

AFM - CALL TO OPPOSE LETHAL DRONE USE

Background:

On 3 January 2020, in the hours of darkness, Qasem Soleimani, an Army general from Iran, a country that is at peace with the United States, was killed by a U.S. drone near Baghdad International Airport in Iraq, a country that is torn by warfare but that is a U.S. ally. Although the attack primarily targeted General Soleimani, published reports say it also resulted in multiple collateral deaths, as drone strikes often do.

Drones have been used in warfare for almost 30 years, but their evolution has been horrifying. First used for surveillance during the Gulf War and the civil strife in Yugoslavia, since 2002 they have been employed as a favorite method of “targeted killings,” as U.S. administrations refer to them – otherwise referred to as assassinations. Other countries use drones in warfare too, but the United States has sought to legitimize their use in pursuit of this nation’s military goals.

Statistics are hard to obtain. In 2011, John Brennan, at the time President Obama’s chief counter terrorism adviser, famously stated publicly that for “almost a year” no civilian had died in U.S. drone strikes in Pakistan. With great difficulty, the Bureau of Investigative Journalism in London tries to track U.S. drone strikes and their aftermath. As of 2/4/2020 BIJ had logged 6,876 confirmed U.S. drone strikes since it began recording data in January 2004. It estimates total deaths at 8,459-12,105, and it puts civilian deaths at 769-1,725. Of those, between 253 and 397 have been children. Akbar Ahmed, an American University professor and author of “The Thistle and the Drone,” draws a horrific portrait of children in Pakistan lying in bed night after night listening to the buzz, waiting for it to fall and kill.

Quakers have stood as advocates for peace and as witness against war and violence since their beginnings more than 350 years ago. The Quaker Peace Testimony states: *"We utterly deny all outward wars and strife and fightings with outward weapons, for any end or under any pretence whatsoever. And this is our testimony to the whole world."*

In America and the rest of the world, Quaker meetings and other organizations have spoken out against drone warfare. This testimony has taken many different forms. In 2013, Orange Grove Meeting in southern California passed a minute opposing drone warfare. The next year, Madison Friends Meeting in Wisconsin came to unity around a minute objecting to the building of a drone support facility at Volk Field, a local Air National Guard base. Kendal Monthly meeting in Kennett Square, Pennsylvania, passed a minute urging that the U.S. government put an end to ‘this secretive, remote-controlled killing’ and calling for an international treaty controlling the development and use of lethal drones. Last year, Diane Randall, the executive secretary of Friends Committee on National Legislation, told a protest outside the offices of General Atomics, the company that makes the Predator and Reaper drones: “Drone strikes that include the killing of civilians is counter to people of all faiths, who find meaning in our

relationships to each other, our common humanity and God. It is time — nearly 20 years after our first lethal drone strikes — to acknowledge that this harmful drone program should end. It is immoral, unethical, and prolongs the United States in endless wars.”

In 2016, Midlothian Friends Meeting, a monthly meeting in Virginia affiliated with Baltimore Yearly Meeting, adopted a minute against drones. The drone attack in Baghdad this year adds urgency to their call. Following is an adapted version of the Midlothian minute, written in full acknowledgment of and gratitude for the Quaker process that led to its adoption in Midlothian:

Minute:

Annapolis Friends Meeting (Quakers) is deeply concerned about the proliferation of lethal unmanned aerial vehicles, commonly known as drones. We are especially troubled that the United States is leading the way for drone warfare and the dehumanizing attacks of targets on kill lists around the globe, as demonstrated recently in the January 2020 attack at Baghdad International Airport. In this incident, simple arrest would appear to have been feasible, permitting Soleimani to be brought to justice and saving the lives of noncombatants if the U.S. also would join and enforce the International Criminal court. We believe war is never a justifiable means of solving conflicts, and it only perpetuates fear, suffering, and revenge.

Some see drones as an improved method of waging war. With drone technology, “pilots” at U.S. bases use remote control to kill people who are thousands of miles away. Drones have become the preferred weapons to conduct war because they are seen as minimizing the risk to U.S. troops. However, drone pilots, like ground troops, are experiencing mental health problems and post-traumatic stress disorder. We must stand against these insidious, dehumanizing weapons with the same vigor that we stand against weapons of mass destruction.

We are also creating hostility in communities attacked by drones. Evidence suggests that the trauma of living under drone attacks causes anti-American resentment and aids in the recruitment of violent extremists. According to a former State Department official, for every drone strike, the U.S. generates roughly forty to sixty new enemies. Drone strikes have led to the death of hundreds of innocent civilians, including children. In addition, the U.S. is using drone warfare in countries where we are not at war, such as Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, the Philippines and now Iraq. [However, the drones program allows the U.S., and potentially other countries, to remain in a constant state of endless, undeclared wars of questionable legality.]

Equally important, if drones lower the threshold for war, what happens when everyone has drones? Drone technology is spreading. Friends Committee on National Legislation reports that more than 50 countries are developing drones and more than 70 have acquired various types. Experts suggest that every country will possess the ability to create or acquire armed drones within 10 years. Many mistakenly see the use of drones as a low cost – human and financial – alternative to war. But, just as the spread

of automatic weapons, nuclear weapons, internet hacking, and other military technology has become inevitable, the spread of military drones already are commonplace. Unless our policies change, the day is readily foreseeable when military drones may become as available as automatic weapons and when U.S. citizens become targets of similar anonymous and lethal attacks on our own communities by terrorist and criminals.

We call on our country's leaders to stop the international spread of drones and promote a just and peaceful world community. Our country's decision to use drones will ultimately define the type of nation and world we leave to our children. We urge our government to put an end to this secretive, remote-controlled killing and instead promote foreign policies that are consistent with the values of a democratic and humane society.

Annapolis Friends Meeting recognizes the value of every life. We are guided by the inspirational teachings of Jesus and other spiritual leaders promoting peace. We also stand by our Quaker witness against war and violence which began over 350 years ago. The Quaker Peace Testimony states: *"We utterly deny all outward wars and strife and fightings with outward weapons, for any end or under any pretence whatsoever. And this is our testimony to the whole world."*

Recommended actions:

Annapolis Friends Meeting recommends this minute be circulated to all members of the Maryland delegation to Congress and that members of Meeting ask for time to discuss them in person with the two U.S. Senators and the four U.S. representatives whose districts include Anne Arundel County. It recommends sending it as a letter to the Capital and Bay Weekly and Washington Post following up with the editors to try to secure publication. It recommends copying the minute to BYM and all BYM monthly meetings and FCNL with a call to generate similar minutes. And it recommends setting up a local forum accessible to the public at a venue such as Anne Arundel Community College, Johns Hopkins, USNA or St. Johns to discuss how drone warfare has evolved and how it is likely to evolve in the future with representatives from other faith communities and from the U.S. military, including the U.S. Naval Academy and Fort George G. Meade.

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