

## SHOULD AMERICA CARRY OUT DRONE ATTACKS AGAINST TERRORISTS?

One of the core elements of President Barack Obama's strategy to fight terrorist groups has been the increased use of drones—small, pilotless aircraft that fly into foreign airspace, monitor the activities of terror suspects on the ground, and, once the identities of suspects have been verified and the president's approval received, launch missiles to attack these suspects and their facilities. Over the last six years, drone attacks in countries such as Afghanistan, Yemen, and Pakistan have decimated the leadership and infrastructure of terrorist groups and inflicted significant casualties on lower-level fighters. Drones also played a key role in identifying the safe house in Pakistan where Al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden was located, making possible the helicopter attack by U.S. Special Operations troops that resulted in bin Laden's death in 2011.

On the one hand, drones allow the United States to attack terrorists and terror organizations throughout the world without putting American troops at risk. Drone attacks are also less expensive than conventional forces. For example, rather than sending a Special Operations unit across the world to attack a target in the Middle East, American crews working at a base in Nevada can remotely control drones launched from a secure base in Saudi Arabia. Because they have no crew, drones can be small, quiet, and stay in the air for long periods of time, making a surprise attack more feasible. Even if an attack is not being planned, drones allow the United States to monitor suspected terrorists to identify their possible link to other individuals and organizations that threaten U.S. security.

Nonetheless, the use of drones by American forces continues to be highly controversial, with critics of the policy found both inside the United States and throughout the world. Some people foresee that the very advantages ascribed to drones—that they are relatively inexpensive and require no human pilots—could likely lead decision makers to use drones more quickly than they might conventional weapons. Opponents also predict that decision makers may be less likely to fully consider the merits and consequences of a drone mission before taking action than they would if contemplating an attack that would put American troops at risk. In a similar vein, there are those who believe that drones remove the personal element from warfare, making it easier to disregard the moral implications of an attack.

Moreover, at least up to now, drone strikes have occurred with little congressional oversight or approval. As we have discussed in Chapter 12, Congress has the power to limit military operations—but doing so in the case of drones would be difficult because most of these operations are carried out in secret. How could members stop an operation they didn't know about until after it occurred?



The use of drones is controversial in the United States and abroad. Here, a protester in Yemen holds a sign denouncing the practice.

Drone strikes also involve the possibility of civilian casualties or damage to the property of people who have nothing to do with terrorism. Of course, collateral damage is possible in any military operation. However, because drone operators view their targets through long-range cameras mounted on the drones, the chances of a mistake are higher compared to Special Forces units who carry out their attacks at short range.

The problem for decision makers is this: prohibiting drone attacks on suspected terrorists does not mean that these individuals and organizations will go scot-free; most of these operations will instead be carried out by American armed forces, with the risk that some of these troops will be wounded, killed, or taken hostage. Should decision makers use drones or send in the Special Forces? You decide.

### CRITICAL THINKING QUESTIONS

1. The discussion gives several reasons why U.S. leaders might be reluctant to use drones to attack suspected terrorists. Besides the arguments about lower costs and not risking lives, what are the other advantages of utilizing drone attacks?
2. When might civilian and military leaders disagree about the decision to use drones? Why might military leaders be more likely to favor drone attacks?