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The immorality of drone warfare

Maureen Fiedler | Apr. 4, 2013 NCR Today

On Tuesday, I had the great pleasure of interviewing the noted Islamic scholar and author, Akbar Ahmed, who serves as the Ibn Khaldun chair of Islamic studies at American University, on the thesis of his new book , *The Thistle and the Drone: How America?s War on Terror Became a Global War on Tribal Islam.*

The thesis is simple: drones (remote controlled aircraft used both for surveillance and bombing) are billed as instruments to hunt down terrorists, but in reality, they are being used to wage a war on tribal Islam. Such tribal areas include much of Afghanistan, and parts of Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, Mali and other countries.

For starters, polls have reported that 80 to 90 percent of the people in such tribal areas have never heard of the 9-11 terrorist attacks, and have no idea about its significance for the United States.

Ahmed is an anthropologist by training, and had actually studied people in tribal areas of his native Pakistan in his younger years, when he administered in Waziristan, one of the tribal provinces of Pakistan.

He understands their codes of honor and revenge, and their severe shortcomings as well, especially the ?terrible? way they treat women. But he respects their right to exist and evolve.

In these tribal areas, however, Ahmed says that drones often kill totally innocent people: women, children, the elderly, those attending innocent business meetings, etc. In fact, about 80 to 90 percent of the deaths are people who have nothing to do with terrorism or potential attacks on the U.S.

The drone, in other words, is an indiscriminate weapon.

Moreover, these drones ?buzz? overhead many hours of the day and night (probably for surveillance), raising immeasurably the fear level of those on the ground.

In the process, these drones are creating all kinds of animosity toward the U.S. in these tribal areas. The animosity would be even worse if the potential victims knew what the drone operators (usually located in the Midwest somewhere) called a ?hit.? The phrase used often is a ?bug splat,? ? as if the people killed were insects, not human beings. This is blatantly racist.

For all these reasons, Ahmed judges that the current use of drones (and up to 10,000 are in use at the moment) is both immoral and counterproductive for U.S. foreign policy.

What *would* be productive? Ahmed advocates a program that exemplifies the best values of the Abrahamic traditions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam). Development assistance, especially programs of education, would be valued and appreciated, he says ? and would go a long way to reverse the negative views of the United States in these tribal areas.

His book is causing something of a stir in policy circles, and his has been invited to speak about it at the Pentagon in May. Stay tuned.

If you would like to listen to my interview with Ahmed, it will be available online at Interfaithradio.org [1] beginning Friday.

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[1] http://www.interfaithradio.org/