

# Review of: "The Necropolitics of Drone Bases and Use in the African Context"

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Thank you for giving me the opportunity to read an interesting paper. Reading your paper has given me new and interesting perspectives. Since my background is from Europe, my frame of reference differs from yours. Please bear in mind that my prejudice might colour my understanding of your thoughts. Here are my comments:

1) You should provide a definition/description of what a drone base is. As we see, e.g., in the Ukrainian war, drones can be both small and large and can have both short and long ranges. Small, short-range drones do not need the same infrastructure as large, long-range drones. Aerial control can be achieved by small, inexpensive drones that can be operated literally from anywhere. Hence, we need to agree upon what we mean by drone bases.

2) You define aerial colonialism as "*a system wherein one country controls the airspace of another*". But how do you define 'colonialism'? Is colonialism, and hence aerial colonialism, always exerted by a country, i.e., a formal state? Do you distinguish between colonialism and imperialism? You could link this to Mbembe (2003), who argued that the Western colonial powers "normalised" the killing of the local population in Africa because these were savages that belonged to nature in a 'terra nullus'; they did not have a country or a state structure or a civilisation in the eyes of the colonial powers. Then colonialism could be viewed more generically as one people dominating another people on this latter people's territory (which does not have to be recognised as a country or sovereign state). This has implications if you link drone technology with colonialism; drones that can be operated from anywhere could mean that one people/political faction/tribe that does not control an entire country can decide who must die and who may live in another people. In other words, a terrorist organisation can obtain aerial control and dominate parts of a country by applying different kinds of drones from their bases.

3) If you go back to Mbembe (2003) and his explanation of the Israeli occupation of the West Bank (Palestine), you can build on his description of three-dimensional colonisation. The illegal settlements on the hilltops work as observation posts since they give an aerial view over everything that goes on in the valleys / on the ground. Similarly, non-armed surveillance drones play a role in aerial colonisation in Africa. Actors that don't (yet) operate killer drones can use surveillance drones to coordinate ground attacks, in a similar way as the illegal settlements on the West Bank give intelligence to units on the ground. In fact, also harmless drones, such as drones for agricultural use, traffic surveillance, recreational use, etc., can be misused to supply intelligence to armed groups. Thus, you could more precisely specify what kind of drones you are studying.

4) Some words about stringency: on the one hand, you write about drone bases in given African countries and how they

can serve as tools for necropolitics and aerial colonisation. On the other hand, you describe how colonial powers (US, others) during Operation Odyssey Dawn controlled African airspace. This was for the most part from bases outside Africa, although you speculate that the base in Djibouti played some role. How is that operation relevant to your arguments? Further, if a colonial power operates a drone base in one African country and flies the drones over a third country, over which country does it exert aerial control, and hence colonise? Background for the question: as you write, the US operates a drone base in Ethiopia. Does the US colonialise Ethiopia if these drones are not used against the population in Ethiopia? Does the US colonialise, e.g., Somalia by flying drones from Ethiopia over Somalia? Is this principally different than if the US had used conventional aircraft?

5) You criticise the West for seeing Africa as one 'country' and for not assessing each African country's ability to deal with terrorism. Yet, reading your text with my Western prejudice, it seems that you simplify the same way and treat 'the Western countries' as one entity (e.g., p. 11 "*...particularly in the Sahel by Western and Arab countries, facilitate necropolitical domination*"). Not all Western countries could be said to be involved in colonialism. Also, I'm not sure that India would agree that it is an Arab country, as it seems you indicate on p. 5 ("*Western and Arab states, including India...*")

6) I think you need to distinguish between UN bases/operations, which is a decision of the world community, including African states, and bases of one foreign nation. Re. your comments about MINUSMA, Sweden and the Netherlands operating drones from Timbuktu as part of a UN mission in 2014 (when Mr. Hamdi of Tunisia was SRSG), this is not the same as e.g., the US operating drones from drone bases in Africa to target Houthi rebels in Yemen.

7) Methods: On p.6, you write "*While this review does not cover the entire body of literature on the subject,*" on p.2 "*numerous studies,*" and on p.3 "*still needs to be explored*" – "*informed by secondary sources*" since your review doesn't cover the entire body of literature, without explaining what part of the literature you do cover (and what parts are left out), it is difficult to assess whether you include the central part of the literature. You could write some words about your literature search strategy, how you identified what literature to include and exclude.

8) Since drone technology of today is not the same as it was last week, you could argue that the recent development of drone technology and operational concepts can 'democratise' drones the same way as mines 'democratised' ground war, that colonising the sky and necropolitical domination is not just for states but also for non-state actors. In this new technological reality, drone bases as necropolitics would not be delimited to the traditional colonial powers (US, UK, France) and the Arab world. Also, seen from my European point of view, you could consider including other state actors that have the capability to colonialise the skies of a country either through killer drones or various kinds of surveillance drones, such as China, Japan, India, Russia (through its proxy, the Wagner Group). In addition, terrorists and insurgent groups that control territories in a country, such as Boko Haram and others, would also have the potential to exert necropolitical domination from above. See e.g., <https://www.intelligenceonline.com/government-intelligence/2024/04/22/wagner-recruits-drone-experts-for-central-african-republic.110218141-art>, <https://liberties.aljazeera.com/en/malian-army-captures-kidal/>, <https://adf-magazine.com/2024/01/cost-accessibility-of-drones-make-them-a-terrorist-threat-to-african-nations/>

[https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2023/12/30/drones-a-weapon-system-coveted-by-all-african-armies\\_6388927\\_4.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2023/12/30/drones-a-weapon-system-coveted-by-all-african-armies_6388927_4.html)

9) In the conclusion, you argue for an African Drone Conference to establish protocols for the use of the airspace of African countries. You could argue more explicitly what the principal differences are between operating drones and operating aircraft. Both technologies use the airspace either with the consent of the host nation or by violating the airspace of a country. What are the principal differences between airplanes and drones?

To conclude, I find your manuscript interesting and thought-provoking. I do hope you consider my suggestion to regard drones as inexpensive weapons that “democratise” air control, just as mines democratised ground control, and that drone bases of today (2024) can be much smaller and more flexible than those built for big hunter-killer drones such as the MQ-9 Reaper. Necropolitics and aerial colonialism are no longer reserved for the colonial powers of yesterday.