

Killer drones, also known as UAVs (Unmanned Aerial Vehicles), are armed aircraft that are used to surveil and kill people remotely. There are two types of killer drones: those that are remotely controlled by humans, and those that are preprogrammed, also known as robot, Artificial intelligence (AI), or autonomous drones. Regardless of whether a killer drone is preprogrammed or not, the end result is the same: trauma, injury, murder, destruction, environmental degradation, and the erosion of the rule of law. This fact sheet lays out the top reasons why a ban on killer drones is needed and the myths about drone use that stand in the way of passing a ban.

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## KNOWN U.S. DRONE STRIKES



*As part of the Mapping Militarism project to expose the impact of war worldwide, World BEYOND War has mapped out the known U.S. drone strikes around the world, thanks to data from the Bureau of Investigative Journalism.<sup>1</sup> Explore Mapping Militarism at [worldbeyondwar.org/militarism-mapped](https://worldbeyondwar.org/militarism-mapped).*

# WHY WE MUST BAN THEM

- Drones kill and injure innocent people. Despite the U.S. government's lack of transparency and frequent denials of civilian casualties, the Bureau of Investigative Journalism has documented an estimated 910 to 2,200 civilian deaths from U.S. drone strikes between 2010 and 2020, including attacks on entire families.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, drone warfare causes lasting psychological harm for targeted populations and destroys the social fabric. "Community members, mental health professionals, and journalists interviewed for this report [Living Under Drones] described how the constant presence of U.S. drones overhead leads to substantial levels of fear and stress in the civilian communities below. One man described the reaction to the sound of the drones as 'a wave of terror' coming over the community. 'Children, grown-up people, women, they are terrified...They scream in terror.'<sup>3</sup>"
- Drones violate human rights. International vigilantism, championed by the U.S., is leading to the development of a new wave of more powerful, dangerous robot drones, that will continue colonial repression and which could lead to war among the world's major colonial powers, such as the U.S. and China.<sup>4</sup>
- Drone bombs leave a legacy of pollution. The explosive weapons that drones drop, like Hellfire missiles and GBU-12 and GBU-38 bombs, contain TNT and RDX, which can spread from soils into groundwater, and are toxic to human, animal, and aquatic life.<sup>5</sup>
- Drones destroy targets that then harm the environment, animal and human health. These include industrial, petrochemical, or pharmaceutical sites; electricity production or distribution networks; water treatment and distribution facilities; and military bases and ammunition storage areas.<sup>6</sup>
- Drone strikes violate the rule of law. There is a severe lack of transparency and oversight in the use of drone warfare. Countries like the U.S. are using drones to unilaterally attack other countries, in flagrant disregard of domestic and international laws, for example in Pakistan.<sup>7</sup> "Drone assassinations...using 'kill lists' of named suspects, to be hunted and killed based on secret intelligence, are extrajudicial executions that violate the right of due process of their victims. So too are the so-called 'signature' strikes that target unknown victims based on their demographics and patterns of behavior."<sup>8</sup> On top of that, war is already illegal under the UN Charter and the Kellogg-Briand Pact and murder is illegal worldwide, which would make a ban on the use of weaponized drones redundant.

However, we can put pressure on international actors to adhere to the rule of law, and lobby for a ban on the sale of drones, addressing the problem at its source.<sup>9</sup>

- Drones perpetuate a state of never-ending war and surveillance. Journalists, federal intelligence analysts, and former military officials have suggested that U.S. military interventions, including the drone program, may actually cause an increase in terrorist strength and activity, generating more violence than they prevent.<sup>10</sup> Retired U.S. Lt. General Michael Flynn, who quit as head of the Pentagon's Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) in August 2014, said "When you drop a bomb from a drone...<sup>11</sup> you are going to cause more damage than you are going to cause good." An example of this is a 2015 analysis by Georgetown University student Emily Manna that points to a positive correlation between U.S. drone strikes and terrorist attacks in Pakistan.<sup>12</sup>



As one part of a larger militarized foreign policy framework, drones also have reverberating impacts on the citizens of the perpetrator countries, by undermining their understanding of our shared humanity and normalizing terrorism. "A 2011 British Defense Ministry study of drones raises these challenging questions: 'If we remove the risk of loss [of lives on our side] from the decision-makers' calculations when considering crisis management options, do we make the use of armed force more attractive? Will decision-makers resort to war as a policy option far sooner than previously?'"<sup>13</sup> U.S. President Joe Biden stands to gain public approval in promising to pull troops out of Yemen and Afghanistan, yet the U.S. will continue to wage war and kill civilians in those countries through the

covert use of drones.<sup>14</sup> In this respect, drone warfare is more insidious than nuclear warfare.<sup>15</sup>

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## HURDLES TO GETTING A BAN ON DRONES

- The existence of harmless drones. The public's perception of killer drones is muddled by the fact that there are also harmless drones used for deliveries or as toys, for example. But, as World BEYOND War Co-Founder David Swanson puts it, "There really are drones for fire and rescue and science research and toys and lovers of technology and even peace activists tracking weapons shipments. But we can ban selling deadly poisonous mushrooms even though other mushrooms taste great in pasta sauce."<sup>16</sup>
- Myth of the precision attack. Another problem is the media portrayal of drones as efficient devices that hone in on a single "evildoer target,"<sup>17</sup> without harming innocent people, which is far from the reality. In fact, the majority of those killed with missiles from drones have been unidentified. During one five-month period of Operation Haymaker in Afghanistan, nearly 90 percent of the people killed in drone strikes were not the intended targets.<sup>18</sup>
- Myth of human infallibility. The idea that drone warfare is acceptable as long as a human is able to control the drone attack, as opposed to autonomous drones, is also problematic. As we know all too well, humans in a warfare situation do not always make wise decisions.

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## WHAT YOU CAN DO NOW

- Sign the global petition to ban weaponized drones from the world at [BanWeaponizedDrones.org](https://BanWeaponizedDrones.org)
- On April 9, 2021 the Ban Killer Drones campaign was launched, calling for an international treaty to ban weaponized drones and military and police drone surveillance. Visit [BanKillerDrones.org](https://BanKillerDrones.org) to learn more and take action.

## REFERENCES

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