

Proliferation of Armed Drones for “Global Security”: Will the UN Drone Inquiry Get to the Heart of the matter?

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The [UN inquiry into the use of armed drones for targeted killing](#), announced yesterday by London-based UN Special Rapporteur on Counter-Terrorism and Human Rights, Ben Emmerson, is very much to be welcomed.

Undertaken at the direct request of several states, the inquiry is also in response to what Mr Emmerson called “the increasing international concern surrounding the issue of remote targeted killing through the use of UAVs.”



In [a statement](#) Ben Emmerson said

“The exponential rise in the use of drone technology in a variety of military and non-military contexts represents a real challenge to the framework of established international law and it is both right as a matter of principle, and inevitable as a matter of political reality, that the international community should now be focussing attention on the standards applicable to this technological development, particularly its deployment in counterterrorism and counter-insurgency initiatives, and attempt to reach a consensus on the legality of its use, and the standards and safeguards which should apply to it.

The inquiry will examine 25 case studies of drone strikes that have taken place in Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, Afghanistan and Palestine in order to:

“look at the evidence that drone strikes and other forms of remote targeted

killing have caused disproportionate civilian casualties in some instances, and to make recommendations concerning the duty of States to conduct thorough independent and impartial investigations to such allegations such as allegations, with a view to securing accountability and reparation where things can be shown to have gone badly wrong with potentially grave consequences for civilians.”

This inquiry then is very much to be welcomed and will hopefully make an important contribution to our understanding of the use of armed drones.

However the inquiry will make a real impact if it also addresses some of the wider questions about the growing use of drones, questions that go beyond the issue of targeted killing. As [we have written before targeted killing, while being an extremely serious issue, is only part of the problem](#). The wider problem is that armed unmanned drones lower the political cost of military intervention as a whole and make it far too easy for political leaders to choose the lethal, military solution rather than a political or diplomatic option.

While Mr Emmerson as UN Special Rapporteur has a mandate to look at human rights issues, the wider political and global security implications of the growing use of armed drones are also hugely important. And , it is perhaps important to point out, they too have a bearing on the human rights of those caught up in the so-called ‘risk free’ warfare.

There are signs that Mr Emmerson understands these wider issues. In his statement he said

Given the relative ease with which this technology can be deployed, and given its relatively low cost (both in economic terms, and in terms of risk to the lives of service personnel of the states deploying the technology) the issue now has to be confronted squarely by the international community... [T]hese legal questions are not confined to the use of drones... but it is the use of drones which has propelled this issue to the top of the international agenda because they can and have been used with such apparent ease and frequency to devastating effect...”

Also in his [interview on the BBC programme The World at One](#), Mr Emmerson also added that

“the real issue is that the frequency and ease with which they [drones] can be resorted to carries with it the risk that there may be an unacceptable high level of risk of civilian casualties given that the technology is deployed in densely populated civilian areas”

No doubt Mr Emmerson and his team will be under great pressure to limit the scope of the inquiry and to take a narrow definition of the human rights implications of drone strikes and look simply at whether particular strikes ‘have gone wrong’.

If that is the case this will be a missed opportunity.

The implication of the growing use – and proliferation – of armed drones for global security as well as their impact on human rights is very severe. Mr Emmerson and his team have a huge responsibility to get this right.

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