Ethical Issues surrounding the usage of drones in warfare

The US air force is currently the largest user of drones in the world. They own and operates thousands of them and have had them deployed around the world for various uses in wars. In Iraq, the USAF conducted about 30-40 missions daily with their predator drones in 2014. These ranged through various uses of the drones, some missions were reconnaissance, others launching strikes on suspected terrorists or militant groups.

These drones are of massive value to the military for dozens of different reasons. One of the big reason for them is the cost, drones are much cheaper to purchase and operate. An F-35 fighter costs the military around $85 million just to purchase it, while a reaper drone is only $14 million. The F-35 also cost around $40,000 to operate per hour of flight, while a predator costs less than $4,000. For these reasons alone, we can see that operating drones is massively beneficial to the military. Drones are also much safer to fly, since there’s no pilot. You’re never putting one of your pilot’s lives at risk to run a mission. Drones can also operate for much longer periods of time, being able to remain air born for up to 30 hours with some of the longer-range models. This is way longer than any single human pilot would be able to fly for, with most manned missions lasting less than 4 hours.

While drones are massively beneficial to the military, they do bring up some controversial topic for many different reasons. One issue with drones is that a lot of attacks end up having civilian casualties. In Pakistan, the USAF claimed that only 5% of those killed in drone strikes were civilians, however the Pakistani military estimated the number to be closer to 20%. Regardless of whether it’s 5% or 20% though, that’s far too many civilian casualties. People try to justify this by talking about the things that militant or terrorist organizations have done as well, since they’ve been just as destructive, but I don’t think that our actions can be validated by theirs. Another reason that they’re controversial is that it’s possible that the anger caused by drone strikes in certain regions is only fueling terrorism. They fuel anger, which is kind of one of the causes of terrorism.

In terms of just war principles, drones do not meet the standard that should be met. Just War principles state that civilians may not be killed, and that has obviously been violated. In Pakistan alone, several hundred civilians have been killed by drones strikes. I believe that the response of launching these strikes is proportional to the damage that terrorist or militant organizations are causing in the middle east, but we’re causing a lot of damage as well by launching these strikes. Dozens of strikes have been launched on houses in the middle of villages, killing civilians and children, destroying neighboring houses and doing a lot more damage than necessary. While the intent of launching these strikes is good, they do not follow just war principles. Too many civilians have been killed in the intent of killing a single officer to justify these attacks.

In my opinion, drones could be used by the military, but with restrictions. I don’t think that drones should be used to attack a target located within a certain distance of residential area. I don’t think that it’s ethical to be risking the lives of civilians for the potential to take out a single threat. Drones don’t need as many limits for reconnaissance missions since the intent in them is never to kill, but for launching actual strike, I think there needs to be some cut back and restrictions on when and where they can be done.