Houston Area Model United Nations
Standard Committee

DISEC

Chair | Rohini Das
Topic B: UAV's: Legality and Ethics of State Sponsored Assassinations and Human Rights Violations
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Atilgan Ozdil/Anadolu Ag

Chair Letter

Hello Delegates,

Hi guys! My name is Rohini and I am currently a junior pursuing a Finance degree at the University of Texas at Dallas!

I first joined Model United Nations during my sophomore year of high school and have been invested since! Model UN has become one of my biggest passions and I am proud to represent UTD MUN as a Writing Officer! Model UN is a great place to refine your skills, meet some great new people, and push yourself!

Having an opportunity to chair DISEC is incredibly exciting as this committee's relevance grows by the day. DISEC is a great environment to learn about the inner workings of the UN, how to handle delicate topics with care, and expand your knowledge. I am thrilled to see the unique approaches you all have been preparing!

I urge every delegate to be prepared to be challenged in committee. This committee's topics are the Legitimacy of Nuclear Weapons in National Defense and UAVs: Legality and Ethics of State Sponsored Assassinations and Human Rights Violations. These topics are serious, complex, and difficult to diplomatically address, but I am confident with sufficient preparation you all will do great! Be ready to think on your feet!

Good Luck!

Rohini Das
Chair of DISEC
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Topic Overview

"We have a collective need for ensuring that our communities are kept safe from the threat of terrorists using new and emerging technologies while also using those tools to benefit society."
- UN Office of Counter-Terrorism Deputy-Under-Secretary-General Raffi Gregorian

The global stance on Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAV), also known as drones, is multifaceted and complex, primarily led by a growing desire to embrace technology but restrained by a lack of precedent. If left unregulated, UAVs can be used as lethal weapons and enable terrorist sects. However, UAVs also have a potential to become strong tools in counter-terrorism. These UAVs have been used for surveillance, humanitarian aid, mapping conflict zones, and reducing risks for aid workers.

Although drones have significant benefits in protecting human rights, there is a large concern on its use for assassinations and human rights violations.

This committee focuses on the UN Charter's foundational pillars, and the use of UAVs for targeted killings tests the limits of these bounds. Article 2(4) of the UN Charter prohibits the use of force and promotes peaceful dispute resolution and Article 51 recognizes the inherent right to self defense for nations in conflict. These two ideas guide the rhetoric on the use of state sponsored assassinations, with some arguments to support its use as a form of self defense and other arguments that condemn it as unnecessarily forceful.

International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and International Human Rights Law (IHRL) does not prohibit armed UAVs, but instead requires compliance with the principles of distinction, proportionality, and precaution. There must be a distinction between combatants and civilians, attacks are prohibited if the loss to civilian life is excessive, and feasible precautions must be taken to minimize civilian harm. .

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Thus, UAVs may be used only to target combatants and support military objectives with a focus on minimal civilian harm and in the situation of imminent threats. However, the IHRL's strong stance on restricting lethal force creates a tense debate around the use of UAVs outside of armed conflict zones, with a focus on the right to life and fair trial

UN Documentation

The Global Counter-Terrorism Programme on Autonomous and Remotely Operated Systems (AROS Programme) was developed in 2021 by the UN Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT) in order to address the challenges posed by UAVs and support Member States with innovative capacity building assistance to counter terrorism. This programme implements the United Nations Global Counter Terorism Strategy outlined in General Assembly (GA) Resolution 60/288 that was adopted in 2006. This promotes the commercial use of UAVs, and proposes measures to counter the use of this technology for terrorist purposes by having Member States strengthen focus on international human rights laws.

Additionally, the Human Rights Council (HRC) passed Resolution 25/22 in 2014 in order to ensure the compliance of UAV operations with IHL, IHRL, and the UN Charter. With transparency in records on the use of UAVs, Member States are able to be held to the international standards set forth by the HRC and investigative panels.

Historical Use

The development of UAVs has occurred in a global platform through technological diffusion, doctrinal innovation, and escalating conflicts. This has moved the use of drones from reconnaissance tools to powerful instruments in maintaining state power and creating geopolitical contention. Drone technology has had widespread use since its rudimentary introduction in World War I in the form of pilotless aircrafts with the primary goal of being a lethal weapon. The Kettering Bug, developed by the United States of America, and the Aerial Target, developed by the United Kingdom, were developed in 1918 but not yet used operationally during the war.

The gap between World War I and World War II is when development and testing of unmanned aircrafts continued. Global superpowers began utilizing radio-controlled aircrafts as targets for training purposes, but its true potential was soon realized.

The use of UAVs in both non-lethal and lethal ways was developed further during the Cold War. The Vietnam War saw the first reconnaissance UAVs deployed on a large scale, while additionally being utilized as decoys in combat, missile launchers, and even dropping leaflets for propaganda operations. This opened the use of drones for commercial and military use as the technology continued to adapt.

The widespread use of the modern definition of drones was seen in the 1980s as its increasing success during the Cold War encouraged lethal and non-lethal use. However, the 21st century brought its extended use as a lethal weapon in targeted killings. The United States of America spearheaded the weaponization of UAVs, and nations such as Israel, Turkey, China, and the United Kingdom quickly followed suit. With this increased production of UAVs, non-state actors began to access and improvise weaponized drones in conflict zones.

Current Status

The proliferation of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) has fundamentally destabilized the notion of territorial sovereignty, creating circumstances where the geographical limits of war are blurred. In 2026, the primary legal conflict exists between the restrictive application of International Humanitarian Law (IHL), which governs active zones of hostility, and International Human Rights Law (IHRL), which mandates that lethal force be used only as a last resort. States increasingly bypass these boundaries by utilizing signature strikes that target individuals based on behavioral patterns rather than confirmed identity. Therefore, effectively shifting the burden of proof from the state to the victim posthumously.

This technological evolution has lowered the political and physical cost of intervention, facilitating state-sponsored assassinations under the guise of counter-terrorism. The standard for self-defense, once strictly defined as an immediate physical threat, has been diluted into a doctrine of permanent preemption. This allows states to conduct extrajudicial killings in non-belligerent nations, often without the consent of the host government, thereby eroding the UN Charter's prohibition on the use of force.

Case Examples

Russo-Ukraine War
The conflict in Ukraine has been dubbed the "First Drone War," characterized by the massive deployment of "kamikaze" (loitering) munitions and First-Person View (FPV) drones. Ukraine's SBU and GUR have utilized drones to track and eliminate Russian military commanders and political officials in occupied territories.

The use of low-cost drones with limited guidance systems has raised significant concerns regarding the Principle of Distinction. Attacks on energy infrastructure and residential areas in cities like Kyiv and Moscow often blur the line between legitimate military targets and civilian populations.

Both sides have expanded the use of UAVs for "deep strikes" and targeted killings far behind the front lines. In late 2025, Russia alleged multiple Ukrainian drone attempts to strike presidential residences, classifying them as state-sponsored assassination attempts.

Iran and the Soleimani Strike
The 2020 assassination of Iranian General Qasem Soleimani via a U.S. drone strike in Iraq remains the definitive case for state-sponsored assassinations outside an active battlefield. UN Special Rapporteurs have argued that the strike violated the UN Charter because it occurred on the soil of a third-party state (Iraq) without their consent and failed to meet the "imminent threat" criteria required for legal self-defense under Article 51. Furthermore, Iran's own proliferation of UAV technology to non-state proxies—such as the Houthis and various militias—has created a "responsibility vacuum." This case highlights the risk of transnational repression, where states use the "clean" and remote nature of drone technology to conduct assassinations that would otherwise be considered acts of war, thereby lowering the threshold for global conflict.

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Past UN Actions

The United Nations' response to the evolution of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) has shifted from a focus on counter-terrorism to a broader concern regarding the "automation of killing" and its implications for state responsibility. For DISEC, the challenge lies in reconciling 20th-century legal frameworks with 21st-century remote-warfare capabilities.

Historically, the UN's most significant legal challenge to state-sponsored drone strikes came in 2020 following the assassination of Iranian General Qasem Soleimani. The Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial, Summary or Arbitrary Executions issued a landmark report (A/HRC/44/38) concluding that the strike was an "arbitrary killing" that violated Article 2(4) of the UN Charter. The report criticized the expanding "self-defense" justifications used by states to bypass territorial sovereignty, setting a precedent that the use of UAVs for targeted killings outside of recognized battlefields remains a violation of International Human Rights Law (IHRL).

In 2024 and 2025, the General Assembly took decisive action toward the regulation of Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems (LAWS). In December 2024, Resolution 79/62 was adopted with overwhelming support (166 votes in favor), signaling a global consensus on the need for "meaningful human control" over lethal technology. This resolution established a series of open informal consultations in May 2025, which aimed to move the international community beyond the stalled consensus-based debates of the Group of Governmental Experts (GGE). These consultations formally introduced the "two-tier approach," which seeks to prohibit autonomous drones that cannot be used in compliance with International Humanitarian Law (IHL) while strictly regulating those with semi-autonomous capabilities.

Most recently, in May 2025, the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine published a conference room paper documenting a systematic pattern of drone hunting in the Kherson region. The Commission concluded that the use of FPV drones to intentionally target individual civilians—verified through real-time video feeds posted by the operators themselves—constitutes crimes against humanity of murder.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. How can current international standards and measures be developed further to regulate the development, transfer, use, and accountability of UAV use by Member States?
2. Is the increasing accessibility of UAV technology by non-state actors and smaller states a destabilizing force in the international system?
3. Does the presence of UAV, for surveillance capabilities and military purposes, act as a continuous lethal threat that violates the UN Charter even without a strike? How should armed surveillance be classified and regulated on an international level?
4. Does the use of algorithms in UAVs perpetuate algorithmic discrimination based on location, age, gender, and behaviour and does this violate IHL? Can demographic patterns be used as sufficient evidence of combatant status?
5. What measures can be taken to ensure UAVs do not interfere with humanitarian aid efforts and the right to relief?

TOPIC B APPENDIX & SOURCES

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