DRONE WARFARE:
An Emerging Technology with Deep Moral Implications

The question of whether to go to war and the question of how warfare is conducted are both profound moral and religious questions. Though there are differences of opinion within the religious community about the morality of going to war, most religions are unified in believing that when and if war occurs, it should be limited.

Current U.S. policies for lethal drone strikes are unnecessarily opaque, are implicitly biased against efforts to capture those individuals who are targeted, cause an unacceptable number of civilian casualties, allow targeting of unidentified individuals, violate international human rights law, may ultimately risk removing human judgment from drone strike decisions, create long-term hostility in affected communities toward U.S. interests, directly harm attempts to promote human rights and the rule of law, and dangerously reduce the political and psychological costs of using lethal force.

What makes drones different than other weapons?
Broadly speaking we can put lethal drones in three categories:

1. Battlefield drones – sometimes as simple as modified commercial drones, these short range drones are operated by individuals on or near the battlefield.
2. Long range drones – sophisticated aircraft operated by pilots hundreds or thousands of miles away from their targets.
3. Autonomous drones – drones that carry out missions and strike targets autonomously based on supplied criteria.

Mural by Murad Subay in Sanaa, Yemen. muradsubay.com

The first category, battlefield drones, are functionally not that different from previous weapons technologies – the operators still face physical risk and the drones themselves can sometimes be disabled or destroyed by ordinary combatants with conventional weaponry.

The second and third categories, though, pose two related but distinct risks. First, drones (and other lethal semi-autonomous and fully autonomous weapons) reduce the political and psychological costs of using force (mostly by decreasing the direct physical risk to U.S. personnel). As such, drones make it easier for decision-makers to choose force – even when other alternatives might otherwise be chosen – and that decision-making will only become more biased toward the use of force as drone technology improves.

Second, semi-autonomous and fully autonomous weapons create moral distance from kill decisions. It is one thing for society to send 18 year-old draftees to fight and die in a muddy trench in a distant land; it is another thing for a President to order a strike carried out by a drone pilot sitting in an air-conditioned room 3000 miles from any conflict; and it is yet a third thing for a future President to authorize a computer to

identify and strike targets meeting certain pre-programmed criteria with the President receiving a monthly printout of kill totals. Increasing autonomy allows for increased "othering" of target populations.

What other effects to drones have?
Like any other weapon, drones cause significant civilian casualties. Additionally, the use of drones outside of the traditional battlefield can create a climate of terror where communities – most or all of whom are civilians – constantly fear sudden death from above. This can weaken the rule of law in affected communities, and, according to many national security experts, can create significant blowback against the aggressor. Attempting to deal with terrorism (or other national security issues) by killing those we believe to be terrorists in their homes and in their communities, can result in a perverse situation where drone strikes turn innocent people against us and ultimately leave our adversaries stronger than they were prior to the strikes.

Why does the U.S. government use lethal drones?
From a practical standpoint for the U.S. government, drones are seemingly very useful. Most importantly, long range drones shield operators from direct physical threat (although they do suffer psychological impacts). They also conveniently combine surveillance and attack capabilities.

In the future, improving technology will probably result in increasingly autonomous drones or drone swarms that can react more quickly than a human, or human-operated drone. In that situation, similarly autonomous drones may be the only means of combatting an adversary with autonomous drones.

Are there concerns about non-lethal drones?
Yes. The use of drones for surveillance (both by governments and private citizens) is of increasing concern for many people. NRCAT, however, focuses on the use of lethal drones.

What can I do?
You can:

1. Discuss drones and other autonomous weapons with your friends and family. Ask if they are worried about what happens when we are no longer in the same room, or even the same country, as the people we are killing? Ask if they think computers ought to be able to make the decision to kill someone?

2. Write to the President and to Congress and tell them that you are concerned that drones make it too easy for policy-makers to choose force. Tell Congress and the President that we need additional restrictions on the use of drones, that humans should always be "in the loop" on kill decisions, that the CIA should not carry out lethal strikes, and that Congress should appropriate funds to compensate the innocent victims of drone strikes.

3. Support affected communities. Join with others in your congregation or community to support development work in troubled parts of the world – particularly those affected by U.S. drone strikes. Write to your Members of Congress and tell them that the U.S. government should provide pay to rebuild infrastructure damaged by drone strikes and should provide additional development funds to address the reasons for future drone strikes.

For more information on lethal drones
and action alerts for Congress and the President
go to www.nrcat.org/drones