

DRONE WARS – HOW CAN THEY BE CURBED?

Since Chris Cole first came to talk to Faringdon Peace Group about drones in the 1990s, they have become much more sophisticated and widespread and are now integral to the way we fight wars. Chris came back in July to talk about developments in armed and autonomous drones and what is being done to curb their use.

Chris explained that drones come in all shapes and sizes, land and sea based as well as flying ones, from small quadcopters to huge aircraft sized ones, and that he was talking specifically about remote controlled aircraft for surveillance or armed with weapons. The UK buys its drones from the US or Israel, they are sited largely in the Middle East from where they are launched, then control is taken over by a 3 man ground crew at RAF Waddington. Claims of precision targeting and fewer civilian casualties than with manned aircraft are not backed up by evidence. Although armed drones have been used alongside aircraft in Syria and Iraq for the last 4 years, we do not hear about it. As no soldiers are involved, they are thought of as risk-free and more acceptable.

Targeted killings by drones are lawful within war zones, but are increasingly taking place outside, particularly in the aftermath of UK and European terrorist attacks. Few questions are asked, undermining UK and international law. Chris was also worried about proliferation: while only the US, UK and Israel used to use drones, now 15 countries and various rebel and militia groups have them. In Syria, many different groups are using drones so it is becoming harder to find out who is responsible for which attack.

Drone technology is developing rapidly. New jet-powered drones go faster and further and are more difficult to track. The 'Taramis' autonomous drone is being developed in the UK by BAE Systems and although the government says there are no plans to develop autonomous weapons with the intellectual level of a human, they could have just enough autonomy to make them very dangerous. Already they have automatic pilot, systems updating and surveillance, but how soon will it be before the drone, rather than a human, decides when to fire a weapon? Various UK organisations – Drone Wars, Article 36 and Reprieve - are pushing the government to make an unequivocal statement that this will never happen. They are also challenging them over the secrecy surrounding how many drones we have and where they are deployed. Parliament should have a say over military involvement, but this is not being enforced in the case of drones, so much advocacy work is being done with MPs, ministers and defence officials. A UN or worldwide treaty is needed but it is difficult to start working for it when Trump has made it clear that the US would not be part of it.

For more information about drones see: <https://dronewars.net/>

The more complicated the system, the more there is to go wrong.