State of the Union: A Decade of Armed Drones

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ABSTRACT

Over the course of the intervening decade, drones have become the centerpiece in U.S. counterterrorism operations and over 400 strikes have been reported in Pakistan, Somalia and Yemen. Proponents have lauded drones as the weapon of choice for future presidents and a step forward in humanitarian technology. Their use, however, has been the subject of ongoing controversy. Journalists report significant civilian casualties, while legal scholars challenge the legitimacy of targeted killing and political scientists and philosophers raise deep concerns about the ethics guiding U.S. policy makers. The purpose of this article is threefold: to map out the authorities and precedents that enabled the U.S drone program, to critically engage the U.S. government’s opaque language by employing the principles of the just war tradition which President Obama has openly endorsed, and to provide a history of the use and rhetoric of drones that can serve as the basis for robust public debate.