

Chapter 13

Armchair Warfare 'on Terrorism': On Robots, Targeted Assassinations and Strategic Violations of International Humanitarian Law

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ABSTRACT

In the 21st century, militaries are not competing for military dominance through specific superior weapon systems alone but also through networking these systems via information and communication technologies. The 'Revolution in Military Affairs' (RMA) relies on network centric warfare, 'precision' weaponry and 'intelligent' systems such as uninhabited, modular, globally connected robot systems. While some Western forces (and the U.S. Central Intelligence Service C.I.A.) claim that robots help to avoid the death of one's soldiers (respectively agents), NGOs point out the increase of killed civilians. In my paper, I discuss the deployment of uninhabited combat aerial vehicles (UCAV) in Western 'wars on terror' and their political and techno-ethical consequences. The question arises whether the new military philosophy, network centric (armchair) warfare, targeted assassinations and robot technology work towards the weakening of international humanitarian law.

INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, militaries are not competing for military dominance through specific superior weapon systems alone but also through networking these systems with the help of information and communication technologies (Kaufmann, 2006). In the course of the 'Revolution in Military Affairs', concepts of network centric warfare,

transparent battle space, a logic of precision strikes with autonomous resp. 'intelligent' systems and munitions are becoming dominant in western warfare. In the configuration of high-tech militaries, robotic systems play a decisive role. Uninhabited, modular, globally connected, and tele-operated as well as increasingly autonomous, multi-mission systems are regarded as crucial means of warfare. They are faster, cheaper and supposedly more adaptable systems which are claimed to help avoid the death of one's soldiers

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and cope with non-conventional/asymmetric wars. Rarely anybody considers that armchair warfare with tele-operated robots firing missiles from thousands kilometres away from the battlefield has severe consequences with regard to human rights and mirrors problematic changes in recent military philosophy. However, robotic precision weaponry such as uninhabited combat aerial vehicles (UCAVs) not only poses a permanent threat for local populations in everyday life, but leads to an increase of the number of killed civilians (Münkler 2002). The 'revolution in military affairs' (RMA) as well as the invention of network centric warfare seem to come with a new military philosophy that works towards the weakening of human rights standards in laws of war and rules of engagement which could in the long run endanger international humanitarian law.

In my paper, I will discuss the deployment of uninhabited combat aerial vehicles (UCAV) and their political, sociocultural and technoethical consequences.

KILLER ROBOTS TARGETING CIVILIANS?

Today, UCAVs are deployed by the US and the NATO militaries in the war in Afghanistan, Iraq and Pakistan, and by the Israel military for targeted killings in Palestinian occupied territories.

The deployment of new robotic technologies for aerial attacks intensified massively in the last years (Cordesman, 2008; Fischer, 2008; Singer, 2009; Weber, 2009)¹ and the number of killed civilians is rising (UN News Center 2009). Especially interesting is also the deployment of US drones in Pakistan, where not only the military but also the C.I.A. operates uninhabited combat aerial vehicles: "it represents a radically new and geographically unbounded use of state-sanctioned lethal force. And, because of the C.I.A. program's secrecy, there is no visible system of accountability in place, despite the fact that the agency has

killed many civilians inside a politically fragile, nuclear-armed country with which the U.S. is not at war." (Mayer 2009, 39)

Estimates of killed civilians differ widely. According to the survey of Peter Bergen and Katherine Thiedemann from the think tank 'The New America Foundation' 82 drone attacks were undertaken in Pakistan between January 2006 and mid October 2009 in which between 750 – 1000 people were killed. Bergen and Thiedemann (2009) estimate that 250 – 320 of these had been civilians (31-33%). 'The News' – a Pakistani newspaper – reported in April 2009: "Of the 60 cross-border predator strikes carried out by the Afghanistan-based American drones in Pakistan between January 14, 2006 and April 8, 2009, only 10 were able to hit their actual targets, killing 14 wanted al-Qaeda leaders, besides perishing 687 innocent Pakistani civilians." (Mir 2009, np). There are diverse counts of killed civilians in Pakistan as official numbers are not available and Pakistan's tribal areas have become largely forbidden terrain for media organizations.

The number of US air strikes in Iraq rose from 285 to 1119 (per year) between 2004 und 2007 and from 6495 to 12,775 in Afghanistan. As the number of flying hours of uninhabited combat aerial vehicles (UCAVs) tripled between 2003 und 2007, while the number of surveillance flights in Iraq and Afghanistan rose only very slightly, it is very likely that air attacks by UCAVs in Afghanistan and Iraq also massively increased lately (see also Cordesman 2008, Rötzer 2008).

A study on the weapons that killed civilians in the Iraq war from 2003-2008 (using the detailed and extensive data base of Iraq Body Count) published in the internationally renowned *New England Journal of Medicine* states: "*Female Iraqis and Iraqi children constituted the highest proportions of civilian victims when the methods of violence involved indiscriminate weapons fired from a distance: air attacks and mortars.* That air attacks, whether involving bombs or missiles, killed relatively high proportions of female civil-

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