

The killing of British citizens without democratic oversight raises questions over the government's use of drones

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By Democratic Audit UK

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*In August two British citizens were killed by British drones in Syria. The government has managed to avoid tough questions about the precise level of threat posed by the men to UK by conflating the right of an individual to self-defence with a state's capacity to pre-emptive action. But **Humeira Iqtidar** writes that it remains hard to judge the appropriateness of the action because it was taken without any democratic oversight, raising worrying questions about the use of drones by the UK government.*



Reaper Remotely Piloted Air System (RPAS) Credit: [Ministry of Defence](#), Open Government Licence

In August 2015 UK joined Pakistan in a unique club of states: states that have used drones to kill their own citizens. Both states claim a threat to national security from these citizens. In defending the UK government's decision to kill 21 year old Reyaad Khan, and 26 year old Ruhul Amin, David Cameron [claimed](#) "It was necessary and proportionate for the individual self-defence of the UK". This claim requires further democratic scrutiny.

It is precisely because Reyaad and Ruhul were UK citizens that proportionality of punishment for crimes committed becomes very important. This, after all, is a fundamental principal of our legal regime. The government claimed that the two were involved in a terror plot in UK. Playing on the fears of an already fearful citizenry Cameron implied that short of killing two men based in Syria, there was no way to stop these terrorist attacks from taking place within the UK. This appears to be a false binary, that the choice was between doing nothing, or killing the two young men in an act of spectacular violence in another state without permission from parliament.

Cameron is right to point out that nobody would have thanked him for waiting for a terrorist attack to actually do something, but that does not mean that awarding a death penalty without trial was the only possible option for stopping that terror attack. We don't know what other courses of action could have been taken but were not pursued. If the intelligence received was clear enough to confirm Reyaad and Nurul's guilt, did it not contain any details of other networks and operators within Britain? Does killing them disable that network completely? If making their deaths into a spectacle is meant to act as a deterrent might it not equally inspire those already enmeshed in this network? These are just some of the questions, which require answers before we can declare unequivocally that the

death penalty was indeed a justified response to their actions.

But all of this remains hard to judge precisely because this decision was taken without any democratic oversight—neither the parliament nor any specialist independent committee were consulted before this death penalty was passed. As [Kat Craig, Legal Director of Human Rights group Reprive](#) noted, “...what we are seeing is the failed US model of secret strikes being copied wholesale by the British government. Ministers repeatedly promised Parliament and the public that there would be no military operations in Syria without Parliamentary approval. The fact that David Cameron has bypassed Parliament to commit these covert strikes is deeply worrying – as is his refusal to share what legal advice he was given.”

The slope the Cameron government has started down is a very slippery one. Precisely because drones seem to carry no human cost to the attacker, and are marketed as weapons that allow ‘surgical’ strikes without much collateral damage, they seduce us into seeing them as neat technical solutions to intractable political problems. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Drones warfare, like other acts of war, invariably gets enmeshed in the political chaos that surrounds armed conflict, but more critically drones are only as accurate as the human intelligence on the ground. This is invariably flawed in combat situations. The [Naming the Dead](#) project by The Bureau of Investigative Journalists has shown that between 2467 and 3984 people have been killed in US drone attacks in Pakistan over the last ten years, but only 725 people can be identified with certainty. Of these 725, slightly more than half have been identified as civilians and the rest as militants. Even among the militants killed it is not clear whether their level of involvement merit a death penalty.

Yet, the US government could continue with drone attacks because the weapon’s speed and malleability of deployment make democratic scrutiny in attacking states, and ground-based fact checking in the attacked state, difficult. If there is one lesson we can draw from the intensive use of drones by the US in the last decade, it is that drones allow greater circumvention of painstakingly erected democratic oversight over the more shadowy parts of powerful states. And this is where Cameron’s use of the term ‘individual self-defence of UK’ needs greater investigation. In conflating the right of an individual to self-defence with a state’s capacity to pre-emptive action, the government has managed to avoid, at least so far, tough questions about the precise level of threat posed by the two men to UK. The government’s subsequent decision to claim a legal basis for the strike in collective defence of Iraq in its [submission to the UN](#) raises further questions about its reasons for using drones.

Security and defence are fast becoming worn-out commodities in political imagination. The expanded scope of security apparatus in many states post 9/11 is beginning to be increasingly questioned, and certainly requires extensive rethinking of [regulation of security services](#). The Pakistani state, which has recently unveiled its own drones that it has been using to attack Pakistani citizens within the FATA (Federally Administered Tribal Areas) region, has long used the idea of an existential threat to deflect attention away from its own complicity in militancy alongside its support for the fanatical ‘war on terror’ led by the US. My research with [refugees and migrants](#) from the tribal areas has highlighted the sense of despair and disenfranchisement this has entailed amongst them. Similarly, Israel has used a threadbare account of self-defence to try out its drones on a captive Palestinian population to sell them as ‘[combat proven](#)’ weapons that give Israeli firms a competitive edge. As one of the world’s largest weapon’s exporter, despite its size, Israel’s [ability to test its weapons](#) is important. USA has used drones to ease itself out of the ill-planned war in Afghanistan, launched once again in response to a perceived threat to its existence from the poorest nation in the world. The question that demands urgent attention is what exactly is the UK government using drones for?

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