

Keep your eyes on west's new terror in the sky

One of my favourite t-shirts is black and has in striking gold lettering, the words, “Fly kites not drones”. It always attracts attention and opens the door for conversation. What are drones and what do they have to do with kites? Where are drones used? Who makes them? Why are they used? All excellent questions. The phrase was inspired by a young Afghan boy, a member of Afghan Peace Volunteers. In Afghanistan, clear blue skies mean perfect weather for flying kites (remember the film *Kite Runner*?) but they now also mean perfect weather for the use of armed drones too. So a season that once brought joy and laughter now brings apprehension and fear.

As the war in Afghanistan was winding down, new areas for their use opened in Libya, Iraq and Syria. Drone research, development and use began in the US and Israel but today the Remote Control Project estimate that 86 countries now have drones, many for surveillance but 19 have armed drone programmes. Drones are a new weapon of choice. The US is expanding its drone force and needs to train 400 pilots a year by 2019. The first operation from UK soil took place in April 2013 with an attack in Afghanistan. The Reaper programme, once operated on our behalf from the US, is now managed and run from RAF Waddington in Lincolnshire.

In his analysis of Ministry of Defence data the director of Drone Wars UK, Chris Cole reports that in the first half of 2016 British air strikes in Iraq and Syria increased by 85% over the previous six months. 249 strikes were launched from British aircraft and drones between July and December 2015, while 464 strikes were launched in the first six months of 2016. Readers may wonder why the UK is involved? In what they call ‘Operation Shader’ the UK has been part of a military coalition carrying out airstrikes over Iraq since 2014 and Syria since 2015. The airstrikes involve a variety of weapon-systems of which armed drones are a growing part. Drone Wars UK research indicates that 1,427 Reaper missions have been carried out by the UK since 2014. The NGO AIRWARS estimate that tens of hundreds of non-combatants are being killed in these air strikes - a figure disputed by Governments. However, Governments rarely seek to measure the human impact of military operations whereas AIRWARS gather and collate data from the region to capture the human consequences of these air strikes.

Keeping the real story under wraps seems to be the operating model of Governments. Getting things out in the open is one of the roles of NGOs and campaign groups. A new briefing from Drone Wars UK on the proliferation and dangers of armed drones, *Drones: Out of sight, Out of*

mind, Out of control', will be launched in London in early October. Others will gather, as they do on a regular basis, at RAF Waddington under the banner “We are watching you” with the intention of keeping the work of the British armed Reaper drone programme in the public eye. Concern about the accountability, secrecy, lack of international scrutiny of use of force in relation to drones will be raised by NGOs at the UN General Assembly First Committee on Disarmament and International Security on 15 October.

In 2014 the Holy See made an intervention at the UN in Geneva on armed drones saying: “We are witnessing a certain proliferation of this technology and a growing use of it in various conflicts. The challenges are multiple and related to international humanitarian law, to human rights, and to international law. The ethical implications are not insignificant. The choice of indifference in relation to this question is counter-productive.”

It is thanks to researchers and campaigners that the indifference of Governments will be challenged.

- Fly Kites not Drones education pack here: www.flykitesnotdrones.org/home
- Drone Wars UK : www.dronewars.net/
- Airwars: monitoring coalition air strikes in Iraq, Syria and Libya: www.airwars.org

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