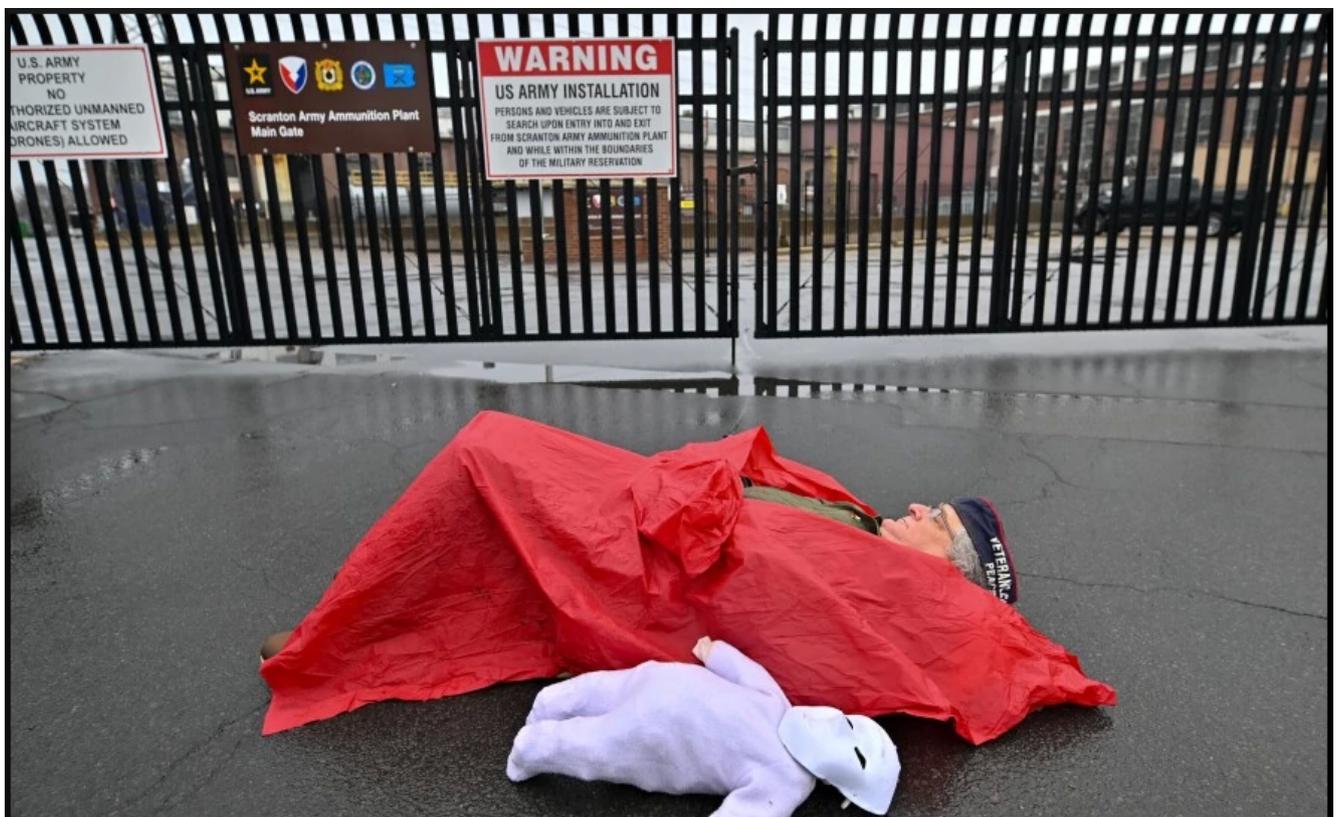


Rally for Peace: Shut Down General Dynamics – No More Weapons for Israel

According to event organizer Jack Gilroy, a group of over 100 people protested outside General Dynamics in a cold rain in Scranton, PA, Joe Biden's home town. This factory manufactures ammunition required by both Israel and Ukraine to keep the U.S. backed slaughterhouse in business. Sponsors for this action include: Ban Killer Drones, The Merchants of Death Tribunal, Broome County Peace Action, Broome County Veterans For Peace and Upstate Drone Action.

The event was given positive coverage by **WVIA News in Scranton**, which published a great slideshow on their website.



Veterans for Peace Director Mike Fermer lays in front of the gate to the Scranton Army Ammunition Plant. Src: WVAI

The **Press Release** is below:

Following talks with Blinken, Israel has resumed bombing of Gaza, including the south, where Israel told Palestinian civilians to go in what UNICEF spokesperson James Elder is calling "*a war on children.*" An Israeli spokesperson states its forces are unleashing "*the mother of all thumpings*" on Gaza. The Israeli +972 Magazine published the piece "'A mass assassination factory': Inside Israel's calculated bombing of Gaza." See Al Jazeera live stream and X/Twitter list. There have been major protests around the world, from South Africa to Denmark to Jordan.

This weekend, a coalition of groups protested in Biden's hometown of Scranton, Penn.

Video by Vera Scroggins.

The protests centered around a General Dynamics facility which the coalition states "*makes 155 mm shells which have been used by Israeli artillery to bomb Gaza where over 15,000 people have been killed with 75 percent being children and women. The geographic area of Gaza is just one-third the size of Lackawanna County [where Scranton is located]. Israel has dropped 25,000 tons of explosives on tiny Gaza – equal to the explosive force of two nuclear bombs. ... The Biden administration ordered 57,000 155 mm shells to be delivered to Israel.*"

The groups include Northeast Pennsylvania for Palestine, Veterans for Peace and Democratic Socialists of America. The coalition states: "*Genocide Joe is attempting to remove all restrictions currently in place on Israel's access to U.S. stockpiles in the region as a way of sidestepping congressional approval. The killing must stop.*"

Video by John Amidon:

The coalition cites the *“Leahy Law that prohibits sending weapons to known human rights violators”* and vows to block the main gate of General Dynamics facility.

“Josh Paul, a former senior State Department official overseeing arms sales who resigned in protest last month, said that Israel is in violation of international law. ‘Israel is committing war crimes in its actions in Gaza right now,’ he said. ‘And it’s not just my opinion. I’ve actually heard from officials across government, including elected officials at a very senior level, who share that opinion but aren’t willing to say it in public.’

“Hospitals had become refuge for many, and they have been bombed, along with actual refugee camps. Even during this ‘humanitarian pause’ Gazans who have attempted to return home in the North have been fired on by the Israeli Forces.

“While we are pleased to see the reunification of families ... we must remember the Israeli government has vowed that they will continue their campaign of carnage after the temporary ‘humanitarian pause.’

“We in no uncertain terms condemn Rep. Matt Cartwright, Sen. Bob Casey, and Sen. Fetterman for providing rhetorical cover for the genocide of Palestinians. We condemn President Biden, who could stop this genocide with a phone call and who has been a vehement supporter of the brutal Israeli occupation his entire political career.”

Speakers at the rally at noon on Sunday included:

Mike Ferner, Director of Veterans for Peace USA

Nick Mottern, National Board of Directors of VFP

Ariel Gold, Director of Fellowship of Reconciliation

Jamie Santiago, University of Scranton student

Julia Stanley, Binghamton NY Peace and Justice advocate

Lori Watson, Scranton Peace and Justice advocate
Jack Gilroy, Pax Christi USA/VFP

**Featured Image: Protesters outside General Dynamics in Scranton, protesting US weapons sales to Ukraine and Israel which result in tens of thousands of pointless deaths while US corporations receive billions of \$\$.* src ~Vera Scroggins Video above.

For more information about the activities of US weapons manufacturers, check out the **Merchants of Death Tribunal**. It has already begun with an introductory session on November 5, followed by new sessions released on zoom every Sunday night at 8pm. The schedule can be found on merchantsofdeath.org and the video presentations from each session are on Rumble.

Military-Industrial Complex Is Itching to Send “Hunter-Killer” Drones to Ukraine

by Sara Sirota, published on [The Intercept](https://theintercept.com), May 18, 2022

After failing to convince the Biden administration to ship NATO fighter jets to Ukraine, the military-industrial complex is now trying to coax the White House into sending what are, essentially, unmanned fighter jets to counter Russia’s invasion. Kyiv reportedly met with the major defense contractor General Atomics about obtaining the “Hunter-Killer” MQ-9 Reaper drone, armed with Hellfire missiles, which the U.S. has infamously used in botched airstrikes that killed and

maimed civilians in Afghanistan, Somalia, and other countries around the world. The company and Kyiv's allies in Washington are appealing to policymakers to greenlight the export, despite the high risk of escalation that could turn the devastating war nuclear.

Take retired Air Force Lt. Gen. David Deptula, dean of the influential and General Atomics-funded Mitchell Institute for Aerospace Studies, who penned an op-ed in *Forbes* advocating for the U.S. to give Ukraine Reapers in March, before Kyiv's interest was publicly known. He blasted skeptics who voiced concern about offering Poland's MiG-29 fighter jets to Ukraine, saying they're "*being cowed by Putin*," the Russian president.

In a phone call with *The Intercept*, Deptula reiterated his hawkish stance, arguing concern about conflict escalation "*is being fed by the Russians through a very sophisticated information operations campaign to deter U.S. and NATO actions to assist the Ukrainians. Anything's fair up to, but not including, the use of NATO forces in the conduct of hostile operations against the Russians.*"

"*Approve this, US Govt.,*" Rep. Adam Kinzinger, R-Ill., tweeted last month when the *Washington Post* reported that Ukraine's ambassador to the U.S. met with General Atomics. Notorious for calling on the U.S. to enforce a dangerous no-fly zone over Ukraine, Kinzinger, along with Reps. Ted Lieu, D-Calif., and Chrissy Houlahan, D-Penn., also asked the Defense Department to report on how long it would take to train a Ukrainian pilot to fly the MQ-9. This week, senior fellows from the General Atomics-funded Hudson Institute wrote an op-ed in *The Dispatch* endorsing sending Ukraine Reapers as well. And General Atomics sends lobbyists to Washington specifically to influence the strict export policy that the U.S. has enforced to limit the global proliferation of such dangerous drones.

The White House has shown an increased willingness to give

Ukraine weapons as the war in Ukraine has dragged on and U.S. aims shift toward seeing a “weakened” Russia. Initially, it was only willing to give shoulder-fired missiles; backpack-sized drones called Switchblades strapped with grenades; and encrypted communications equipment. More recently, the administration has greenlighted heavy artillery weapons, armored personnel carriers, and longer-flying experimental drones called Phoenix Ghosts. Last week, President Joe Biden signed into law the first “lend-lease” program to accelerate military shipments since World War II, and this week, Democrats are trying to fast-track \$40 billion to supply Ukraine with more arms and replenish the U.S.’s depleted stockpiles, at the expense of new Covid-19 relief spending.

Along the way, Kyiv and the U.S. defense industry have had a strong ally in the American media, which is constantly asking the administration why it’s not getting more involved. After the Washington Post reported on Ukraine’s discussions with General Atomics, Politico beckoned: *“Ukraine wants armed drones. Is the U.S. ready to deliver?”*

“It’s not every day that the United States approves the sale or transfer of armed drones to a foreign country – but Ukraine is hoping the Biden administration will heed the call of soldiers on the ground to do just that,” the story led.

If the government approves a deal, Ukraine would be one of only a few countries to receive Gray Eagles or Reapers. Unlike fighter jets such as the F-16, the U.S. hasn’t widely provided them because of an international agreement known as the Missile Technology Control Regime. Aiming to curb the spread of weapons of mass destruction, the nonbinding regime calls on exporters to use a *“strong presumption of denial”* standard when considering giving advanced drones like the MQ-9 to other countries.

However, following pressure from the defense industry, former

President Donald Trump eased that burden in July 2020 as part of a broader effort to expand U.S. arms sales globally, opening the door for the State Department to authorize Reaper exports to the United Arab Emirates and Taiwan. The policy shift drew strong rebuke from members of Congress, who may now be tested with a transfer to Ukraine.

Describing the Trump administration's policy shift, Sen. Bob Menendez, D-N.J., now chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, said at the time, *"This reckless decision once again makes it more likely that we will export some of our most deadly weaponry to human rights abusers around the world."* Sen. Chris Murphy, D-Conn., quickly teamed up with Sen. Rand Paul, R-Ky., and other Democratic and Republican senators on legislation to ban exports of advanced drones, except to NATO members and a handful of other close allies. Ukraine was not on the list.

Asked their positions on giving Ukraine the Reaper now, both Menendez and Murphy said they'd have to review the proposed deal first before taking a position.

"I have to look at that. I have to see what their ability to use it [is]. I have to see how they use it," Menendez told The Intercept.

General Atomics has already tried to clear up such questions. A company spokesperson told Forbes last month that motivated Ukrainian forces could undergo an expedited training period much shorter than the U.S. Air Force's mandatory one-year lessons for drone pilots.

Paul, the Senate's strongest critic of U.S. military assistance to Ukraine, warned about the risk of NATO getting drawn in further. *"I do understand that there is a danger, and I haven't fully concluded where I am on this, but you know, there is always the danger of escalation,"* he said in an interview. (He added that he would be more comfortable if

Ukraine paid for the weapons, but since MQ-9s cost tens of millions of dollars each, that is not likely.)

Bill Hartung, senior research fellow at the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, warned in an email to The Intercept that giving Ukraine armed Reapers would be a major step up from what the U.S. has already supplied.

"In my view, Ukraine has the right to defend itself, and some weapons supplies are warranted on that basis," Hartung wrote. "But supplying large, long-range drones would be a significant escalation in the types of systems supplied to Ukraine, and as such shouldn't go forward without significant scrutiny by Congress."

Members of Congress do have the authority to block an export, like when Paul introduced a motion to halt a missile sale to Saudi Arabia in November, which was voted down in the Senate. He distinguished that case from Ukraine, though. *"Most of the battles that I've chosen on selling arms have been to countries where there's a lot of people ... who've talked about their human rights abuses,"* Paul said, noting he hasn't objected to deals with NATO allies. *"Ukraine's not NATO and I'm not a supporter of them being in NATO, but at the same time, I am sympathetic to their plight."*

Meanwhile, Ukrainian forces have reportedly used internationally banned cluster munitions during the current war, and have a sizable neo-Nazi faction. Ukraine is also home to one of the largest arms trafficking markets in Europe, meaning weapons sent to Kyiv could end up with unintended militias or in other conflicts abroad.

Meanwhile, it's not clear whether the State Department has made any formal moves toward a possible Reaper deal. Reporter Michael Peck, writing about the meeting between Ukraine and General Atomics, speculated in Forbes:

“[I]t is unlikely that such talks between Ukraine and a U.S. defense contractor would have happened without a green light from the Biden administration.”

A State Department official who requested anonymity said it cannot comment on possible arms transfers before formal notification to Congress. General Atomics spokesperson C. Mark Brinkley told The Intercept Tuesday that the company remains in close contact with Ukraine and U.S. government representatives.

Hartung warned that giving Reapers to Ukraine in service of weakening Russia, as stated by Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, can especially be dangerous.

“A policy of trying to weaken Russia risks pushing Putin into a corner and increasing the risks of escalation of the conflict to a direct U.S.-Russia war, with all the risks that entails, including the possibility of the use of nuclear weapons,” he said.

Saudi Bombings Kill Scores of Civilians—Including Children—in Yemen

by Andrea Germanos, published on Common Dreams, January 21, 2022

A series of Saudi-led airstrikes were blamed Friday for

killing scores of people in Yemen as civilians, including children, continue to suffer deadly consequences of the U.S.-backed conflict that has lasted for years.

Overnight bombings included one that targeted a prison holding mostly migrants in the northern city of Sa'ada, an area described as being under the control of Houthi forces.

"It is impossible to know how many people have been killed. It seems to have been a horrific act of violence," said Ahmed Mahat, MSF's (Doctors Without Borders) head of mission in Yemen.

A hospital in the city *"has received 138 wounded and 70 dead"* and is *"so overwhelmed that they can't take any more patients,"* MSF said.

News update from #Yemen:

Last night Sa'ada City Remand Prison was hit by what was reported to be an air strike from the Saudi-led Coalition. Al-Gumhourriyeh Hospital in the city has received 138 wounded and 70 dead. They are so overwhelmed that they can't take any more patients.

– MSF International (@MSF) January 21, 2022

Facilities used for detention in Sa'ada, #Yemen, were hit early this morning, killing and injuring over a hundred detainees.

Emergency workers were searching for victims amidst the rubble. pic.twitter.com/CdT8qe7wEF

– ICRC (@ICRC) January 21, 2022

Strikes also hit further south in the port city of Hodeida. According to *Agence France-Presse*:

“Video footage showed bodies in the rubble and dazed survivors after an air attack from the Saudi Arabia-led pro-government coalition took out a telecommunications hub. Yemen suffered a nationwide internet blackout, a web monitor said.”

The humanitarian group Save the Children said that at least three children, as well as more than 60 adults, were reported killed by the series of strikes, though the number of confirmed casualties would likely rise.

The children killed as a result of the Hodeidah strike had been playing on a nearby football field, the group said.

“Children are bearing the brunt of this crisis,” said Gillian Moyes, the group’s country director in Yemen.

“They are being killed and maimed, watching as their schools and hospitals are being destroyed, and denied access to basic lifesaving services,” she said. *“They are asking us: Does it matter if I die?”*

“The initial casualties report from Sa’ada is horrifying,” Moyes added. *“Migrants seeking better lives for themselves and their families, Yemeni civilians injured by the dozens, is a picture we never hoped to wake up to in Yemen.”*

In the U.S., the Biden administration—like previous administrations—has faced calls to stop supplying Saudi Arabia with weapons and other support being used to wage the bombing campaign on Yemen that’s estimated to have killed over 300,000 Yemenis since 2015 and unleashed what the United Nations called the world’s worst humanitarian crisis.

In *The New Republic* earlier this month, the Quincy Institute’s Trita Parsi and Annelle Sheline wrote:

Despite Biden’s promise to end the war in Yemen and his pledge

to make the Saudis *“pay the price, and make them in fact the pariah that they are,”* he has fallen back into America’s hegemonic role in the Middle East: taking sides, making America a party to conflicts, and selling more weapons—U.S. interest, peace, stability, and human rights be damned.

Responding to news of the overnight airstrikes, journalist Spencer Ackerman tweeted:

“America is complicit in this, as it has been complicit in every Saudi or UAE airstrike of this horrific war that Biden and his senior officials once promised to end. I hope they see these children when they sleep at night.”

The International Committee of the Red Cross sounded alarm about the recent intensification of violence in Yemen.

“It is essential that we protect the lives of people in armed conflict. The human toll that we witness in Yemen is unacceptable,”

Fabrizio Carboni, ICRC’s regional director for the Near and Middle East, said in a statement Thursday.

“Civilians living in densely populated areas have been exposed to increased attacks,” he continued, *“causing death and injury and deepening the psychological trauma among the affected communities after seven years of war.”*

The deadly strikes came after a Tuesday statement from the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights also expressing concern about the uptick in violence in Yemen.

“In recent days,” said spokesperson Ravina Shamdasani, *“there have been dozens of airstrikes and artillery strikes launched by the parties with seemingly little regard for civilians.”*

“The fighting has damaged civilian objects and critical

infrastructure, including telecommunication towers and water reservoirs, as well as hospitals in Sana'a and Taizz. With frontlines shifting rapidly over large areas, civilians are also exposed to the constant threat of landmines," she said.

"As has been shown time and time again," added Shamdasani, "there is no military solution to the conflict in Yemen."

**Featured Image: Yemenis inspect the scene of aerial attacks said to be carried out by aircraft of the coalition led by Saudi Arabia on January 18, 2022 in Sana'a, Yemen. (Photo: Mohammed Hamoud/Getty Images) Cropped*

Andrea Germanos is a senior editor and staff writer at Common Dreams. She can be reached on twitter at @andreagermanos and by email: andrea@commondreams.org

Keep Your LAWS Off My Planet: Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems and the Fight to Contain Them

by Rebecca Gordon, published on Tom Dispatch, January 9, 2022

Here's a scenario to consider: a military force has purchased a million cheap, disposable flying drones each the size of a deck of cards, each capable of carrying three grams of explosives – enough to kill a single person or, in a "shaped charge," pierce a steel wall. They've been programmed to seek

out and “engage” (kill) certain human beings, based on specific “signature” characteristics like carrying a weapon, say, or having a particular skin color. They fit in a single shipping container and can be deployed remotely. Once launched, they will fly and kill autonomously without any further human action.

Science fiction? Not really. It could happen tomorrow. The technology already exists.

In fact, lethal autonomous weapons systems (LAWS) have a long history. During the spring of 1972, I spent a few days occupying the physics building at Columbia University in New York City. With a hundred other students, I slept on the floor, ate donated takeout food, and listened to Alan Ginsberg when he showed up to honor us with some of his extemporaneous poetry. I wrote leaflets then, commandeering a Xerox machine to print them out.

And why, of all campus buildings, did we choose the one housing the Physics department? The answer: to convince five Columbia faculty physicists to sever their connections with the Pentagon’s Jason Defense Advisory Group, a program offering money and lab space to support basic scientific research that might prove useful for U.S. war-making efforts. Our specific objection: to the involvement of Jason’s scientists in designing parts of what was then known as the “*automated battlefield*” for deployment in Vietnam. That system would indeed prove a forerunner of the lethal autonomous weapons systems that are poised to become a potentially significant part of this country’s – and the world’s – armory.

Early (Semi-)Autonomous Weapons

Washington faced quite a few strategic problems in prosecuting its war in Indochina, including the general corruption and unpopularity of the South Vietnamese regime it was propping up. Its biggest military challenge, however, was probably

North Vietnam's continual infiltration of personnel and supplies on what was called the Ho Chi Minh Trail, which ran from north to south along the Cambodian and Laotian borders. The Trail was, in fact, a network of easily repaired dirt roads and footpaths, streams and rivers, lying under a thick jungle canopy that made it almost impossible to detect movement from the air.

The U.S. response, developed by Jason in 1966 and deployed the following year, was an attempt to interdict that infiltration by creating an automated battlefield composed of four parts, analogous to a human body's eyes, nerves, brain, and limbs. The eyes were a broad variety of sensors – acoustic, seismic, even chemical (for sensing human urine) – most dropped by air into the jungle. The nerve equivalents transmitted signals to the "*brain*." However, since the sensors had a maximum transmission range of only about 20 miles, the U.S. military had to constantly fly aircraft above the foliage to catch any signal that might be tripped by passing North Vietnamese troops or transports. The planes would then relay the news to the brain. (Originally intended to be remote controlled, those aircraft performed so poorly that human pilots were usually necessary.)

And that brain, a magnificent military installation secretly built in Thailand's Nakhon Phanom, housed two state-of-the-art IBM mainframe computers. A small army of programmers wrote and rewrote the code to keep them ticking, as they attempted to make sense of the stream of data transmitted by those planes. The target coordinates they came up with were then transmitted to attack aircraft, which were the limb equivalents. The group running that automated battlefield was designated Task Force Alpha and the whole project went under the code name Igloo White.

As it turned out, Igloo White was largely an expensive failure, costing about a billion dollars a year for five years (almost \$40 billion total in today's dollars). The time lag

between a sensor tripping and munitions dropping made the system ineffective. As a result, at times Task Force Alpha simply carpet-bombed areas where a single sensor might have gone off. The North Vietnamese quickly realized how those sensors worked and developed methods of fooling them, from playing truck-ignition recordings to planting buckets of urine.

Given the history of semi-automated weapons systems like drones and “*smart bombs*” in the intervening years, you probably won’t be surprised to learn that this first automated battlefield couldn’t discriminate between soldiers and civilians. In this, they merely continued a trend that’s existed since at least the eighteenth century in which wars routinely kill more civilians than combatants.

None of these shortcomings kept Defense Department officials from regarding the automated battlefield with awe. Andrew Cockburn described this worshipful posture in his book *Kill Chain: The Rise of the High-Tech Assassins*, quoting Leonard Sullivan, a high-ranking Pentagon official who visited Vietnam in 1968:

“Just as it is almost impossible to be an agnostic in the Cathedral of Notre Dame, so it is difficult to keep from being swept up in the beauty and majesty of the Task Force Alpha temple.”

Who or what, you well might wonder, was to be worshipped in such a temple?

Most aspects of that Vietnam-era “*automated*” battlefield actually required human intervention. Human beings were planting the sensors, programming the computers, piloting the airplanes, and releasing the bombs. In what sense, then, was that battlefield “*automated*”? As a harbinger of what was to come, the system had eliminated human intervention at a single crucial point in the process: the decision to kill. On that

automated battlefield, the computers decided where and when to drop the bombs.

In 1969, Army Chief of Staff William Westmoreland expressed his enthusiasm for this removal of the messy human element from war-making. Addressing a luncheon for the Association of the U.S. Army, a lobbying group, he declared:

“On the battlefield of the future enemy forces will be located, tracked, and targeted almost instantaneously through the use of data links, computer-assisted intelligence evaluation, and automated fire control. With first round kill probabilities approaching certainty, and with surveillance devices that can continually track the enemy, the need for large forces to fix the opposition will be less important.”

What Westmoreland meant by *“fix the opposition”* was kill the enemy. Another military euphemism in the twenty-first century is *“engage.”* In either case, the meaning is the same: the role of lethal autonomous weapons systems is to automatically find and kill human beings, without human intervention.

New LAWS for a New Age – Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems

Every autumn, the British Broadcasting Corporation sponsors a series of four lectures given by an expert in some important field of study. In 2021, the BBC invited Stuart Russell, professor of computer science and founder of the Center for Human-Compatible Artificial Intelligence at the University of California, Berkeley, to deliver those *“Reith Lectures.”* His general subject was the future of artificial intelligence (AI), and the second lecture was entitled *“The Future Role of AI in Warfare.”* In it, he addressed the issue of lethal autonomous weapons systems, or LAWS, which the United Nations defines as *“weapons that locate, select, and engage human targets without human supervision.”*

Russell’s main point, eloquently made, was that, although many

people believe lethal autonomous weapons are a potential future nightmare, residing in the realm of science fiction, *"They are not. You can buy them today. They are advertised on the web."*

I've never seen any of the movies in the *Terminator* franchise, but apparently military planners and their PR flacks assume most people derive their understanding of such LAWS from this fictional dystopian world. Pentagon officials are frequently at pains to explain why the weapons they are developing are not, in fact, real-life equivalents of SkyNet – the worldwide communications network that, in those films, becomes self-conscious and decides to eliminate humankind. Not to worry, as a deputy secretary of defense told Russell, *"We have listened carefully to these arguments and my experts have assured me that there is no risk of accidentally creating SkyNet."*

Russell's point, however, was that a weapons system doesn't need self-awareness to act autonomously or to present a threat to innocent human beings. What it does need is:

- A mobile platform (anything that can move, from a tiny quadcopter to a fixed-wing aircraft)
- Sensory capacity (the ability to detect visual or sound information)
- The ability to make tactical decisions (the same kind of capacity already found in computer programs that play chess)
- The ability to "engage," i.e. kill (which can be as complicated as firing a missile or dropping a bomb, or as rudimentary as committing robot suicide by slamming into a target and exploding)

The reality is that such systems already exist. Indeed, a government-owned weapons company in Turkey recently advertised its Kargu drone – a quadcopter *"the size of a dinner plate,"* as Russell described it, which can carry a kilogram of explosives and is capable of making *"anti-personnel autonomous*

hits” with “*targets selected on images and face recognition.*” The company’s site has since been altered to emphasize its adherence to a supposed “man-in-the-loop” principle. However, the U.N. has reported that a fully-autonomous Kargu-2 was, in fact, deployed in Libya in 2020.

You can buy your own quadcopter right now on Amazon, although you’ll still have to apply some DIY computer skills if you want to get it to operate autonomously.

The truth is that lethal autonomous weapons systems are less likely to look like something from the *Terminator* movies than like swarms of tiny killer bots. Computer miniaturization means that the technology already exists to create effective LAWS. If your smart phone could fly, it could be an autonomous weapon. Newer phones use facial recognition software to “*decide*” whether to allow access. It’s not a leap to create flying weapons the size of phones, programmed to “*decide*” to attack specific individuals, or individuals with specific features. Indeed, it’s likely such weapons already exist.

Can We Outlaw LAWS?

So, what’s wrong with LAWS, and is there any point in trying to outlaw them? Some opponents argue that the problem is they eliminate human responsibility for making lethal decisions. Such critics suggest that, unlike a human being aiming and pulling the trigger of a rifle, a LAWS can choose and fire at its own targets. Therein, they argue, lies the special danger of these systems, which will inevitably make mistakes, as anyone whose iPhone has refused to recognize his or her face will acknowledge.

In my view, the issue isn’t that autonomous systems remove human beings from lethal decisions. To the extent that weapons of this sort make mistakes, human beings will still bear moral responsibility for deploying such imperfect lethal systems. LAWS are designed and deployed by human beings, who therefore

remain responsible for their effects. Like the semi-autonomous drones of the present moment (often piloted from half a world away), lethal autonomous weapons systems don't remove human moral responsibility. They just increase the distance between killer and target.

Furthermore, like already outlawed arms, including chemical and biological weapons, these systems have the capacity to kill indiscriminately. While they may not obviate human responsibility, once activated, they will certainly elude human control, just like poison gas or a weaponized virus.

And as with chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons, their use could effectively be prevented by international law and treaties. True, rogue actors, like the Assad regime in Syria or the U.S. military in the Iraqi city of Fallujah, may occasionally violate such strictures, but for the most part, prohibitions on the use of certain kinds of potentially devastating weaponry have held, in some cases for over a century.

Some American defense experts argue that, since adversaries will inevitably develop LAWS, common sense requires this country to do the same, implying that the best defense against a given weapons system is an identical one. That makes as much sense as fighting fire with fire when, in most cases, using water is much the better option.

The Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons

The area of international law that governs the treatment of human beings in war is, for historical reasons, called international humanitarian law (IHL). In 1995, the United States ratified an addition to IHL: the 1980 U.N. Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons. (Its full title is much longer, but its name is generally abbreviated as CCW.) It governs the use, for example, of incendiary weapons like napalm, as well as biological and chemical agents.

The signatories to CCW meet periodically to discuss what other weaponry might fall under its jurisdiction and prohibitions, including LAWS. The most recent conference took place in December 2021. Although transcripts of the proceedings exist, only a draft final document – produced before the conference opened – has been issued. This may be because no consensus was even reached on how to define such systems, let alone on whether they should be prohibited. The European Union, the U.N., at least 50 signatory nations, and (according to polls), most of the world population believe that autonomous weapons systems should be outlawed. The U.S., Israel, the United Kingdom, and Russia disagree, along with a few other outliers.

Prior to such CCW meetings, a Group of Government Experts (GGE) convenes, ostensibly to provide technical guidance for the decisions to be made by the Convention's *"high contracting parties."* In 2021, the GGE was unable to reach a consensus about whether such weaponry should be outlawed. The United States held that even defining a lethal autonomous weapon was unnecessary (perhaps because if they could be defined, they could be outlawed). The U.S. delegation put it this way:

"The United States has explained our perspective that a working definition should not be drafted with a view toward describing weapons that should be banned. This would be – as some colleagues have already noted – very difficult to reach consensus on, and counterproductive. Because there is nothing intrinsic in autonomous capabilities that would make a weapon prohibited under IHL, we are not convinced that prohibiting weapons based on degrees of autonomy, as our French colleagues have suggested, is a useful approach."

The U.S. delegation was similarly keen to eliminate any language that might require *"human control"* of such weapons systems:

"[In] our view IHL does not establish a requirement for

'human control' as such... Introducing new and vague requirements like that of human control could, we believe, confuse, rather than clarify, especially if these proposals are inconsistent with long-standing, accepted practice in using many common weapons systems with autonomous functions."

In the same meeting, that delegation repeatedly insisted that lethal autonomous weapons would actually be good for us, because they would surely prove better than human beings at distinguishing between civilians and combatants.

Oh, and if you believe that protecting civilians is the reason the arms industry is investing billions of dollars in developing autonomous weapons, I've got a patch of land to sell you on Mars that's going cheap.

The Campaign to Stop Killer Robots

The Governmental Group of Experts also has about 35 non-state members, including non-governmental organizations and universities. The Campaign to Stop Killer Robots, a coalition of 180 organizations, among them Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and the World Council of Churches, is one of these. Launched in 2013, this vibrant group provides important commentary on the technical, legal, and ethical issues presented by LAWS and offers other organizations and individuals a way to become involved in the fight to outlaw such potentially devastating weapons systems.

The continued construction and deployment of killer robots is not inevitable. Indeed, a majority of the world would like to see them prohibited, including U.N. Secretary General Antonio Guterres. Let's give him the last word:

"Machines with the power and discretion to take human lives without human involvement are politically unacceptable, morally repugnant, and should be prohibited by international law."

I couldn't agree more.

Featured image: *Killer Robots* by Global Panorama is licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0 / Flickr

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Rebecca Gordon, a *TomDispatch* regular, teaches at the University of San Francisco. She is the author of *Mainstreaming Torture*, *American Nuremberg: The U.S. Officials Who Should Stand Trial for Post-9/11 War Crimes* and is now at work on a new book on the history of torture in the United States.

The Distributed Empire of the War on Terror

by **Madiha Tahrir**, published in the **Boston Review**, September 10, 2021

I have been kind of hoping that Imran Khan might have stopped the disappearances and drone strikes on Pakhtuns in Pakistan. And it's possible he has. I hope so. Meanwhile, Madiha paints a vivid picture of the suffering induced in Pakistan Tribal Regions and around the globe by the U.S. War of Terror. ~jb

In *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War* (2016), Viet Thanh Nguyen writes that U.S. films tend to substitute American pain for Vietnamese pain. "Americans love to imagine the war as a conflict not between Americans and Vietnamese,"

observes Nguyen, *“but between Americans fighting a war for their nation’s soul.”* The last twenty years of the so-called War on Terror have stuck to this script. Consider the sheer number of articles, interviews, and think pieces on the anguish and trauma of the American soldier.

A thriving subset of this genre reports on the mental afflictions of the drone operator. These psychic lacerations, caused by having to watch the murderous effects of their own handiwork, have been elevated beyond a clinical condition into a philosophical anguish called *“moral injury.”* The term originated in 1994 with psychiatrist Jonathan Shay, who argued that a diagnosis of PTSD did not sufficiently capture the *“soul wound”* inflicted when one commits acts *“that violate one’s own ethics, ideals, and attachments.”* Following the start of the drone war, dozens of articles in outlets such as *GQ* (2013), *Slate* (2016), *NPR* (2017), the *New York Times* (2018), and the *Washington Post* (2021) followed—along with scholarly publications across the political spectrum—probing the mental states and suffering of the United States’ newest class of violence workers (a term I borrow from David Correia and Tyler Wall).

Lost in all this business of soul-wounded warriors is the relatively unfashionable wounding of empire’s targets. It doesn’t make for the kind of war story Americans want to learn about. A friend who is an award-winning magazine journalist explained the craft to me like this: *“You have to ask yourself, if this story were a movie, what role is Matt Damon going to play?”* The formulation is brutally honest about the seductive racial and colonial fantasies that are both subtext and, well, *text* of modern war reporting.

Where does that leave the rest of us—we, who belong to the browner parts of the Earth, we who are fighting on multiple fronts?

In Pakistan, the country of my birth, the country from which I

became a refugee, the country to which I returned as a journalist and then as a scholar, I have had friends, comrades, and colleagues forcibly disappeared, sometimes killed. Particularly in the regions I have covered—the Tribal Areas along the border with Afghanistan that are being drone-bombed today and the province of Balochistan where a separatist movement is underway—the risk intensifies.

Photos circulate on Whatsapp groups—a confession, a beheading, a bomb blast, a body twisted and turned inside out. I once woke to photos of charred corpses, exposed bone and pink flesh, bloody as fresh butcher's meat. It took me time to understand the diagram of these unholy bodies, where the legs should have been, where the mouth and the eyes must have once existed. The media relations arm of the Pakistani security forces had circulated the images as evidence of a "successful" counterattack against "*militants*."

The United States began bombing the border zone, then known as the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), in 2004, ostensibly to combat al-Qaeda and the Taliban. It has bombed the area at least 430 times, according to the London-based Bureau of Investigative Journalists, and killed anywhere between 2,515 to 4,026 people.

But the United States is not the only force bombing the region. Between 2008 to 2011 alone, the Pakistan Air Force carried out 5,500 bombing runs and dropped 10,600 bombs. The Pakistani security forces have also conducted scores of major military operations in the Tribal Areas as well as other Pashtun regions. There is no detailed accounting of the human costs of these military assaults.

When I traveled to the northern valley of Swat following Operation Rah-e-Rast (Righteous Path) in 2009, bullet marks and gaping holes scarred the low-lying homes along my drive. There, among others, I met Asfand Ali, whose brother and father were killed when a mortar shell blasted through their

house. I asked him about the operation. *"Whatever they do is just fine,"* he told me. *"They killed a lot of innocent people."* A ghost of a smile flickered across his face. *"They can do whatever they want. It's the government."*

Some time later, when I suggested to a Western leftist that we, we U.S. leftists, rework our analyses to account for the devastation caused by the Pakistani security forces, he disagreed. *"What Pakistan does in Pakistan,"* he shook his head, *"that's not our concern."* It was certainly *my* concern but, as someone with diasporic sensibilities, I have become used to pronouns like *"we"* and *"our"* as spaces of uneasy solidarities (to borrow a turn of phrase from Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang).

I also understand the impulse that drove his response. Global powers have repeatedly used the human rights abuses of other states, or the need to save brown women, or UN resolutions stating a *"responsibility to protect"* as pretext to invade less powerful nations. But, in restricting attention to the direct actions of the U.S. state, we fail to grasp the mechanics and manifold distributions of empire.

With the United States now shifting its strategy in Afghanistan from a direct military occupation with ground troops to an aerial drone bombardment conducted, it seems, in collaboration with the Afghan Taliban, it is critically urgent that we—we who dream of liberation—grapple with the complexity of imperial entanglements. What is happening with Afghanistan is less a withdrawal than a redistribution of imperial power. The United States is dispersing its war-making to collaborators and security assemblages that will help render empire difficult to track—a game that the United States has long played in Pakistan.

During my research on the war in FATA, I ran across a small

handbill asking for help finding a missing teenager. The sheet had been distributed by his family. The boy had been badly injured when a U.S. drone bombed a funeral in the Tribal Areas. It was, in fact, the second bombing that day. Earlier, U.S. violence workers had killed several people in the same area; one of the dead, they thought, was important enough to draw out the senior leadership of the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) to the dead man's funeral, which happened later the same day. In their staunch belief that "*terrorist*" funerals only draw out other terrorists, they then bombed the mourners.

Here, I suppose I could pause and add an explanation of how we, we Muslims, bury our dead. This could include a description of the speed of funerals after a person's death, or disclose funeral sociality in this part of the world. Certainly, a journalist reporting on the bombing for a Western press outlet felt compelled to clarify in an article I read that the attendance at funerals of Taliban figures was not limited to guerrilla fighters.

I hung at this sentence when I read it because I have written sentences just like it as a former journalist. You are trying to explain how it came to pass that dozens of people died, or you slip it in because you're trying in your small brown way in a white media establishment to remind U.S. readers about the inordinate toll, or your editor asks for "*context*," and you're reduced to explaining the self-evident (*funerals draw together family and community!*) as if it were some peculiar borderland ritual.

I could also parse the statistics of this bombing—but I think that would all miss the point, which is that they bombed because they could.

Consider that drones are actually technological failures as weapons of war, if by "*war*" we mean a contested battleground. They are easily shot down and, as U.S. military officials have

stated, they are unfit for fighting with a “*near peer adversary*.” This is why the U.S. Air Force is trying to retire the MQ-9 Reaper drone.

It follows, then, that to fly drones over the Tribal Areas requires not only coordination with Pakistani authorities for airspace, but also a whole host of largely opaque negotiations and arrangements that barter the lives of ethnic Pashtuns in FATA in the imperial war market. In other words, the “organized abandonment” (to use abolitionist Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s terms) of border zone populations has been crucial to maintaining drone bombardment.

Checkposts and moveable checkpoints surveil, intimidate, and interrupt the movement of people, journalists, and information in and out of the Tribal Areas. These physical blockades have been augmented by a digital enclosure, especially in Waziristan, on the southern tip of the Tribal Areas, where bombardments have been heaviest. The strategic absence of sufficient electronic infrastructure—from the Internet to cell phone towers—has not only made the relay of information difficult following bombardments, but has limited the global circulation of photos and videos documenting the aftermath. In the Obama years, therefore, news stories on drone bombardment quickly took on a standardized, anesthetized structure: an anemic lede stating where the attack had taken place, followed by a quote from anonymous Pakistani officials categorizing the dead as “*militants*” or “*civilians*,” then a short final paragraph on the alleged lawlessness of the region. It became small news.

British colonial knowledge, predating Pakistan’s independence, still underwrites these arrangements. Gazettes, tribal descriptions, and genealogies produced by colonial authorities remain standard fare on the bookshelves of Pakistani bureaucrats and analysts. The largest bookstore in Islamabad, which caters to the instrumental knowledge class—including Western ambassadors, the CIA, the U.S. State Department, and

other administrators, UN officials, and NGO workers—keeps these colonial texts in stock for its customers, alongside more recent pop literature by U.S. terrorism experts.

After independence, this knowledge shaped the continuation of a colonial regime in all but name within the Tribal Areas. There, the Frontier Crimes Regulations (FCR), a draconian set of laws enacted by the British and justified as granting tribal autonomy, continued to be enforced. Under these regulations, FATA Pashtuns could not vote. Instead, an appointed Political Agent with sweeping powers governed each of the administrative districts or “agencies” that make up the Tribal Areas. The agent was judge, jury, and administrator. He could deliver executive judgments and detain entire communities on suspicion of a crime by one of their members. While the FCR was formally repealed in 2019, meaningful change has yet to take shape on the ground.

The War on Terror, particularly as manifest in the Tribal Areas, remixes the colonial-era stereotype that Pashtuns are especially fanatical with post-9/11 fears about Pashtuns’ alleged propensity for terrorism. Not only does the propaganda arm of the Pakistani security forces churn out films that regularly depict Pashtuns as terrorist villains, but private television shows and advertisements also ridicule Pashtuns as extremists.

Poorer Pashtuns, especially, have been subject nationwide to police crackdowns, raids, and the razing of *katchi abadis* (squatter settlements). Following a bomb blast in Lahore, for instance, a traders’ association demanded identity documents from Pashtun traders, and the police circulated notices about surveilling Pashtuns as well as Afghan refugees, some of whom are ethnically Pashtun. (Sanaa Alimia has richly documented how identity documents work as a means to surveil and control these Afghan refugee communities.)

In short, while there are caricatures about all ethnicities in

Pakistan, only one of them is conflated with the Western fantasy of the “terrorist.” Pashtuns have become what Samar Al-Bulushi calls “*citizen-suspects*”—racialized populations subjected to suspicion, surveillance, and paranoid state imaginaries, thus making them vulnerable to overwhelming state violence. Pervez Musharraf, the military dictator who seized power in a 1999 coup and collaborated with the United States following 9/11, was explicit about his government’s strategic abandonment of Pashtuns specifically and Pakistanis more broadly. Asked by the CIA how the agency could conduct drone bombings without admitting responsibility, Musharraf was dismissive. “*In Pakistan,*” he said, “*things fall out of the sky all the time.*”

This is how the funeral came to be bombed. But these genealogies of violence do not make for good copy, so we—we who know better—settle for a docile sentence about how villagers attend funerals too.

Luckily the boy was still alive, but in urgent need of medical attention. He was badly burned and bleeding. The local hospital could not care for his wounds. So, his father and other family members loaded him into an ambulance, and it sped off toward the nearest well-equipped hospital several hours away.

In 2006 two journalists appeared before a Pakistani court as defendants. They were accused of leaking official secrets because they had been filming at Shahbaz airbase, a Pakistan Air Force holding, in the southern city of Jacobabad. The base was one of the earliest used by U.S. forces for flying drones in the region.

While the use of the airbase may have technically been secret, it was of course known to Jacobabad locals; no fewer than three Predator drones had crashed in and around the city in

2003 due to technical failure. In addition to drones falling from the sky, the increased securitization of the area had alerted uneasy residents to the goings-on at the airbase.

This may have been why television reporter Mukesh Rupeta and cameraman Sanjev Kumar were filming at the airbase when they were picked up and *disappeared*. Unlike ordinary arrests with their attendant paperwork and bureaucratic procedures, *disappearance* makes it difficult to know who or which agency has taken someone, where the detainee has been taken, and whether they will ever be seen again—and that unknowability is the point. Without accountability, the state's agents are able to engender spaces where things can fall out of the sky, where the potential for violence is enormous.

In this case, Rupeta and Kumar were turned over to the police three months later. While police officials refused to say who had initially detained them, a relative of one of the men told reporters that they had been detained by Pakistani intelligence officials linked to the military, and that at least one of the reporters had been tortured.

A week before Rupeta and Kumar were presented in court, the body of another journalist was found dumped in Miranshah, the capital of North Waziristan in FATA. Hayatullah Khan was a Waziri reporter who, six months earlier, had photographed remnants of a Hellfire missile, the first visual proof that the United States was bombing the border zone. The photos were published in international news outlets, and the next day Hayatullah was disappeared.

On the U.S. news, I often heard experts and analysts claim that part of the appeal of drone warfare to the Obama administration was that it offered a viable alternative to detentions. John Bellinger, the former legal advisor for the Bush administration, told audiences in 2013, "*This government has decided that instead of detaining members of al-Qaeda [at Guantánamo] they are going to kill them.*"

But all the while in Pakistan, secret detention centers and black sites continued to metastasize. Together they constitute Pakistan's "*little Guantánamo Bay*," as rights activist Amina Masood Janjua puts it. During the early years of the war, Musharraf literally sold detainees picked up in Pakistan to the United States. We know this because the ignominious buffoon boasted about it in the English edition of his autobiography. He admitted to auctioning 369 detainees; the figure that Pakistan handed over may be as high as 800. While some of these people ended up in Guantánamo, others were disappeared into CIA secret prisons in multiple countries.

In Pakistan, U.S. operatives, working jointly with their Pakistani counterparts, interrogated prisoners in secret locations. Pakistani security officials also acted as the heavy in many cases, detaining and torturing prisoners. Moazzam Begg, perhaps one of the most famous detainees, was initially held by the Pakistani spy agency, the ISI, at a house used as a detention site in the G-10 neighborhood of Islamabad. The CIA's prison program was eventually terminated but, by then, detention was beginning to take on a life of its own inside Pakistan.

In 2011 the Pakistani government used anti-terrorism as a justification to formalize roughly forty internment centers. While little is known about these sites, almost all of them appear to be based inside existing prisons, military forts, and jails. All of them are also located in the predominantly Pashtun regions of the country, which underscores the racialization of Pashtuns as terrorists.

These practices have been especially difficult to track in FATA in part because arbitrary detention and collective punishment—often described in other contexts as "*extrajudicial*"—have been, in these regions, legal. Under the FCR, that legal remnant of British colonial rule, people could be detained for up to two years at the will of the Political Agent with no recourse to courts. Add to the blockades,

military forts, internment centers, and jails of the Tribal Areas the carceral spaces across the rest of the country—more internment centers, military and paramilitary bases, secret compounds, and ordinary jails where the disappeared sometimes mysteriously reappear—and an entire carceral geography flickers into view.

Documenting these practices and carceral spaces, however, can land one in trouble. Activist Alamzaib Mehsud, who is attempting to keep an archive of detentions, disappearances, mine blasts, and extrajudicial murders in FATA, was himself picked up in January 2019 and charged with rioting and inciting hatred for an allegedly anti-military speech. He was released almost nine months later.

The War on Terror is not the first time the Pakistani government has deployed detention and disappearance. During the 1973 insurgency in Balochistan, Pakistani forces disappeared Baloch activists, and under the U.S.-backed regime of military general Zia ul-Haq in the 1980s, critics and dissidents were, at times, picked up and disappeared.

With the War on Terror, however, these practices have expanded in both scope and geography. A wider array of dissidents, activists, and critics has been detained, as well as a host of other individuals deemed by the state, because of ethnicity or class, to be suspect: madrassa students, laborers, bus passengers. Sometimes the disappeared return in strange form. In March this year, road workers at a construction site in the Tribal Areas unearthed the bones and personal effects of a teacher disappeared thirteen years ago.

In an act that would be parodic were the stakes not so horrific, the Pakistani government has set up a Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances: the government looking into government crimes. It is a largely toothless affair, for the committee dares not name the military perpetrators. Police reports of disappearances, when the family manages to get them

filed, regularly note down that the suspected perpetrators are *na maloom afraad*, unknown persons. It works as a shorthand: we, we Pakistanis, know who the Unknown are.

These carceral geographies are also available to bolster U.S. empire and drone warfare. Karim Khan, an anti-drone activist, was disappeared in 2014 days before he was due to speak with European parliamentarians and the International Criminal Court at the Hague about drone bombardment in the Tribal Areas. (U.S. violence workers had killed Khan's son and brother when they bombed his home in 2009.) Khan's captors did not identify themselves, but the method of his disappearance—plainclothes men accompanied by police officers who bundled him into an unmarked vehicle—bears the hallmark of the Pakistani security apparatus. During his detention, his captors beat him and interrogated him about his contacts, other drone victims, his upcoming trip, and what he intended to make public. Karim was released after nine days and, though he still traveled to Europe to testify, the detention scarred him. When I saw him after, he appeared withered and reported difficulty sleeping as well as bouts of anxiety. Alamzaib, too, was picked up again in 2020 from his home hours after posting a video on social media criticizing U.S. drone bombardment and asking questions about the Pakistani military's complicity. He was not disappeared. In his case, the local police served as captors, taking him without an arrest warrant and keeping him for twenty-three days.

And so, this is what I know about what happened to the boy on the missing poster, the one who had just barely survived the US bombing of the funeral. As the ambulance sped toward the hospital, Pakistani security forces blockaded the road and stopped it from passing. They ordered everyone out of the vehicle. The ambulance driver, the boy's father, the relatives traveling with him—and the boy himself—were all disappeared.

Is this a story of U.S. empire or of Pakistani state impunity? And what are the stakes when drawing such a distinction?

The story about the boy's disappearance doesn't fit neatly into the popular understanding of what drone warfare looks like. Our conceptual frames tend to restrict our attention to the deaths and injuries caused instantly by Hellfire bomb blasts, but the lives of drone survivors, and of the communities living through the war, go on. Drone survivors, like others in the border zone, are also people who have cousins taken by the Taliban, or an uncle whose decomposing body is found in the market after several months of disappearance, or a brother who is detained indefinitely by the Pakistani military.

The failure to see the full scope of the war has the effect of isolating the drone from the broader social and material worlds that make the drone war possible. This blindness rehearses the logic of U.S. empire. Preferring to frame its interventions as temporary and limited, the United States has been adept at distributing its capacities for violence among networks of collaborators. It need not explicitly demand the detentions of Rupeta, Kumar, Hayatullah, Karim, or Alamzaib. Having set the broad terms of its imperial project through opaque arrangements with the cruelest segments of the Pakistani state, it can disperse its war-making among transnational security assemblages.

For the Pakistani security state, in turn, the U.S.-led vitalization of terrorism as an ideological framework has enlarged the space for its own geopolitics, sometimes in tension with the United States but always in loose collaboration. These take many forms, including attacking critics in the name of national security, using War on Terror rhetoric to assault peasant movements and thieve land, passing broad surveillance and anti-terrorism laws, committing extrajudicial murders and totalizing military operations, forcing mass displacements that have reshaped FATA, and using

the war to intervene in Afghanistan.

For the United States, the expansion of these Pakistani militarist projects has allowed for a displacement of responsibility, and the ability to strategically shift scales. Western and international publics may be attuned to direct U.S. actions, but “*local*” cases of detention, disappearance, extrajudicial murder, and even military operations go largely unnoticed. This is the distributed empire of the United States, one that exceeds the direct actions of the U.S. state—and continues to shape lives long after the drones have gone.

It has been years now since the boy was disappeared. Everyone else has been released, but he remains an absent presence. Sometimes, people never return. But, when I speak to a member of his family, I cannot ask *that* question, so I ask instead, “How is the family nowadays?”

He understands, responds, “*We are searching for him.*”

Madiha Tahrir is a Pakistani American journalist and researcher.

Demand for ‘Moratorium on Drone Warfare’ Follows Latest US Killing of Afghan

Civilians

by *Jake Johnson*, published on *Common Dreams*, August 30, 2021

The largest Muslim civil rights organization in the United States demanded Monday that the Biden administration immediately put in place a “*moratorium on drone warfare*” after the U.S. killed at least 10 Afghan civilians—including half a dozen children—with an airstrike in Kabul over the weekend.

“*Enough is enough*,” Edward Ahmed Mitchell, national deputy director of the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), said in a statement.

“For more than ten years, our government’s drone strikes have killed thousands of innocent people in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Yemen, and elsewhere in the Muslim world—destroying family homes, wedding parties, and even funeral processions. The civilian casualties in Kabul are simply the latest victims of this misused technology.”

Mitchell said the Biden administration should impose a temporary moratorium on the U.S. drone program—which is largely shrouded in secrecy—“*until the government establishes strict oversight rules that would prevent these tragedies by severely limiting and transparently accounting for our military’s use of drone warfare.*”

According to press reports and accounts from relatives and witnesses, the 10 people reportedly killed by the U.S. airstrike in Kabul on Sunday were all members of a single extended family—and at least three of the child victims were girls just two years old or younger.

“This is the latest in 20 years of innocent lives taken and children orphaned in Afghanistan and covert drone warfare around the world,”

Rep. Ilhan Omar (D-Minn.) said Monday.

“Impunity for these attacks continues to create a never-ending cycle of violence and retribution. Where should these victims go to seek justice?”

The Biden administration has yet to take responsibility for killing the civilians with its drone strike, which purportedly targeted an explosive-laden vehicle that the U.S. military claims ISIS-K was planning to use in another attack on Kabul’s international airport.

“The U.S. went into Afghanistan seeking revenge and bombing civilians,”

Medea Benjamin, co-founder of the anti-war group CodePink, tweeted Monday.

“Twenty years later, the U.S. is leaving Afghanistan seeking revenge and bombing civilians.”

Maj. Gen. Hank Taylor, deputy director of the U.S. Joint Staff for Regional Operations, said during a press briefing on Monday that the Pentagon is “aware” of reports of civilian deaths in Kabul and that an investigation is underway.

In a statement, Amnesty International USA executive director Paul O’Brien said that the Biden administration “has a responsibility to the families of those killed to name the dead, acknowledge its actions, investigate, and provide reparations.”

The Pentagon is notorious for dramatically undercounting the

number of civilians killed in U.S. military operations overseas. And when the U.S. government does admit to killing civilians, it often refuses to provide any compensation to the victims' families.

"The United States has been killing civilians in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Syria, and Somalia for years, under the guise of the so-called 'war on terror,' with impunity,"

said O'Brien.

"For two decades, the United States has carried out strikes with no accountability to the public for how many civilians were killed."

The latest airstrike in Kabul, O'Brien argued, could be

"a glimpse into the future U.S. involvement in Afghanistan if the Biden administration pushes ahead with an 'over the horizon' counter-terrorism program that does not prioritize civilian protection."

Earlier this year, the Biden administration quietly implemented temporary restrictions on drone strikes outside of "conventional battlefield zones" such as Afghanistan. But such limits did not stop U.S. military's Africa Command (AFRICOM) from launching a lethal drone strike in Somalia in July, the first attack on that country of Joe Biden's presidency.

As the withdrawal of U.S. troops continues apace ahead of the August 31 exit deadline, it appears that Biden is prepared to keep carrying out drone strikes in Afghanistan in the future. In a statement Friday after the U.S. launched a drone strike targeting two "planners and facilitators" of the deadly attack on Kabul's airport, Biden declared, "This strike was not the last."

**Featured Image: Relatives and neighbors of the Ahmadi family gathered around the incinerated husk of a vehicle hit by a U.S. drone strike in Kabul, Afghanistan on August 30, 2021. (Photo: Marcus Yam/Los Angeles Times)*

Jake Johnson is a staff writer for Common Dreams website.

Biden Acknowledges ‘Over the Horizon’ Air Attacks Planned Against Taliban

by Nick Mottern, published on Common Dreams, July 5, 2021

On July 2, fleeing questions from reporters about U.S. plans in Afghanistan, President Joe Biden sought refuge behind the July 4th Independence Day holiday, yet obliquely acknowledged that the U.S. will use some level of “*over the horizon*” air attacks to prevent the Taliban from taking power, attacks that will include drones and manned aircraft, possibly even B-52s.

Here is a portion of President Biden’s remarkable exchange with the press, which occurred at the close of his comments on the June, 2021 jobs report:

Q Are you worried that the Afghan government might fall? I mean, we are hearing about how the Taliban is taking more and more districts.

-THE PRESIDENT: Look, we were in that war for 20 years. Twenty years. And I think – I met with the Afghan government here in the White House, in the Oval. I think

they have the capacity to be able to sustain the government. There are going to have to be, down the road, more negotiations, I suspect. But I am – I am concerned that they deal with the internal issues that they have to be able to generate the kind of support they need nationwide to maintain the government.

Q A follow on that thought on Afghanistan

-THE PRESIDENT: I want to talk about happy things, man.

Q If there is evidence that Kabul is threatened, which some of the intelligence reports have suggested it could be in six months or thereabout, do you think you've got the capability to help provide any kind of air support, military support to them to keep the capital safe, even if the U.S. troops are obviously fully out by that time?

-THE PRESIDENT: We have worked out an over-the-horizon capacity that we can be value added, but the Afghans are going to have to be able to do it themselves with the Air Force they have, which we're helping them maintain.

Q Sir, on Afghanistan

-THE PRESIDENT: I'm not going to answer any more quick question on Afghanistan.

Q Are you concerned

-THE PRESIDENT: Look, it's Fourth of July.

When the president refers to "over-the-horizon capacity that we can be value added" he is referring to a plan, that appears might cost \$10 billion, to fly drones and manned attack aircraft from bases as far away as Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait to assist the current Afghan central government in defending itself against the Taliban.

His statement is the first acknowledgement that the "over-the-

horizon” air operations, that reportedly may rely very heavily on drone assassination and drone targeting for manned aircraft, will be directed at the Taliban. In Congressional testimony in June, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said that *“over-the-horizon”* operations would focus on *“elements that can possibly conduct attacks against our homeland”*, suggesting Al Qaeda and ISIS as targets but not foreclosing attacks against the Taliban.

The president’s remarks about *“over the horizon”* as *“value added”* flowing into *“but the Afghans are going to have to be able to do it themselves with the Air Force they have”* is reminiscent of former President Richard Nixon’s attempt to argue that the puppet government of Viet Nam was developing the power to defend itself, attempting to cover U.S. tracks out of the horribly disastrous U.S. colonization project in Viet Nam.

“Our air strikes have been essential in protecting our own remaining forces and in assisting the South Vietnamese in their efforts to protect their homes and their country from a Communist takeover,”

Nixon said in a 1972 speech to the nation.

The apparent U.S. decision to continue to assist the Afghan central government from the air comes in company with a *New York Times* report saying that President Biden has placed *“temporary limits on counterterrorism drone strikes and commando raids outside conventional battlefield zones like Afghanistan and Syria, and it has begun a broad review of whether to tighten Trump-era rules for such operations, according to officials.”*

A similar report in *Foreign Affairs* says that there has been an apparent reduction in U.S. drone attacks, and details elements of a *“bigger rethink”* process that the Biden administration is said to be going through to limit civilian

deaths and reevaluate how the U.S. should respond to "*the overseas terrorist threat*." A goal of the administration, the report says, is to end the U.S. "*forever*" wars.

It must also be said, however, that these reports indicate that President Biden fully intends to continue the U.S. drone assassination/pre-emptive killing policy of Bush, Obama and Trump, possibly with more care for civilian casualties but in defiance of international principles of war, as outlined on BanKillerDrones.org, that would rule out the use of weaponized drones and military drone surveillance altogether whether inside or outside a recognized combat zone.

It appears that the reformist talk from Biden officials, much of it unattributed and therefore having no accountability, is intended to divert and placate those of us citizens who are revulsed by continuing drone atrocities, such as those leading 113 peace, justice and humanitarian organizations who signed a letter demanding "*an end to the unlawful program of lethal strikes outside any recognized battlefield, including through the use of drones*." Apart from the view, noted above, that drone attacks and surveillance are illegal anywhere, we have the question of the U.S. having turned the entire world into a potential "*recognized battlefield*" .

Even though U.S. ground forces have largely left Afghanistan, it is clear that the Biden administration considers Afghanistan a legitimate battlefield for U.S. air forces.

In President Biden's "*value added*" remark, one can see a clear message: regardless of talk of a more humanitarian policy of drone killing and ending "*forever*" wars, the president has decided that prolonged civil war in Afghanistan is in the interest of the U.S. Possibly this is because continued turmoil in Afghanistan will be unsettling and preoccupying to her neighbors, Iran, Pakistan, Russia and China. Possibly it is because a civil war will make it easier for corporations and banks to exploit Afghanistan's mineral, fossil fuel and

opium wealth.

Certainly, continued U.S. air assaults in Afghanistan will generate money for U.S. military contractors.

With continuing U.S. air and commando attacks, Afghanistan can turn into a Libya, a divided, stalemated, suffering, bleeding country, where Turkey, Russia and China test their weapons and seek advantage.

Indeed, the U.S. is negotiating with Turkey, over the objection of the Taliban, to maintain "security" at the Kabul International Airport. Undoubtedly, the Turkish political/military/ corporate elite, who have their own expansionary ambitions, will use its drones, among them the semi-autonomous Kargu 2, to try to hold the airport and surrounding territory.

The Black Alliance for Peace released a statement on June 25, opposing *"any effort to prolong the U.S. war on the Afghan people, including efforts to keep the United States engaged in any form in Afghanistan."* The statement expressed concern for *"the continued operation of U.S. special forces and mercenaries (or contractors) in Afghanistan, as well as U.S.-pledged support for Turkish military defense of Kabul International Airport, a site that has continued to be a major U.S. military stronghold to support its imperial presence."*

President Biden would do well to heed this statement, along with a petition to him, circulated by BanKillerDrones.org, urging no further U.S. air attacks against the Afghan people.

Now that Independence Day has passed, perhaps the president will be more willing to answer questions about the real goals of *"over the horizon."*

***Featured Image:** *U.S. Army 3rd Infantry Task Force 3-7 soldiers ride atop an armored vehicle during a training exercise near the Iraqi border March 13, 2003 in northern*

Kuwait. U.S and British forces within the region continue to poise for a possible strike on Iraq. (Photo: Scott Nelson/Getty Images)

Nick Mottern has worked as a reporter, researcher, writer, and political organizer over the last 50 years. He manages KnowDrones.com, a website devoted to education and organizing to stop drone warfare and surveillance.

Killer Reaper Drones Coming to the Pacific “To Counter Threats from China.”

by Ann Wright, published on Popular Resistance, March 27 2021

A Chinese military takeover of Taiwan is the top U.S. concern in Asia and the Pacific, according to the admiral nominated to lead the U.S. military’s Indo-Pacific combatant command.

During his confirmation hearing to head the command that covers 51 percent of the globe, U.S. Pacific Fleet commander Admiral John Aquilino told the Senate Armed Services Committee that *“the most dangerous concern is that of a military force against Taiwan.”* Aquilino told the committee that the *“annexation of Taiwan is the number one priority of China”* and asked the Senate committee to fund the \$27.3 billion Pacific Deterrence Initiative.

Aquilino’s comment echoed the March 2, 2021 assessment of retired Lt. General H.R. McMaster, one of the Trump administration’s national security advisers. McMaster told the

Senate Armed Services Committee that Taiwan is “*the most significant flashpoint now that could lead to a large-scale war.*” McMaster, who is a fellow at the Hoover Institute at Sanford University, submitted 28 pages of written testimony to the Congress which centered around the Chinese “threat” to the U.S.

To meet what senior U.S. officials are calling the “*threat*” from China, the U.S. Marine Corps is embarking on a major change in strategy and equipment. Marine strategy calls for assassin drones “*to counter threats from China.*” The Marines will dramatically increase its current worldwide inventory of only two MQ-9A Reaper unmanned aerial drones to 18 and have them located in the Indo-Pacific region, with six in Hawaii arriving in fiscal year 2023.

The Marines currently operate only two MQ-9A drones, turboprop aerial vehicles with wingspans of 66 feet and a maximum weight of 10,500 pounds. They are significantly larger than the RQ-21 Blackjack drones currently in use by Hawaii-based Marines, which have wingspans of 20 feet and weigh 460 pounds. The Hawaii-based Reapers, which will be operated by hundreds of Marine Corps personnel with new job specialty designations, could be armed with AGM-114 Hellfire missiles, officials said. The Air Force has used laser guided bombs.

This is a dramatic upswing in the Marines major reorganization designed in large part to counter China in the Western Pacific with fast-moving missile forces aided by unmanned ships, vehicles and the eighteen Reaper aircraft.

In another aspect of the new Marine strategy, on March 15, the entire Marine Corps fleet of CH-53E Sea Stallion helicopters in Hawaii began leaving the islands to be replaced by a squadron of KC-130 cargo and refueling aircraft.

Eliminating from the Marine Corps inventory of all tanks is another move to use of longer-range missiles over

conventional, tubed artillery shelling.

To layout its Pacific strategy, on March 16, the U.S. Navy and U.S. Marine Corps released a 40-page "Unmanned Campaign Framework", that details the range of unmanned vehicles they have developed including the No Manning Required Ship (NOMARS) and Unmanned Logistics Systems with a variety of unmanned air, surface, undersea, and ground systems developed to demonstrate long range, big payload, ship-to-ship, ship-to-shore, and land-based cargo transport options.

In the report, Marine Corps Commandant Gen. David Berger said he is committed to a "*deliberate but aggressive*" pathway toward unmanned systems. Berger wrote in the report that "*Concepts such as half of our aviation fleet being unmanned in the near- to midterm, or most of our expeditionary logistics being unmanned in the near to mid-term, should not frighten anyone.*" When operating forward in small groups under austere conditions, "*the ability to maximize unmanned systems to create outsized effects for our allies and against our adversaries is a key element of our future success.*"

Unmanned systems are becoming so important that the U.S. Pacific fleet in April 2021 will conduct an "*integrated fleet battle problem,*" otherwise known as war maneuvers, that will have unmanned systems operating in the air, on the surface and subsurface, according to the new report.

Ann Wright spent 29 years in the U.S. Army/Army Reserves and retired as a Colonel. She also was a U.S. diplomat for 16 years in U.S. embassies in Nicaragua, Grenada, Somalia, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Sierra Leone, Micronesia, Afghanistan and Mongolia. She resigned from the U.S. government in March 2003 in opposition to the U.S. war on Iraq. She is the co-author of "Dissent: Voices of Conscience." She lives in Honolulu, Hawaii.

The False Narrative of Unmanned Drones and Trump's Responsibility to Lead

by **George Cassidy Payne**, Published on **Talker of the Town**,
June 24, 2019

The unmanned drone narrative is wrong. Someone is always operating these highly sophisticated killing/surveillance machines. Militarized drones may be maneuvered thousands of miles away by human pilots, but they are always being flown by someone. More to the point, they are being used by human beings to launch missile strikes that have killed at least 2,000 people since the beginning of Bush's *"War on Terror."*

Although estimates of civilian deaths attributed to drone strikes are notoriously difficult to establish, several courageous organizations have made it their mission to uncover the origin of these deaths so that the world can know what is happening in places such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. For instance, the New America Foundation has stated that from 2004 to 2011 alone, 15% of the 2,551 people killed by drone strikes were either known civilians or unknown. It has been widely reported that at least 150 children have been killed by militarized drones in Pakistan and that over 1,000 have been maimed or injured. Of course, these statistics say nothing about the extraordinary levels of PTSD inflicted on these populations. Civilian casualties from U.S. drone strikes

Whether someone agrees or disagrees with their use in combat, no one can effectively make the argument that these drones are

in any way benign or innocuously unmanned. Whether equipped with weaponry or not, they represent the terrifying reality of American firepower and the severe cost of making the United States an enemy to be resisted. That is why they are flying above – or dangerously close to – the sovereign airspace of Iran. That is why Donald Trump authorizes their use every day. In fact, that is why the American president even went so far as to stop the mandatory reporting of civilian deaths and casualties due to drone strikes. (An act that reversed an Executive Order signed by Barack Obama in 2016.) What is more, that is why the United States military has been authorized by the American people to spend over 100 million dollars on a single piece of drone aircraft, which, we are learning, is the estimated cost of the one recently shot down by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard.

And that brings me to my second point. When that American drone was blown out of the sky, what an immense waste it truly was. I don't mean a waste of insanely expensive technology. I mean, what an immense waste of potential to do good! What has a shot down airplane resulted in but further geopolitical brinkmanship, mutual distrust, and the growing likelihood of another costly and protracted war in the Middle East? And don't try to tell me that drones are the only way that the U.S. military and intelligence apparatus can attain footage of Iran's nuclear program. That line of reasoning is absurd and outright mendacious.

I always wonder how that money could be spent differently to achieve better results. With that same amount of money, just imagine what could have been accomplished in the way of actually improving international relations between the two historic foes. If Trump really wants to "*make Iran great again*", as he stated to Chuck Todd in his recent *Meet the Press* interview, then he must change how money is invested and the way he uses resources to make his presence and priorities known. Just think about it. 100 million dollars, even today,

goes a long way in the arena of peacemaking. Examples abound from cultural exchange programs and humanitarian aid relief to joint commercial ventures and the lifting of economic sanctions. Even direct support of Iranian-American institutions and citizens and the sponsorship of diplomatic talks would, if allocated strategically, cost far less than 100 million dollars and open up the potential for hundreds of billions in new trade opportunities, regional stability, and scientific cooperation. During the Cold War, the Soviets still collaborated with the U.S. to achieve incredible feats of space exploration. To merely assume that Iran would refuse direct investment – not to mention one less drone in their airspace – is not rational.

Now, I do agree with Trump's wise decision to restrain his military options after the drone was shot down. The fact that he is looking into other retaliatory options besides bombing Iranian civilians is a good sign that he has not completely lost his grip on reality and the responsibility he has to maintain global peace. But in general, Trump must be far more creative and proactive when it comes to Iran. He must realize that drones are not "*unmanned*" and that they represent to millions of people in the Middle East a horrific example of indiscriminate slaughter and omnipresent terror. It is, by any calculation, a hugely expensive means for exacting political leverage. Whether or not they have been effective from a combat standpoint is a matter of academic debate, but there is no debating that the *use* of these weapons has destroyed thousands of lives in some of the most unethical acts of combat in military history. Morally speaking, the price we pay as Americans far exceed the 100 million dollar price tag that each of these vehicles comes with.

For all of these reasons, the time has arrived for President Trump to rethink everything about Iran, the use of force, and the cost of what some pundits call "*hard diplomacy*." On a heart level, I ask myself: Why does Iran need to be a mortal

threat to the national interests of America? That is not what the people of Iran want. That is not what the region, as a whole, wants. And, if Trump looks at this problem from a big picture perspective, that is not what has to happen, at least not if the U.S. is truly the leader of the free world. As such, we all have a choice. We can choose peace and prosperity or destruction and poverty. War is never inevitable, and the future can belong to those who truly believe that humanity is fundamentally alike and intrinsically good. It does not have to turn into a situation in which all sides pay a price that cannot be put into numerical form.



Photo by Lynda Howland

Come to think of it, Trump actually said something akin to this in his *Meet the Press* interview. To paraphrase, the U.S. president said, *"I am from NY. I know a lot of Iranians. They are good people."*

Yes, they are. That you are right about Mr. President. Because they are good people, the time is now to show the world that you can lead with thoughtful reflection on your own experience, resolute compassion for others (not in your base), and an honest desire to make people's lives better because that is the sacred duty of the office you hold.

*** Featured Image: Pilgrimage of Peace: Upstate Drone Action Walk to Educate Upstate NY about Drone Warfare*

Voices Rising for Yemen – Final Day

Header and photos all from Voices for Creative Nonviolence

by Kathy Kelly, published on Voices for Creative Nonviolence, November 8, 2018

Over these past three days, Voices and a coalition of justice-minded organizations have been at and around the United Nations in New York City protesting the ongoing U.S.-Saudi attack on famine-imperiled Yemen. Details are available at www.vcnv.org along with next steps for people looking for ways to get involved. Participants Kathy Kelly, Brian Terrell, and Jules Orkin write here about the third and final day of protests:

VOICES RISING FOR YEMEN: FINAL DAY



We started our NYC activities this past Tuesday in soggy style, but yesterday, under brilliant sunny skies, the action became a moving procession. About 70 people formed a single file to carry backpacks, placards, signs bearing the names of children, and various banners, past the

U.S. Mission to the UN, past the Saudi Mission, and over to the consulate. Today we did the same, anticipating that those who stood in front of the consulate would be arrested.

By 11:30 this morning, on Dorothy Day's birthday, about 90

people had gathered at the Isaiah Wall for a procession to the Saudi consulate. The mourning women led our march, garbed in large masks and veils, holding limp grey dolls that represent the thousands of children facing death in Yemen. Jun Sun and a companion followed, their drumbeats guiding us. Six people carried placards describing the terrible attack on a children's schoolbus in northern Yemen. The attack happened on August 9, 2018.

This week in Yemen, children who had survived were going back for the first time to their classes, carrying their blue U.N. backpacks from the day of the attack, splattered with their classmates' blood. So today in New York, people willing to risk arrest carried blue backpacks and signs naming the children who had been killed. Others followed with banners. Nick Mottern joined us with a drone replica, an apt reminder of U.S. aerial attacks and drone surveillance in Yemen.



Felton Davis and Ed Kinane held a banner and blocked the entrance to the U.S. Mission to the UN. They were later released without charge.



The procession continued past the Saudi Mission to the UN and over to the Saudi Consulate on Second Avenue. Members of our group swiftly set up a presence in front of three entrances to the building, urging people not to enter because it is too

dangerous: criminal activities have been going on and all who have cause to be in the building should be aware of the crucial importance of ending the murderous, tortuous activities carried out by the Saudi government. Brian Terrell

points out that, just as you would be concerned if office workers in your building were involved in human trafficking or drug smuggling, people should be alarmed over the Saudi government's murderous practices as it makes war on Yemen. As Buddy Bell intoned the names of children killed on August 9 and raised a lament for Yemeni families, our response was "*We Remember You.*"

We sang and chanted for over two hours. At least two dozen police carrying plastic cuffs arrived, along with a NYPD Detective named Bogucki, who told us he recalled arresting some of us during the late '90s and in the years leading up to the Shock



and Awe bombing in Iraq. From 1996 to 2003, we had protested the sacrifice and slaughter of Iraqi children. Detective Bogucki said we are preaching to the choir when we tell him about crimes happening inside the consulate, and other offices that prolong war in Yemen. Recognizing our complicity, we believe "*the choir*" must unite by resisting child sacrifice, child slaughter.

Word arrived from one of the blockade groups that the New York Police Department had decided not to arrest anyone in our group. We eventually formed a circle, confirmed our collective determination to continue outreach, witness and resistance, expressed many thank yous, and dispersed.

Our hearts remain with Yemeni families agonizing over the dire plight of loved ones in Yemen. We thank Yemenis who have stood up, in more precarious settings, to call for an end to the fighting. And we look forward to supporting their calls for peace in every way we can, until this dreadful war is over.

Kathy Kelly interviewed outside the Saudi Arabian Consulate:



November 8th 2018 – protest gathered outside of Saudi Arabian Consulate in Midtown Manhattan, East 47th street and 2nd Ave. Protest spoke of Yemen bombing, deaths, Jamal Khashoggi, Trump and other issues. Large police response with various specialized units, carrying multiple zip ties and hand cuffs for the arrests. **Click image to watch video.** Full video and photos available [oliya\(at\)scootercaster.com](mailto:oliya@scootercaster.com), www.scootercaster.com

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Kathy Kelly is an American peace activist, pacifist and author, one of the founding members of **Voices in the Wilderness**, and currently a co-coordinator of **Voices for Creative Nonviolence**. She has traveled to Iraq twenty-six times, notably remaining in combat zones during the early days of both US–Iraq wars. Her recent travel has focused on

Afghanistan and Gaza, along with domestic protests against US drone policy. She has been arrested more than sixty times at home and abroad, and written of her experiences among targets of US military bombardment and inmates of US prisons.