

UK Defence Select Committee to investigate use of armed drones

By [Drone Wars UK](#)

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The Times is today reporting that the UK Defence Select Committee is to hold an inquiry into the use of armed drones:

Members of the Commons Defence Select Committee are to investigate the deployment of armed unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) in Afghanistan as part of a two-year inquiry into the use of lethal force, The Times has learned. MPs and peers may also hold a joint debate on Britain's drone policy and the ethics of killing targets remotely. In addition ministers face calls to reveal whether they share British intelligence with the US to help CIA-operated drones to kill terror suspects in Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia.

The report goes on:

James Arbuthnot, the Conservative chairman of the Defence Select Committee, said that the issue of drones was gaining in importance as a larger proportion of the Royal Airforce became unmanned. "An unmanned aerial vehicle is the same as any other platform that fires weapons," he said. "The issues that are concerning people are the distance between the person who is controlling the platform and the death that results from it."

While it is good news that an inquiry is going to happen, it is important that the issues are properly investigated and it is not used to simply affirm the 'direction of travel'. The Times quotes two senior ex-defence secretaries, welcoming the inquiry but taking the opportunity to put the usual arguments across to the public:

"Lord Hutton, a former Labour defence secretary, said that the weapon was the "face of modern warfare" and welcomed greater debate on its use. "This is the future of war fighting and deterrence. We need this technology and we need to make sure the public understands that. Sir Malcolm Rifkind, a former Tory defence and foreign secretary, agreed. "This is part of modern military capability, which will undoubtedly become much more substantial.

It is important the Defence Select Committee and the public see details of all the UK's 350 drone strikes, the circumstances surrounding the launch of weapons and the resulting casualty figures.

The Times report quotes senior UN human rights official welcoming the proposed inquiry:

Christof Heyns, the UN special rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary killings, said a debate in the British Parliament would be very important in helping encourage compliance with international law among the governments that use drones. "The

international framework is clear but its enforcement, especially when it is under stress, as is the case at the moment, depends to a large extent on voluntary compliance by states," he said. "The role of especially the stronger states, such as the permanent members of the [UN] Security Council such as the UK, will for better or worse, shape the broader international reaction."

Philip Alston the previous UN special rapporteur on extrajudicial killing, said that Britain could bring greater transparency on drone use by the US. "If the British government is forced to be more transparent and more forthcoming, that puts pressure on its allies, and public opinion, certainly in the United States will see that what they currently assume to be the reasonable norm is not," said Professor Alston.....

"One of the big problems is the shortage of information - we simply do not know what is true and can, as a result, not take an informed decision," Professor Heyns said. "transparency is called for." He plans to present a report on drones to the UN next year. "I also take up the issue with the relevant governments in a direct on-and-off-the-record way." he said.

A Select Committee Inquiry is a welcome step forward, but as always the devil is in the detail and we look forward to seeing the proposed scope and remit of the inquiry. For full story see Today's Times

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