

**A Utilitarian Ethics Analysis of the Use of the General Atomics MQ-9 Reaper Drone to Kill
Iranian Iranian General Qasem Soleimani**

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On my honor as a University Student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this
assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments

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Introduction

The means by which the United States of America wages war have evolved dramatically alongside the advancement of technology. This can be best exemplified by the General Atomics MQ-9 Reaper drone. This is a remotely piloted aircraft with a range of over 1000 miles at 50,000 feet and has the capability to fire laser guided missiles (Air Force, 2021). Using such a technology minimizes the need for American soldiers to be put in harm's way and is also widely considered to be a more precise weapon than conventional bombs (Krishnan, 2013). However, there are also serious ethical concerns surrounding this drone technology and its use by the United States. In 2020, the United States carried out a drone strike in Baghdad, Iraq, which killed Iranian General Qasem Soleimani. Although the strike successfully killed its target, it also caused the deaths of several civilians. In addition to the civilian casualties that seem to be always associated with drone strikes, contrary to conventional warfare, drone operators sit safely thousands of miles away and, "it is this very distance— both physical and psychological — that is a key ethical issue," (Krishnan, 2013). The arguments for and against this drone technology focus on the disparity of power between the drones and their victims with some's conclusion being that it is moral because it is less dangerous to Americans, and some's conclusion being that its indiscriminate nature and ease of use is immoral in the historical context of warfare. However, these arguments neglect to take the highest-level view of drone warfare's consequences, and as a result the practice will continue to be extremely controversial.

I will analyze the effects of the Reaper drone and the technology's role in the 2020 Baghdad drone strike through the lens of utilitarian ethics. This ethical framework focuses on the consequences of an action and its effect on the overall well-being of the greatest number of people. With this, I will describe how the Reaper drone's technological effectiveness and its

minimization of negative consequences coincide with Utilitarian ethic's consideration of overall decision making. The evidence supporting this can be compiled into a chart of pleasure vs. pain consequences derived from the U.S. Government's claims about the incident, reported facts about the actions or attempted actions of General Soleimani, and considerations surrounding the effects drone attacks have on the psychology of the local population.

Background

After the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001, the United States began its "War on Terror." This significantly increased the usage of attack drones offensively by the U.S. and its allies. With this technology, the time between "detection and destruction" of enemies could be as low as five minutes. This was reduced from three days just one decade before. (Mahadevan, 2010). This efficiency was due to several facts about attack drones. As compared to manned aircraft, attack drones are low noise which makes them much harder to detect by enemies. They also can stay in one area longer than manned aircraft. Finally, they can fly much lower to the ground due to posing no danger to a pilot. In the present day, of these attack drones, the main model used by the United States government is the Reaper drone. Regarding the ability of these particular drones to loiter in one area for up to 18 hours, one former director of the CIA described them as possessing an "unblinking stare" (Krishnan, 2013).

Literature Review

Just War

The ethics of the use of the unmanned attack drone has been explored by multiple scholarly sources. All three of these sources focus on the differences between drone warfare and traditional warfare along with the peculiar moral and psychological consequences of using this

technology. Erich Freiberger in 2013 wrote a piece titled “Just War Theory and the Ethics of Drone Warfare.” This explores the ethical implications of drone warfare as it relates to the “Just War Tradition.” He first sets forth the “Core Principles of Just War Theory” which are the Latin phrases “jus ad bellum” and “jus in bello.” These ask whether it was appropriate to go to war and how the war should be fought, respectively. Both of these principles go back in human and war history and have been called upon to form international agreements. Freiberger points to the most notable being The Hague Conference which created “The Convention on Laws and Customs of War”, the Geneva conventions, the Nuremberg War Crimes Trials, and several others. From these have emerged four main principles for the ethics of war: military necessity, distinction between soldiers and civilians, proportionality of military force, and the principle of humanity. With these in mind, Freiberger states that ethical use of drones is possible, but “the bar for their just use is set fairly high.” He goes on to characterize drone strikes in the context of these main principles. For the first, military necessity or imminence, he describes how it is basically impossible to linguistically consider a terrorist target non-imminent. This is exactly what the United States government stated in a leaked paper regarding justification for drone use. Freiberger calls it an abuse of language for the U.S. to suggest that terrorism is always imminent, because it is unpredictable. He also goes on to point out that the U.S. is in fact killing civilians, just as in the 2020 case in Baghdad, which is a clear violation of the distinction principle. On the principle of proportionality, Freiberger concedes that use of drone strikes in a case where all other ethical criteria are satisfied is generally fair. Finally, on the principle of humanity, he again mentions the frequency of civilian casualties resulting in an immense hatred of American strikes. From this he concludes that strikes may be worse overall for peace prospects (Freiberger, 2013).

With all of this being the case, the use of attack drones would be considered unethical by the Just War tradition.

Remote Killing

In another work titled “Killing by Remote Control: The Ethics of an Unmanned Military” written by Bradley Jay Strawser in 2010, he discusses similar concepts as Freiburger. He too mentions the lack of a threshold drone strikes take to be approved and the non-distinction between enemies and civilians. However, he includes an additional claim for why drone warfare can be considered unethical. This focuses less on the results caused by drone strikes as they relate to general war ethics and more on the unique psychological conditions of “remote killing.” This of course refers to the use of these drones to conduct military operations often from distances of thousands of miles. He states the concern that using these drones “remotely” could make it significantly easier to choose to engage in violent acts such as carrying out a strike. This is because drone operators are not present or in any way close to their targets. Thus, they may not witness or understand on a human level the actual consequences of their actions. They are detached from the violence which may dull their sense of responsibility or guilt (Strawser, 2010).

Distance and Responsibility

To further illustrate this concept, actual testimonies are included in Dr. Natalia Jevglevskaia and Dr. Jai Galliot’s 2020 essay “Airmen and Unmanned Aerial Vehicles: The Danger of Generalization.” The specific subject of distance referred to by Strawser’s term “remote killing” is expanded upon as it relates to the uniqueness of drone warfare. They cite a US Army lieutenant colonel who says, “there is a direct relationship between the emphatic and physical proximity of the victim and the resultant difficulty and trauma of the kill.” The distance

“permits” operators to deny the magnitude of the destruction that they have the ability to cause. However, the perspective of drone operators is also included providing a much different narrative. An operator stated, “one of the biggest misconceptions surrounding the RPA community is that the aircraft allows us some distance from the killing, since we are thousands of miles away. The opposite is true. We are too close. We know too much, and when it is time to shoot, we can zoom in until our target fills the screen.” Another unique condition of drone warfare is the sheer amount of power and destruction drones can cause. With this, it is also arguable that drone operators face a weightier sense of personal moral responsibility than a normal soldier. This is because an average soldier does not necessarily have the ability to unleash an incredibly powerful missile wherever they want and kill a potentially unknown and significant amount of people. With these perspectives in mind, the ethical challenges of distance are murky at best. Drone operators may not claim that they are desensitized to violence, but it doesn’t change the particularly unique conditions that drone warfare creates as compared to any other type of traditional war. Determining if the practice is or is not justified based on historical principles leads to conflicting conclusions based on how you define terms. Determining if the practice is immoral based on its remote nature leads to conflicting conclusions based on who you ask. With these flaws in mind, I will use the ethical framework of utilitarian ethics to address the overall consequences of drone warfare according to its principles.

Utilitarian Ethics

According to Ibo van del Poel and Lambér Royackers in “Ethics, Technology, and Engineering”, Utilitarianism is a type of consequentialism based on the utility principle. Consequentialism as a whole views consequences as “central to moral judgment of those

actions.” Therefore, utilitarianism focuses on the utility of these consequences, specifically based on the amount of pleasure or pain that results. With a controversial subject such as drone warfare, its unique characteristics, and mixed consequences such as Baghdad in 2020, using utilitarian ethics can provide a methodical calculation to determine whether the practice is ethical. Founded by Jeremy Bentham, utilitarian ethics is named for its core premise that an action can be considered right if it is useful and wrong if it is damaging. This is labeled by him as the “utility principle” wherein people should choose what causes the greatest happiness and least pain for the greatest number of people. This can be quantified with a “moral balance sheet” to effectively assign a numerical quantity of pleasure and pain to all actions, and thus the correct action can be chosen.

In order to measure the consequences of choices in utilitarian ethics, these are the qualities put forth in van del Poel and Royakkers’ work that utilitarians consider when making a choice that affects the interests of the community. They set forth a procedure as follows. Take into account the value of each pleasure and pain produced in the first instance of an action and then the value of each pleasure and pain following the first. Sum up these values on each side, and finally take into account how many people are affected by these pleasures and pains or the community as a whole. Though Bentham notes this process doesn’t have to be “strictly” pursued, it is the utilitarian guideline (van del Poel and Royakkers, 2011).

John Stuart Mill added on to Bentham’s ideas about utilitarian ethics. He adds distinction between “lower” and “higher” desires which are animalistic vs intellectual. He also adds the idea of the “freedom principle” which states that “everyone is free to strive for his/her own pleasure, as long as they do not deny or hinder the pleasure of others.” These caveats provide more clarity to the calculus involved with making a utilitarian decision. They remove possible scenarios that

could be considered counterexamples to utilitarian ethics such as the oppression of minority groups. Without Mill's freedom principle, utilitarian ethics could suggest that the desires of many always outweigh the desires of few. The result of this could essentially be mob rule. With these criteria in consideration, I will use utilitarian ethics to quantify drone warfare's consequences. This will involve analyzing the costs and benefits of drone warfare in the case of the 2020 drone strike in Baghdad, Iraq resulting in the death of the target but also several civilians. In this case, although the result was not ideal, utilitarian ethics will still serve to provide a unique insight as this event relates to the overall consideration of the ethics of drone warfare.

Analysis of Drone Warfare through Utilitarian Ethics

Overview of Consequences

To analyze drone warfare through the lens of utilitarian ethics for the use of the technology in the case of the 2020 drone strike against Iranian General Qasem Soleimani, the consequences are paramount. The direct and indirect consequences will need to be summed up to make an ethical judgement. After the strike, controversy ensued given that civilians were killed, the attack was on an Iranian military official, and because the attack was within the borders of another country. The U.S. insisted that this attack was self-defense because of the imminent terror threat that was posed by this general. Soleimani was the head of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards' Quds Force which was deemed a terrorist organization by the U.S. (Gan, 2020). Therefore, this claim represents a positive consequence. However, because of this event, Iraq voted to expel U.S. troops from inside its borders. Iran also carried out their own missile strikes on American bases in Iraq (Galbraith, 2020). These of course are negative consequences. The

reason these complicated consequences are representative of drone technology as a whole is because it has all of the qualities of what makes drone warfare ethically blurry. The drone was the General Atomics MQ-9 Reaper, so the drone operators were able to carry out the strike remotely without putting any Americans directly in harm's way. The strike also served its purpose to take out a specific individual, but there were civilian casualties as a result. Finally, it resulted in extraneous political and military repercussions.

Analysis Question

In order to fairly construct this by utilitarian ethics, the objective must be clear. Was the decision to use an MQ-9 Reaper drone, which is remotely operated, to strike and kill an Iranian General, Qasem Soleimani, in the event that there could be civilian casualties the "right" decision? The "action taker" is the U.S. government and there are several levels of people who feel the consequences. They are the people directly involved on both sides of the strike and then the people affected by the higher level political consequences.

Moral Balance Sheet: Immediate Pleasures and Pains

I will now follow the calculation procedure set forth by Jeremy Bentham to create a moral balance sheet. Creating this balance sheet will allow me to make an assessment on the ethics of the drone strike. The balance sheet can be illustrated in Figure 1. Firstly, the immediate effects are the deaths of 10 individuals. From a purely utilitarian ethics perspective, there is severe immediate pain. The only immediate pleasure resulting was perhaps the satisfaction from the U.S. government officials that their overall goal of killing Soleimani was successful. This is also where the nature of the drone technology becomes significant. There is an immediate pleasure that no U.S. operators had to be put in harm's way for this specific strike. But there is

an immediate pain that because a drone was used, there was civilian collateral damage. From the first steps of the utilitarian procedure, using a drone strike seems to favor pain.

	Pleasure	Pain
Immediate Consequence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • U.S. Military mission success • No U.S. military operators put in harm's way 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 10 individuals killed by the drone strike including civilians

Figure 1: Moral Balance Sheet

Moral Balance Sheet: Resultant Pleasures and Pains

Quantifying the values of the pleasures and pains that are produced as result of the first pleasure and pain are more challenging. However, the resultant pleasures and pains ultimately reveal what is needed to make an ethical decision. When doing so, complicated questions arise. If the action taker is the U.S. Government, to whom do they have an obligation to weight the pleasures and pains for? If the answer is U.S. citizens and U.S. strategic interests, the utilitarian procedure could follow a different path than if the answer is humanity as a whole. If the latter is the case, is it even fair to assign that high level of responsibility to an actor? Would the final judgement of the U.S. drone strike even end up being significantly different? These questions are realistic, but for the purpose of this analysis, only the “utility principle” will be used. This encompasses actions that result in the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people (van del Poel and Royackers, 2011). With this as the case, there are significant resultant pleasures as a consequence of this strike. The Pentagon states that Soleimani was “responsible for the deaths of hundreds of American and coalition service members and the wounding of thousands more,” (Gan, 2020). With this, I will assume that a resulting pleasure was the cessation of the killing and wounding of American and coalition service members on the order of hundreds to thousands. A consequence can be added to the balance sheet in Figure 1. American officials also claim that

during the Iraq war, Soleimani provided Iraqi insurgents with special bombs that were deadly against U.S. forces (Gan, 2020). Him no longer being able to do this can be considered a resulting pleasure. This is another example of why the resulting consequences help reveal the ethical details more than the initial consequences. Soleimani's influence was massive and ending his ability to provide weapons against U.S. forces can also be added to the balance sheet. However, there were also resulting consequences such as Iraq voting to expel U.S. troops from inside its borders and Iran also carrying out their own missile strikes on American bases in Iraq, but there were no resulting casualties. So, at this level, the resulting pain seems to be much smaller than resulting pleasure.

However, there is the potential for a broader, more troubling consequence. According to David Kilcullen and Andrew McDonald Exum in, "Death From Above, Outrage Down Below," the use of drones to carry out high level attacks sows resentment and arguably produces more terrorists than it kills. They say, "every one of these dead non-combatants represents an alienated family, a new desire for revenge, and more recruits for a militant movement that has grown exponentially even as drone strikes have increased," (Kilcullen, D., Exum, A., 2009). Kilcullen and Exum are arguing that the psychological nature of drones constantly loitering above and striking frequently makes local populations hostile when they otherwise might not have been. They are not only hostile, but some even join terror groups as a reaction to U.S. military drone operations. This is quite an interesting concept to attempt to quantify with utilitarian ethics and define resulting consequences. If I assume Soleimani was a high-level terrorist but killing him along with 5 civilians created 10 more terrorists, the resulting pain is more significant. But how do you then quantify terrorist effectiveness? Soleimani was a general. He at least commanded thousands of troops. How much did removing him from power diminish their effectiveness in

causing pain to a great number? If using a drone specifically to carry out this operation did in fact create terrorists, but they are able to cause less damage than the U.S. claims Soleimani caused, that is still a worthwhile tradeoff from a utilitarian perspective. All of these considerations are unfortunately speculative. That being said, the data surrounding terrorist attacks in the world from 2010 to 2020 is opposite the claim made in “Death From Above, Outrage Down Below.” According to the Global Terrorism Database, there has been a significant decrease in terrorist consequences since about 2014. This chart retrieved from “Our World in Data” website can be seen in Figure 2. This is not to say that drone strikes are the cause of the decrease, but they weren’t the cause of an increase.

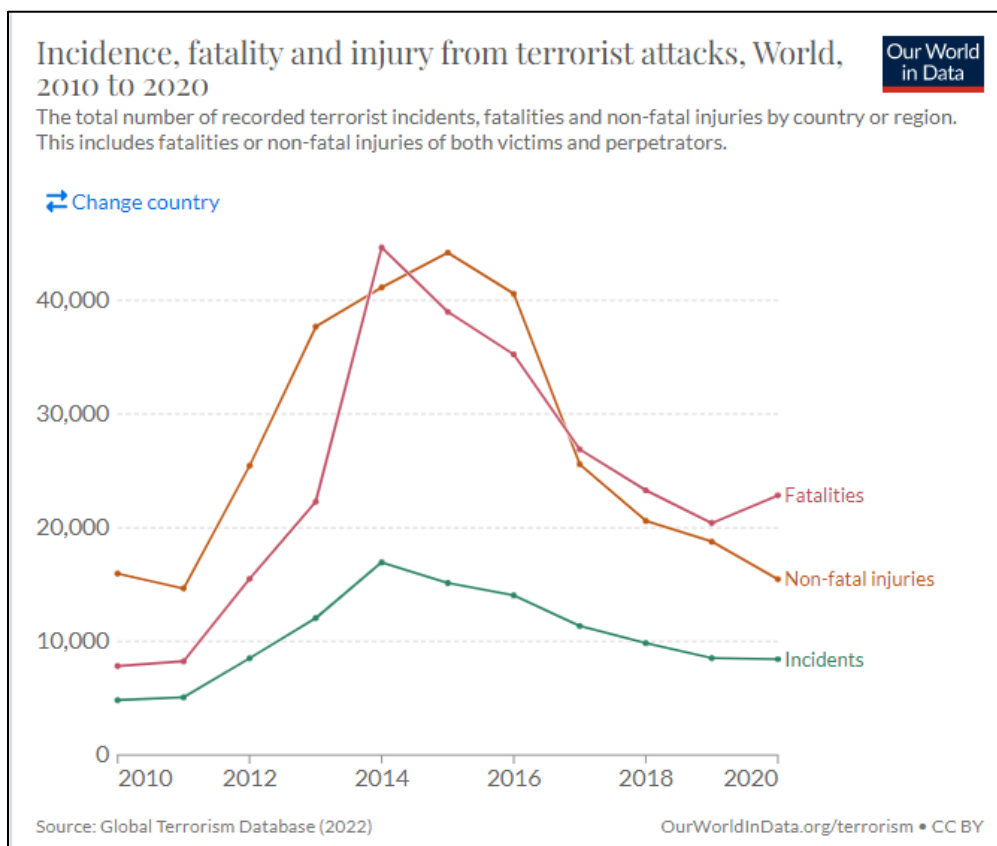


Figure 2: Incidence, Fatality, and Injury World Terrorism Trends

Thus, the chart in Figure 1 can be updated with resultant consequences. These updates can be seen in Figure 3.

	Pleasure	Pain
Immediate Consequence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • U.S. Military mission success • No U.S. military operators put in harm's way 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 10 individuals killed by the drone strike including civilians
Resulting Consequences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hundreds or thousands of U.S. Coalition members lives protected • End of Soleimani's ability to provide weapons to U.S. enemies/terrorists • No increase in terror attacks as a result of using drones 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • U.S. troops expelled from Iraq • Iranian missile attack on U.S. bases • Potentially making the civilian population more hostile towards the U.S.

Figure 3: Moral Balance Sheet Update 1

Moral Balance Sheet: Number of Interests Concerned

Finally, the number of persons whose interests are concerned is a factor in the utilitarian calculation described in van del Poel and Royakkers' description. In this case, I will make the argument that more pleasures apply to more people and pains apply to less people. This is also a challenging idea to quantify. Anyone who supported Soleimani's military activities are caused pain by this event. The civilians who were killed, their families, and everyone they know are caused pain. Civilians in other countries who live in fear of U.S. drone strikes are caused pain. Any victims of retaliatory attacks are caused pain. However, all past and future victims of Soleimani are caused pleasure. All countries that were target by Soleimani's military operations are caused pleasure. For example, he was accused by the U.S. and its allies of plotting to kill the

ambassador of Saudi Arabia in Washington (Arango, Bergman, Hubbard, 2020). If this is true, the country of Saudi Arabia has a resulting pleasure from this. Parties generally interested in the diplomacy of the world should not support a plot to kill an ambassador. So can I quantify the number of countries that are made safer from this to estimate interested persons? This is nearly impossible to do, especially as it is not clear the future pain that would or would not have been caused by Soleimani. For analysis, I will assume yes, more people in the world are safer because of the drone strike against Soleimani. Does this violate Mill's freedom principle? Is it in a way a tyranny of the majority, because in order to make more people safe, a group of a lesser people had to be killed with a drone? Well, under this assumption Soleimani was violating the freedom principle by hindering the pleasure of others himself, so it would not be a violation from this perspective. This analysis required many assumptions based on claims from the U.S. perspective. Unfortunately, this can sometimes be the case when creating a utilitarian ethics balance sheet. As we saw and as is pointed out by van del Poel and Royackers, it is difficult to measure happiness objectively. However, based on the procedure of creating a moral balance sheet through the lens of utilitarian ethics, the use of a drone to kill Qasem Soleimani was the "right" moral judgment because it reduced more pain than it caused. The final rendition of the moral balance sheet including all parties with interests at stake can be seen in Figure 4.

	Pleasure	Pain
Immediate Consequence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • U.S. Military mission success • No U.S. military operators put in harm's way 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 10 individuals killed by the drone strike including civilians
Resulting Consequences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hundreds or thousands of U.S. Coalition members lives protected • End of Soleimani's ability to provide weapons to U.S. enemies/terrorists • No increase in terror attacks as a result of using drones 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • U.S. troops expelled from Iraq • Iranian missile attack on U.S. bases • Potentially making the civilian population more hostile towards the U.S.
Number of Interests Concerned	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • U.S. Government and allies • U.S. troops in the region • Government officials targeted by Soleimani for assassination • Direct victims of Soleimani's military activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family/community of civilians killed by strike • Followers of Soleimani/The Iranian Government • Civilians in the region who fear drone strikes • Victims of retaliatory attacks

Figure 4: Moral Balance Sheet Update 2

Conclusion

Using the ethical framework of utilitarian ethics, I have analyzed the decision making process and considerations of using the MQ-9 unmanned Reaper drone to carry out a drone strike on Iranian general Qasem Soleimani in Baghdad, Iraq in 2020. By creating a moral

balance sheet of the consequences of the strike and factoring in the pleasures and pains of the parties involved, I used this methodical approach to come to a conclusion about the ethics of the judgement by the U.S. government. With several assumptions being made, which is typically inherent to utilitarianism, I showed that the decision to drone strike this target resulted in less pain overall to those directly affected by Soleimani. By using this process, the controversial nature of drone strikes could be reduced and the overall ethics of the decision to use drones made more clear.

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