

US Drone Warfare Faces Questions of Legitimacy, Study of Military Chaplains Shows

by *Paul Lushenko and Keith L Carter*, published on *The Conversation*, May 7, 2023

Editor's note: Upstate Drone Action will be leafleting at 8:30 AM on June 4, in honor of Clergy Day at Hancock Air National Guard Base outside Syracuse, NY. Local clergy have been invited to tour the base, hear about their accomplishments and have lunch. The Catholic Bishop of Syracuse specifically forwarded the invitation to local Catholic clergy. We feel this event should be a "conversation" and not just an opportunity for propaganda that justifies militarism and killing people from a long distance.

Are drone strikes legitimate, meaning on sound moral and legal footing? How people perceive the legitimacy of U.S. drone strikes—firing missiles from remotely piloted aircraft at terrorist and insurgent leaders—is central to whether and how the government can continue to use them.

The American public tends not to question military action it perceives as rightful, and U.S. policymakers often reference the legitimacy of U.S. drone strikes. The U.S. military, responsible for conducting most drone strikes globally, has also adopted legitimacy as a principle of counterterrorism operations.

Yet what shapes perceptions of legitimate drone warfare, how these perceptions vary across audiences, and the implications for the U.S. drone program are not well understood. This gap is surprising, given that "over-the-horizon" drone

strikes—firing missiles at targets many miles away—have defined U.S. counterterrorism policy in Afghanistan and elsewhere, despite being routinely criticized.

Drone strikes differ from other uses of force in the remoteness of the operators firing the weapons. Drone operators are typically hundreds or thousands of miles away from their targets, which they view through drone- and satellite-based cameras and sensors. In the worst-case scenario, this can lead to target misidentification and civilian casualties.

Part of the problem is that scholars disagree on what constitutes drone warfare, which has implications for how they understand variations in public perceptions of legitimacy. As military scholars who study the topic, we define drone warfare as a function of strike attributes, meaning how and why they are used abroad.

Using this definition, we have found that how a country uses and constrains the use of drones shapes how people perceive their legitimacy. We've also found that perceptions of legitimacy differ between U.S. citizens and soldiers, particularly chaplains, who guide the moral use of force. We are scheduled to present our study of the attitudes of military chaplains on drone strikes at both the U.S. Army's Institute for Religious Leadership and the American Political Science Association's annual meeting in September 2024.

Uses and constraints

Countries use drones for different purposes.

Tactical strikes are designed to achieve battlefield objectives, such as destroying an enemy compound.

Strategic strikes destroy terrorist organizations to achieve overall war aims. They are used to remove key terrorist

leaders. The goal of such “*decapitation operations*” is to hasten a terrorist group’s collapse.

Countries also constrain drone use differently. Some use self-imposed constraints. These include targeting standards, which are calibrated to balance effectiveness against anticipated civilian casualties. Others use externally imposed constraints such as international approval for drone strikes.

U.S. citizens’ beliefs

Drawing on our definition of drone warfare as a matter of varying uses and constraints of drones, we reviewed and analyzed public perceptions of the legitimacy of drone strikes.

We found that U.S. citizens perceive over-the-horizon drone strikes, where drones are used strategically without external oversight, as most legitimate. This pattern of drone warfare characterizes the United States’ approach globally.

However, we also found that U.S. citizens’ perceptions of legitimacy are affected by civilian casualties, which lead Americans to reconsider reliance on internal constraints such as targeting standards. Given civilian casualties, U.S. citizens’ perceptions of legitimacy are shaped by international, rather than national, oversight, reflecting a belief that international approval is central to the appropriate use of force.

U.S. Army chaplains’ beliefs

We compared these results with the beliefs of U.S. Army chaplains, offering the first evidence for how these key advisers to military commanders perceive the legitimacy of drone warfare.

The U.S. Army conducts the most strikes of any service. Chaplains in the Army are “*moral advocates*” during conflict who “*provide professional advice, counsel, and instruction on religious, moral, and ethical issues,*” according to regulations. Many commanders in the military have strong religious beliefs, suggesting they may draw on chaplains’ counsel. Similarly, chaplains minister to drone operators, who are vulnerable to moral injury, meaning the emotional or psychological damage people suffer when they transgress their moral boundaries.

Some experts suspect that chaplains’ advisory role may be exaggerated. These scholars often study chaplains during interstate war, however. Our research sheds new light on chaplains’ attitudes toward the use of drones against nonstate adversaries such as terrorist organizations.

We found that, in contrast to the U.S. public, chaplains perceive over-the-horizon drone strikes as illegitimate. Rather, chaplains perceive tactical-level strikes on the battlefield as most legitimate, especially when they are tightly constrained by policy.

Even then, chaplains voice less support for these drone strikes than their perceptions of legitimacy might suggest. Why would chaplains not support drone strikes they perceive as legitimate? We found that this “*legitimacy paradox*” reflects underlying concerns. Chaplains in our survey often questioned the legality of strikes, the veracity of intelligence, the territorial integrity of targeted countries and the implications for national security.

The future of US drone warfare

These findings have implications for policy, strategy and military readiness. In order to increase perceptions of legitimacy of the U.S. drone program among citizens and soldiers, our findings suggest that elected and military

leaders would need to take several steps.

First, elected officials would need to transparently discuss the program. Specifically, they would need to justify a transgression of a country's sovereignty, especially in terms of anticipated security gains.

Second, military leaders would need to explain the intelligence driving drone operations, measures to , and how strikes comply with international law.

Finally, military leaders would need to research the potential for differences in perceptions of legitimacy held by other soldiers, especially with the emergence of fully autonomous drones that can identify, track and engage targets without human oversight. Military lawyers, for instance, also fulfill a key advisory role to commanders. Lawyers' training, shaped more by their understanding of the laws of armed conflict rather than moral considerations, suggests that it is possible they may interpret the legitimacy of drone strikes differently than chaplains.

In our expert opinion, taking these steps would bring the necessary transparency and reflection to address questions of legitimacy that are fundamental to civilian and military support for the U.S. drone program.

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Celebrating Martin Luther King, Jr. in 2023

Syracuse, NY, January 23rd, 2023 On Sunday, January 22nd, the 38th Annual Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. S.U. Celebration was attended by almost 2,000 people dining inside the huge Syracuse University Dome in Central NY. It was an evening of great celebration and reunion, especially for the Black community members and churches of Syracuse, ending a three year COVID hiatus. This year the attendees enjoyed a different twist to the event. Highlights of Dr. King's message of anti-militarism were shared through flyers and a banner in solidarity with the celebration.



Dinner attendees were delighted. Applause erupted, and some of the 200 tables of ten gave standing ovations, as a banner was carried through the cheering crowd reading "*The greatest purveyor of violence in the world is my own government.*" Almost 2,000 flyers with quotes from Dr. King were given to people as they approached the Dome walking through snow to the event.

Flyers read, Celebrate Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

...I Cannot be Silent

Dr. King could not be silent and neither can we be silent about US wars and destruction around the world, most recently in Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria, Yemen, Ethiopia, Somalia, The Congo, and now Ukraine.

*Along with his defiance against racism and his support for the working class, Dr. King decried US imperial wars around the world. In 1967, exactly one year before his death, he gave his famous speech, "**Beyond Vietnam, A Time to Break Silence.**"*

He said, "I knew I could never again raise my voice against the violence of the oppressed in the ghettos without having first spoken clearly to the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today – my own government."

He went on to say, "A true revolution of values will lay hand on the world order and say of war, "This way of handling differences is not just."....A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death."

And, "Every nation must now develop an overriding loyalty to mankind as a whole in order to preserve the best of individual societies. ...We can no longer afford to worship the god of hate or bow before the altar of retaliation."

No to Weaponized Drones! No Nuclear Weapons! Build Roads and Schools, not deadly weapons. Housing and Medical care for all! Create jobs not weapons; love not war.

Because the economy runs on war, Rev Martin Luther King Jr.'s identification of militarism as one of the triplets of evil in

our culture is often set aside to focus on racism and poverty. Lets not break the circle.

At the largest university campus entertainment structure in the United States last night, the ugly face of militarism was raised beside it's evil brethren, poverty and racism. Dr. King could no longer remain silent. Neither can we. Last night, there was joy in holding Dr. King's message in it's fullness among almost two thousand at Syracuse University Dome.

Thanks to members of the Syracuse Peace Council, Upstate Drone Action, Pax Christi, Ithaca Catholic Workers, Veterans for Peace Chapter 90, and Peace Action of NYS for for joining us.