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A Christian Feminist Speaks Out on the Drone War in Pakistan

A **ViewPoint** by Melanie Springer Mock



*A MQ-9 Reaper Unmanned Aerial Vehicle
U.S. Air Force photo/Staff Sgt. Brian Ferguson*

On a warm morning recently, as I was backing the car out of the garage, I saw my eldest son standing on our porch, still in his pajamas and bare feet, looking mournfully at me. I stopped the car and asked what he wanted. “To give you a hug,” he said. I parked the car, got out, and picked up my growing kid, holding him for a moment as I might an infant, his long legs wrapped around me. Right then, nothing felt sweeter.

More than ever, I wanted to stay there, enjoying the moment. But work—and school and life—beckoned. Still, I knew with almost complete certainty that I would see him and his brother again in about seven hours at the school doors; and we would walk several blocks through our neighborhood park to home; and my kids would play in our cul-de-sac, while I sat on that same porch, soaking in fall’s last warmth. Knowing that, I found it much easier to set him down, give him one more kiss, and be on my way, my kids safely at home with their dad, eating Lucky Charms and preparing for their school day.

Women all over the world do not enjoy this same degree of certainty, a fact I remember with an acute ache whenever I bid my boys farewell. The notorious instability of many Middle Eastern countries means a seemingly innocuous walk to a market, across the street, through a park might be disrupted by a suicide bombing. A decade-long U.S. military presence has done little to provide safety for women and children in Afghanistan, Iraq, or elsewhere.

In Pakistan, when parents send their children to school, they do not know whether a U.S.-sent drone will drop bombs nearby, sending a neighborhood into chaos, destroying homes, murdering women and children. Drones, officially known as unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), are aircraft controlled remotely, in the case of those used for bombings in Pakistan, by military officials operating the aircraft far outside the area of battle.

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Casualty numbers for U.S. drone attacks in Pakistan and elsewhere are hard to determine and, in some cases, contradictory. Although a CNN expert, Peter Bergen, claimed no civilian deaths have occurred due to U.S. drone strikes this year, the [Bureau of Investigative Journalism](#) believes, more realistically, that, in the last eight years, U.S. drones have “killed between 2,562 – 3,325 people in Pakistan, of whom 474 -881 were civilians, including 176 children.” These numbers are reported as well at [Living Under Drones](#), an organization supported by the Stanford Law School.

In the United States, we don’t hear much about these civilian deaths, nor about the U.S. drone policy, intended to target militant Islamic groups through what Washington calls “a surgically precise and effective tool that makes the U.S. safer.” And although the White House argues the drones have effectively tampered militant activity in Pakistan, the bombs continue to fall, sent by military officials who themselves remain at remote sites, removed from the carnage, who seem to be playing little

Muslim-American with family still living in Pakistan. Having just returned from a visit to her homeland, Saadia told a small interfaith gathering about conditions in Pakistan, and about an anti-American sentiment fueled by a constant barrage of drone attacks.

The lives of Pakistanis are completely unsettled, she said. No one knows when the next drone will arrive, when their world will be forever reshaped by missiles. They live with persistent fear. And the children—it was she who told me about mothers, sending their children to school, unsure whether they will be reunited at day's end. How they send their children anyway, recognizing the necessity of schools in a culture where too few are educated.

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In the last year, I've talked often and written about the "War on Women" that seems to be occurring in the United States. In the last year, elected officials have tried to block women's access to birth control; have campaigned to reverse Roe v. Wade; have attempted to undermine equal pay legislation; have talked about "legitimate rape" and "rape as a form of conception" and women who had it coming to them. Some days, I'm appalled by what's in the news, and by the ways women's rights in our country seem to be under siege.

But I'm not comfortable using the "War on Women" rhetoric any more, not when our country wages real war on women and children, all in the name of ending terrorism and without any official declaration of war. Despite assurances from our government that attacks are "surgical" and "precise," the truth is that they are also murderous, just one more way Americans have created Middle Eastern enemies through bombs, belligerence, and bullying.

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Some people will say that the drone attacks are necessary, and that they have been effective in removing Islamic extremists from Pakistan. Some may claim such extremism exists not because of U.S. Middle East policies, but because of the oppressive governments that have reigned too long in the region. A defense of drone attacks might also point to the 14-year-old Malala Yousufzai, shot this week in the Swat region of Pakistan because she longed to continue her education, an affront to the Taliban.

But Malala seemed to understand better than the U.S. government what will truly rid the region of extremists: education. Despite receiving multiple warnings from the Taliban, she continued her schooling and, according to the Chicago Tribune, had recently started a fund so that poor girls could also go to school. Imagine if the per-unit cost of each drone, reported to be \$4 to \$5 million, might instead be spent on an education fund, and the difference that kind of money could make for young people in the region.

One of Malala's classmates reportedly said, "If the Taliban kill one Malala, there are thousands and thousands more brave girls like Malala in Swat," ready to continue their education, to change their world. And there will be thousands and thousands of mothers, bravely sending their daughters to school, not sure what their fate will be. As a Christian feminist, it seems imperative that I find ways to support these girls and their mothers. That means speaking out against this particular war on women, and calling our country to account for the immeasurable heartache we are causing innocent people longing for peace, freedom, and stability we still take for granted.

For further reading on this topic:

From [Democracy Now](#)

From PBS [Frontline](#)

From the [Bureau of Investigative Journalism](#)

From the [New York Times](#)

From [Human Rights Watch](#)

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Melanie Springer Mock is Professor of English at George Fox University, Newberg. She is the author or co-author of five books, including most recently *Worthy: Finding Yourself in a World Expecting Someone Else* (Herald Press, April 2018). She is member of [INK: A Creative Collective](#). Her essays and reviews have appeared in *The Nation*, *Christian Feminism Today*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Christianity Today*, and *Mennonite World Review*, among other places. She lives in Dundee, Ore., with her husband and two sons.

