

U.S. Drone Strike in Kabul Killed a Family – and Began a New Chapter of the War

by *Murtaza Hussain*, published on *The Intercept*, August 30, 2021

A Sunday drone strike in Kabul initially claimed by U.S. officials to have destroyed a car packed with “multiple suicide bombers” reportedly killed 10 civilians from one family, including several children.

The drone strike that hit Khwaja Burgha, a working-class residential neighborhood in Kabul, was said to have killed numerous members of the Ahmadi family, with the youngest alleged victim being a 2-year-old girl. Morgue footage shared on social media showed the burned bodies of several children, as well as photos of the victims before their deaths. One of the dead, according to members of the Ahmadi family who spoke to reporters, was a former Afghan military officer who had served as a contractor for U.S. forces, as well as a worker at a charity organization.

“The Americans said the airstrike killed Daesh members,” a neighbor of the family angrily told reporters after the strike, referring to the Islamic State. *“Where is Daesh here? Were these children Daesh?”*

The Defense Department and other arms of the Biden administration continued to describe the drone attack as a “successful” strike against the militant group Islamic State-Khorasan, or ISIS-K, which had taken responsibility for a suicide bombing at the Kabul airport. As reports confirmed that an innocent family had been killed, Pentagon spokesperson John Kirby said that the Department of Defense is *“not in a position to dispute”* reports that civilians were killed,

stating that the incident would be investigated.

The Kabul drone strike is just one in a long string of attacks in Afghanistan by U.S. forces and their proxies reported to have killed large numbers of civilians. Past attacks have hit families traveling in cars and buses, wedding parties, hospitals filled with patients, and groups of farmers working in fields. While the withdrawal of American troops can be described as the end to the war in Afghanistan, the Kabul strike shows how the war may simply enter a new chapter, with the U.S. striking targets with aircraft launched from faraway drone bases.

Critics of civilian casualties in the U.S. war have pointed to the lack of serious investigations on the ground into the deaths – accountability that will be even harder to come by in a remote war.

“In my experience, the bar for thorough military investigation has been so high as to discount a majority of credible incidents. What investigations do take place are neither consistent nor rigorous,”

said Nick McDonnell, author of *“The Bodies in Person: An Account of Civilian Casualties in American Wars,”* an analysis of the impact of the U.S. air wars in the Middle East.

“At the same time, the military has repeatedly suppressed information on civilian casualties. The drone program is opaque, with extremely limited accountability for anyone involved.”

What separated the recent Kabul drone strike from the long pattern of reported civilian deaths was the level of immediate attention and outrage it has generated. The U.S. war in Afghanistan has mostly been waged in rural areas, away from the attention of international media. Kabul, on the other

hand, is the highly populated capital and the country's center for expatriates, nongovernmental organizations, and both Afghan as well as international journalists.

When the strike was reported, immediate video footage of the civilians who were killed in the attack began to circulate, and even international journalists were able to quickly access the attack site.

In contrast, many past strikes have gone under the radar – and continue to do so. A retaliatory strike that came immediately after the recent terrorist attack at Hamid Karzai International Airport hit rural eastern Afghanistan, allegedly killing two people: an ISIS “*planner*” and a “*facilitator*,” according to the Defense Department.

At the press briefing Monday, Kirby declined to share further information about the identities of the two people allegedly killed in that prior attack. Other than dedicated Afghanistan observers, few took notice. Journalists and rights advocates have so far not reported any details of on-the-ground investigations or if such investigations are even possible.

The opaque nature of the war in Afghanistan has made calculating accurate death tolls from U.S. operations difficult – a challenge that has been compounded by the military's own long-standing refusal to compile statistics and verify information about who is killed in its strikes. The secretive nature of the war on terror in general, across all its various theaters of operation, coupled with military practices that devote little attention to strike investigations, makes assessing civilian impact nearly impossible.

The Pentagon initially released a statement celebrating Sunday's strike in Kabul's Khwaja Burgha neighborhood for having stopped what it claimed was another imminent terrorist threat against the airport. After local journalists and

activists began surfacing harrowing footage of civilians killed, however, the Pentagon put out a press release stating that *"it is unclear what may have happened"* in the strike, claiming that there were secondary explosions from the bombing that suggested the presence of explosives on the ground. (The White House cited this explanation in its own statements on the allegations of civilian casualties.)

The Pentagon often releases footage of its airstrikes, with the intention of advertising successful attacks against alleged terrorists. In the past, some videos have been released describing successful strikes that were later revealed to have hit civilian targets. The Pentagon declined to comment to The Intercept as to whether it would release footage of the Khwaja Burgha strike in order to verify the claimed presence of secondary explosions.

The military's own promises to investigate civilian casualty incidents have resulted in little meaningful accountability in the past.

According to its standard practices, the military does not conduct site visits to learn who was killed in its airstrikes, leaving the grueling work of finding out who died and why to independent monitoring organizations and investigative journalists who operate with far fewer resources than the Pentagon. The Washington Post reported last year that as airstrikes ramped up in the final years of the Afghanistan War, the number of strikes investigated by the military for civilian casualties plummeted. Few outside the areas impacted would have taken notice of many of the strikes at all, let alone the absence of investigations.

In those cases in which the military did launch its own inquiries, the findings were viewed with skepticism. *"These investigations are nothing but advertisements to the media,"* a local council official from Helmand Province in Afghanistan told the Post. *"They have no mercy. They only see targets to*

kill.”

The Kabul airstrike, though, generated an outpouring of grief and anger among many Afghans, already reeling from the Taliban takeover of their country following the collapse of the U.S.-backed central government. Though the Pentagon has promised to hold itself accountable for such incidents, experts on the drone war say that there is little reason based on past practice to expect meaningful justice for the victims.

“The failure to properly acknowledge, investigate, or compensate civilian deaths and injuries is one constant of U.S. airstrikes, whether in recognized wars like Afghanistan, or outside of them, like in Somalia,”

said Hina Shamsi, director of the American Civil Liberties Union’s National Security Project.

“The specific reasons and the agencies involved in those failures may differ in each context – and over 20 years we’ve repeatedly seen legal and policy debates and promises by the U.S. government to do better. But that’s of little comfort to the civilians on the receiving end of American lethal force who suffer terrible harm with little or no transparency and accountability.”

***Featured Image:** *Relatives and neighbors of the Ahmadi family gather around the incinerated husk of a vehicle targeted and hit by an American drone strike, which killed 10 people including children, in Kabul on Aug. 30, 2021. Photo: Marcus Yam/Los Angeles Times via Getty Images*

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Abdulrahman Al-Awlaki Would Have Been 26 Today if It Weren't For the U.S. Drone War

by *Danaka Katovich*, published on *Truthout*, August 26, 2021

On a Friday night in southern Yemen in October 2011, 16-year-old Abdulrahman al-Awlaki was enjoying dinner with his 17-year-old cousin at an open-air restaurant. He was getting ready to say goodbye to him before heading back to his grandpa's house in Yemen's capital city of Sanaa.

Abdulrahman was an American, born in Denver, Colorado, 26 years ago today, August 26. He spent the first seven years of his life in the United States, doing what a lot of other U.S. kids do: watching *"The Simpsons,"* listening to Snoop Dogg and reading the *Harry Potter* series.

But on that October night in Yemen, he wouldn't make it back to Sanaa. While he was at dinner, a drone strike authorized by then-President Barack Obama was carried out. It killed him, his cousin, and several other civilians.

Abdulrahman should have been turning 26 years old today, but instead his future was robbed by the U.S. drone war. His grandfather wrote a plea for answers from the Obama administration in *The New York Times* in 2013 about the murder of his beloved grandson.

"Local residents told me his body was blown to pieces. They showed me the grave where they buried his remains. I stood

over it, asking why my grandchild was dead. Nearly two years later, I still have no answers," he wrote.

This kind of grief is all too common in Yemen, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Somalia, where most U.S. drone strikes are conducted.

Like so many victims of U.S. drone strikes, Abdulrahman was in *"the wrong place at the wrong time."* For the al-Awlaki family, the circumstances around Abdulrahman's death were incredibly familiar. Just two weeks prior, a U.S. ordered drone strike killed his father, Anwar al-Awlaki, a U.S. citizen accused of being a part of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula.

While the drone strike on his father was intentional, questions still surround the Obama administration's decision to order the drone strike that killed Abdulrahman. In 2017, the Trump administration approved a U.S. raid targeting al-Qaeda in al-Ghayil that killed Abdulrahman's half-sister, Nawar al-Awlaki. Nawar was 8 years old and also a U.S. citizen.



Abdulrahman and Nawar Al Awlaki, Anwar Awlaki's 2 children murdered by U.S. drone strikes.

How can the *"war on terror"* truly be about the country's safety when it is directly killing U.S. citizens?

Right before President Obama took office, the CIA launched a drone attack on a funeral in Pakistan that killed 41 people. Drones quickly became the main manifestation of the war on terror during Obama's time in office. The premise of increased use of drones was to keep U.S. boots off the ground in the Middle East and Africa. With drone technology, the U.S. was able to conduct covert wars in several countries at once.

Three days after he was inaugurated, Obama authorized a drone strike in Pakistan that killed as many as 20 civilians. Even after knowing how deadly drone strikes really were, Obama went on to conduct 10 times more drone strikes than his predecessor, George W. Bush.

Eight years and 540 drone strikes later, the U.S. public will never really know how many civilians were killed during those years. The U.S. military counts many teenage boys as "enemy combatants" instead of civilians.

In 2011, the U.S. military launched Operation Haymaker in Afghanistan's Pech Valley. Analysts at Bagram Air Force base would track militants' cellphones, which proved inaccurate at times. Targets were often with their families or near bystanders when spotted by intelligence analysts. In 2015, *The Intercept* helped leak documents that showed during the period of Operation Haymaker, 90 percent of those killed by drone strikes were not the intended target.

President Donald Trump continued the brutal use of drones in Afghanistan. In November of 2019, he authorized a drone strike on a village in southeastern Afghanistan where local residents said that all the casualties that day were civilians.

"They keep saying that they are killing terrorists. But that's not true. Farmers, shepherds and women are not terrorists. One of the victims, Naqib Jan, was a 2-year-old child,"

said Islam Khan, a resident of the province that was attacked that day.

Americans were told that "terrorists" don't respect U.S. rights and values. But what are the nation's rights and values? The highest law of the land would suggest due process and liberty, something drone strikes and the PATRIOT Act do everything to undermine. Three U.S. citizens in a single family, two of whom were children, were executed without charges, evidence or a trial. The U.S. Supreme Court would not even uphold Anwar al-Awlaki's right to due process because it was an issue of national security that the Supreme Court felt it had no jurisdiction over. Drone strikes that kill people, even suspected terrorists, are in violation of not only our own laws but international law as well. U.S. citizen or not, the U.S. military cannot continue to act as judge, jury and executioner for people.

Drone strikes and military occupation during the war on terror have been devastating, taking many more lives than the public will ever really be able to know. The only way to make a safer world is the abandonment of war on terror policies like drone strikes and forever wars. After 20 years of unimaginable brutality, the U.S. must be held accountable for the killing of Abdulrahman, Nawar, and countless other civilians across Asia and Africa.

Twenty years since the war on terror began, it has only created more enemies, instability and suffering. Nowhere is that more apparent than in Afghanistan. For two decades the U.S. occupied and bombed Afghanistan under the guise of fighting terrorism. Between January 2004 and February 2020, the U.S. conducted over 13,000 drone strikes in Afghanistan. Thousands of Afghan civilians have been mercilessly killed and millions displaced by the U.S. occupation and continual drone strikes. The group the U.S. spent decades and trillions of dollars fighting has now taken over the country. The U.S. has nothing to show for its occupation of Afghanistan but blood,

and lots of it.

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Ban Killer Drones: International Campaign of Civil Disobedience Necessary (P2)

by **Brian Terrell**, published on **Covert Action**, May 10, 2021

A large campaign of civil disobedience is necessary to abolish one of the U.S. military's monstrous creations

The headline of the *Yankton Daily Press & Dakotan* on November 30, 2012, page one above the fold with my photo, read "Terrell: American Drone Strikes Must Stop."

I was served well by this article explaining my opposition to killing by remotely controlled drones, as that morning I "surrendered" myself to the Federal Prison Camp in Yankton, South Dakota, to begin a six-month prison sentence for

protesting at a drone base in Missouri earlier that year.

“While many Americans may think drone strikes are a safe way to conduct war and improve the nation’s safety, one man will go to prison in Yankton today because of his belief that they are remotely committing crimes against humanity,” the paper reported.

That first afternoon, when I walked into the prison’s library, one inmate was reading that article aloud to the others, who broke into applause when they recognized me.



Protest outside Whiteman Air Force base, Missouri, April 7th, 2014. [Source: veteransforpeace.org]

It is a rare event for someone to go to prison for a federal misdemeanor like trespass and, in these days of mass incarceration and maximum-minimum sentencing, it is unusual for anyone to be incarcerated for so short a time as six months except in exchange for testifying against other accused defendants.

Having my crime and intention advertised to guards and prisoners alike saved me from the uncomfortable suspicion of being a snitch in prison. It also opened up many great discussions with my fellow inmates over those months.

The sentencing judge in this case had given me six weeks

before presenting myself to the prison to put my affairs in order and I used that time traveling through Iowa, Missouri, Illinois, New York and Minnesota, speaking, protesting and organizing with other anti-drone activists.

A reporter from Missouri Public Radio called me during that time and requested an interview. She asked me a question I often hear, if I did not feel that I could do more for the cause by staying out of prison.

I responded by asking her if we would be having this interview if, instead of getting arrested and going to jail for it, I had simply called her station and expressed my concern that the United States was committing war crimes by remote control from Whiteman Air Force Base. This reporter admitted that no, there would not be any interest in talking with me if that were the case.



Terrell (left) protests drones with Colonel Ann Wright (right), at Whiteman Air Force Base in 2012. [Source: flickr.com]

The shift captain who checked me out when my sentence was

completed six months later told me that, while he respected the strength of my conviction, he felt I had done my cause a disservice by going to prison.

I had irresponsibly squandered any credibility I might have had, he told me. Who will listen to a convict? Within the following six months, my platform from which to speak out about drone warfare expanded to churches, libraries, schools, universities, Quaker meeting houses and community organizations around the U.S., the United Kingdom and Germany, including Yale Divinity School, Harvard Law School and Queen's College in Birmingham, UK.

This was not the first time I had gone to jail protesting drones. In April 2009, about the time that President Obama made the Predator Drone the key to his "war on terror," I took part in the first protest of drone warfare anywhere, at Creech Air Force Base in Nevada. Creech was where the drone wars began and where the CIA runs its clandestine program of extrajudicial executions.

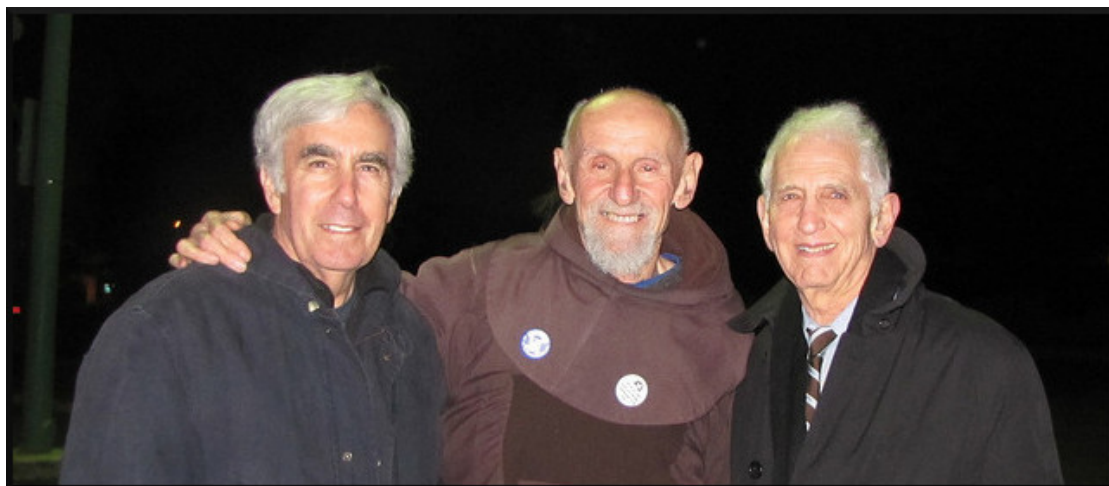


Protesters temporarily block traffic outside Creech Air Force Base in Nevada. [Source: comondreams.org]

Louie Vitale, a Franciscan priest and activist with the Nevada Desert Experience, first noticed mysterious pilotless/windowless planes circling the desert while he was

protesting at the Nevada nuclear test site nearby.

As a U.S. Air Force veteran of the Cold War, Louie first understood and alerted us to their grim significance. From that beginning, I have been arrested at Creech at least nine times, each time spending anywhere from a few hours to four days in the Clark County Jail in Las Vegas, one of the most squalid and cruel lockups in the country.



Louis Vitale (center), with legendary whistleblower Dan Ellsberg (right), and David Krieger, after arrest in 2012 at Vandenberg Air Force Base. [Source: oaklandvoices.us]

In February 2012, I was sentenced to ten days in the Jamestown Penitentiary for my part as one of the “*Hancock 38*.” The previous April we were arrested at the Syracuse, NY, civilian airport from where the New York Air National Guard flies weaponized drone missions.



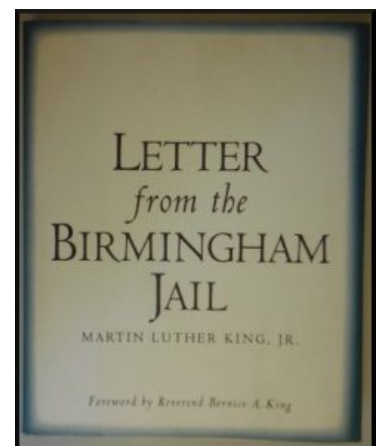
Volk Field [Source:

volkfield.eng.af.mil]

Twice I joined the regular actions of the “*Occupy Beale*” group in California, resisting the Global Hawk surveillance drones flown from Beale Air Force Base. Each of those times, federal prosecutors dropped the charges.

I have also been arrested twice at Wisconsin’s Volk Field, where the National Guard trains soldiers to pilot the Shadow, a surveillance drone that is used for “target acquisition” for armed drones and attack helicopters and, in 2017, I was lodged quite comfortably in the Juneau County Jail for five days after refusing to pay a fine on a trespass charge.

Acts of civil resistance such as these are responses to grave crimes of the state and not crimes in themselves, even when arrest and prosecution seem the immediate outcomes. Such actions are often required, but are not the whole of a campaign for change, either. In resistance to killer drones, such tactics as petitions, billboards, teach-ins, marches, pickets have also been effectively used and more will be needed as we go forward.



[Source:
amazon.com]

Martin Luther King, Jr., explained the necessity of direct action in his 1963 Letter from the Birmingham Jail:

“Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and establish such creative tension that a community that has

consistently refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue.

It seeks so to dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored. I just referred to the creation of tension as a part of the work of the nonviolent resister. This may sound rather shocking. But I must confess that I am not afraid of the word "tension."

I have earnestly worked and preached against violent tension, but there is a type of constructive nonviolent tension that is necessary for growth."

Nonviolent direct action is not the whole of a campaign for social betterment, but it is a necessary and indispensable component of any successful one.



The Late Former Attorney General Ramsey Clark addresses a gathering of about 50 defendants and supporters in front of the DeWitt Court House where the 38 Hancock drone protesters were on trial. [Source: mediasyracuse.com]

These actions in Nevada, California, Missouri, New York and

Wisconsin and their ensuing courtroom dramas have raised the *“constructive nonviolent tension that is necessary for growth”* in their communities at least to the extent that drone violence cannot be so easily ignored. We are responsible to build on these beginnings.

At the Syracuse trial of the *“Hancock 38,”* former United States Attorney General Ramsey Clark was permitted to testify on our behalf on the subject of international law.

Judge Gideon, after listening to Mr. Clark speak of the Nuremberg Principles and other laws as they apply to drone warfare at length, leaned over the bench and asked him,

“This is all interesting, but what is the enforcement mechanism? Who is responsible for enforcing international law?”

“They are,” responded Mr. Clark, pointing to the 31 defendants, *“and so,”* he said to Judge Gideon, *“are you!”*



Activists Brian Terrell and Ghulam Hussein Ahmadi at the Border Free Center in Kabul, Afghanistan.

[Graffiti by Kabul Knight;

photo by Hakim]

As a co-coordinator of Voices for Creative Nonviolence, a 25-year campaign that ended in December 2020, I was privileged to have the community support, the time and the means to join with these local cells of drone resistance around the U.S. and abroad.

Voices had also raised drone awareness by organizing several “peace walks” to drone bases, hundreds of miles on foot—from Chicago to a Michigan National Guard base in Kalamazoo; from Madison, Wisconsin, to Volk Field; from Rock Island, Illinois, to the Iowa Air National Guard drone command center in Des Moines—each time meeting with community groups and talking to hundreds of people along the way.



Peace march toward Volk Air National Guard Base in Wisconsin to voice concern with U.S. drone policy.

[Source: cnsblog.wordpress.com]

We itinerant Voices activists had a role in informing local anti-drone groups, in part because many of us have traveled to

places under attack by armed drones, including Gaza, Iraq, Pakistan, Syria, Lebanon and Afghanistan. I have visited Afghanistan, the nation most subjected to U.S. drone attacks and with the most drone casualties, five times between 2010 and 2018 and, with my colleagues, we have met with and often been befriended by Afghans who have lost limbs and loved ones in drone strikes.

We know many others who, fearing drone violence, have fled their village homes with their families to live in squalid and overcrowded refugee camps.

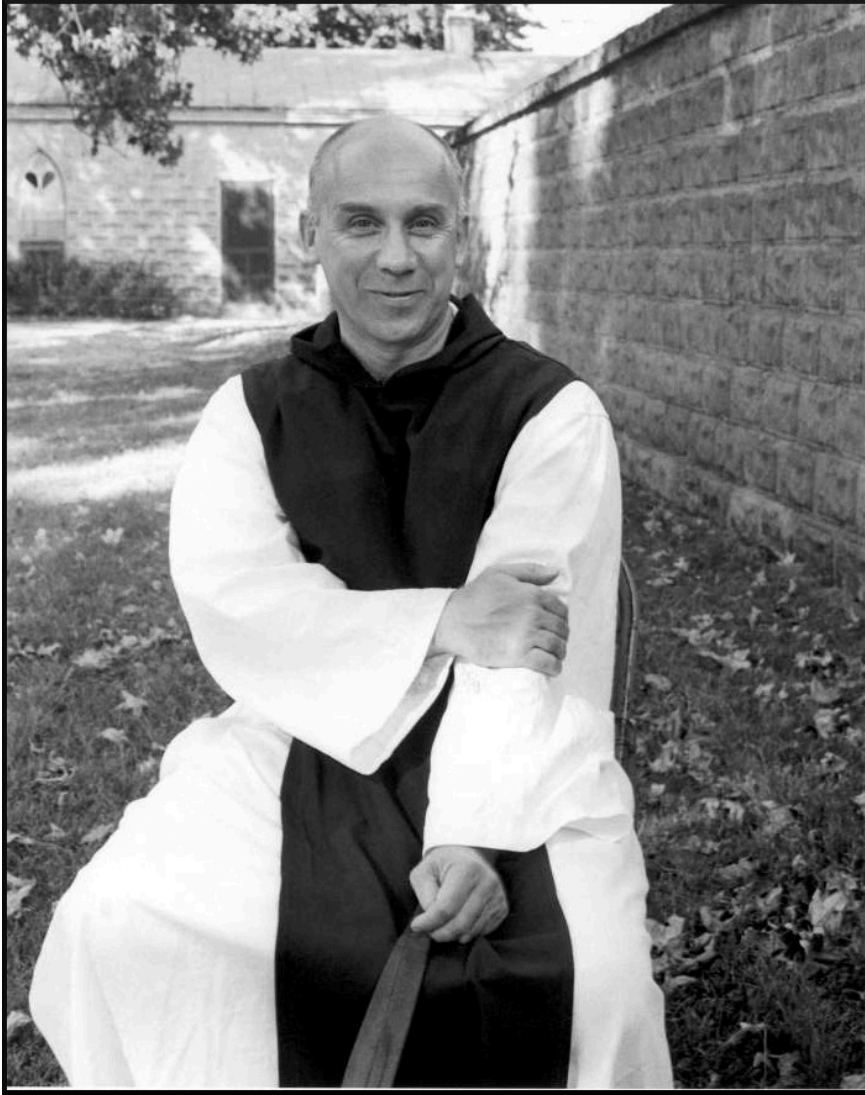
Activists from Voices in the United Kingdom have been resisting the use of armed drones by the Royal Air Force, including nonviolent resistance at RAF Waddington in Lincolnshire and at factories there producing drones for Israel's military.

CODEPINK Women for Peace anti-drone activists likewise have traveled to and established friendships in Pakistan, Palestine and other places targeted by weaponized drones.



CodePink founder Medea Benjamin protests drone war. [Source: codepink.org]

Banning weaponized drones is not an abstract "cause" but a real human obligation. Addressing resistance to the Vietnam War in 1966, Thomas Merton wrote, "It is the reality of personal relationships that saves everything."



Thomas Merton [Source: uscatholic.org]

Not every anti-drone activist needs to visit war zones, just as not all of us need to go to prison, but some of us need to do both of these and it is the reality of those personal relationships that keeps our resistance from the abstractions that would otherwise suffocate it.

To learn more about the international campaign to ban killer drones, see bankillerdrones.org.

**Featured Image: Brian Terrell (right), with Father Louie Vitale, at a 2009 anti-drone war protest at Creech Air Force Base, outside of Las Vegas, NV. [Source: Jeff Leys]*