

All Party Parliamentary Group on Drones

17 October 2012, 10.00am

MINUTES

INTRODUCTION

The three strands of the Group's work were introduced by Tom Watson MP. These were: the use of drones by the United States in Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia and elsewhere; their use by the UK internationally (currently understood to be in Afghanistan and Libya); and their use domestically in the UK by police forces and others. Within these themes, he commented, was a need to examine the legal and ethical frameworks which govern the use of drones.

ELECTION OF OFFICERS

Tom Watson MP was elected as Chair of the Group.

Baroness Stern and Zac Goldsmith MP were elected as Vice Chairs.

Dave Anderson MP was elected as Secretary.

John Hemming MP was elected as Treasurer.

PRESENTATIONS

Clive Stafford Smith, Founder and Director of Reprieve

Clive Stafford Smith presented an overview of the use of drones by the United States in Pakistan. He drew parallels with the nuclear age and argued that the world was sleepwalking into a drone war. He queried whether drones could be considered a miracle weapon. A central theme of his presentation was the issue of secrecy around the use of drones and the numbers killed. He argued that their impact was to increase the ease with which states could go to war. Citing the case of Tariq Aziz, a 16 year old child killed in a drone strike who was initially described as a militant, Clive Stafford Smith was clear that he, along with his brother, were simply in the family car to pick up their aunt, when they were targeted. Clive Stafford Smith highlighted the recent report by Stanford University which focused on the ongoing psychological impact of drones over Pakistan; he also drew parallels with the doodlebug experiences of the Second World War in London. Clive Stafford Smith made reference to civilian ownership of drones, citing the lack of oversight of such ownership. He finished by emphasising the need for an open and public debate on the issue of drones and the importance of the APPG in developing this debate.

Chris Cole, Drone Wars UK

The focus of Chris Cole's presentation was the UK's use of drones. He began by describing the range of drones currently owned and operated by the Ministry of Defence (MoD) including the HERMES drone, rented from Israel, which will be replaced by Watchkeeper drones. While currently RAF drone pilots are based at Creech, in the United States, they will shortly be returning to the UK. As at 31st August, the UK has undertaken 319 drone strikes. This is a similar number to the United States, who are currently believed to have killed between 400-800 civilians; however, the MoD claims that they have only killed 4 civilians in drone strikes. This means, Chris Cole posited that either the UK is exponentially better at using drones or there is something wrong with the counting of deaths by the UK. Chris Cole touched on the different international legal frameworks in operation in Pakistan and Afghanistan but pointed to issues of the status and definition of combatants. He highlighted the levels of investment by the UK Government in drones. For example, to date, £900 million has been spent plus £1.1 billion has been spent on research and development. Chris Cole also highlighted the increased automation of drones and the rise of their use in civil airspace. In conclusion, he pointed to concerns that the increased use of drones was leading

to the proliferation of conflict and cited the example of the United States, which is currently involved in six conflicts this year.

DISCUSSION

- Opening the discussion, a question was asked on the issue of segregated airspace and reference made to the testing of drones in his constituency and the civil liberties of local people. Chris Cole highlighted the fact that the Civil Aviation Authority could only control civil airspace but that the area in which drones were flown in Wales was now considered to be a military zone and thus questions arose regarding oversight.
- Another question was asked, referencing conversations with high ranking officials in Pakistan, with regard to the difficulties in counting casualties. The accurate counting of casualties undertaken by the Bureau of Investigative Journalism was highlighted; it was commented that the organisation had been able to name 200 militants and over 300 civilians.
- In response to a question as to whether the UK was sharing intelligence with the United States for the purposes of drone strikes, Clive Stafford Smith commented that GCHQ had publicly announced that they shared intelligence. He also drew attention to cases where the piloting of a drone was shared between the US and NATO and the implications this may have on the action carried out by this drone.
- A comment was made that there was a need for the APPG to engage with NGOs. Concern should not only be at the development of this technology but the impact on human rights – these weapons present an immense challenge to the human rights framework.
- Further comments were made on the issue of drone ownership together with a query as to if there was an international body which oversaw international state ownership of drones.
- The experiences of Northern Ireland were explored and lead to a comment about the usefulness of micro-drones in saving British lives.
- It was pointed out that the consequences of drone use in Pakistan were well-known within the British Pakistani community but there was a need to raise awareness more broadly.
- A question was asked about whether criminal charges could be brought against a drone pilot. Clive Stafford Smith responded by explain the role of the US ambassador to Pakistan and his relationship with a 'kill list'.
- A query arose about which states had drones and for what purposes they were being used. Chris Cole responded that 76 countries currently have developed or owned drones, though there was a range of drones and only three states had armed drones. This response was followed up with a question as to how much the drone agenda was driven by those who profit from it. Chris Cole made reference to the power of the arms lobby. Clive Stafford Smith noted that the US currently had 11,000 weaponised drones.
- The issue of the health consequences for drone operators, who were showing signs of PTSD related to issues around operational processes, was flagged. Attention was drawn to a launch of a MEDACT report on health and drones on 23 October.

The next meeting will be held at 10am, 5th December 2012 at Committee Room 6.

The meeting was closed at 10.40am