

DEFENDING DEFENSIVE TARGETED KILLINGS

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As is the case with all homicides, there exists a moral presumption against targeted killings. Circumstances can arise, however, in which this presumption is defeated for homicide in general, and – perhaps - for targeted killing in particular. The question to be addressed in this essay is whether the presumption is defeated in the specific circumstances that typically surround certain targeted killings of terrorists that occur as an implementation of official U.S. policy.

A potentially effective way in which to argue for an affirmative answer to this question (and against the idea that targeted killings are nothing but murder) is by demonstrating that the moral permissibility of the targeted killings to which it refers follows from the best available theory of self-defense. There are, however, at least two importantly different ways in which such an argument might be formulated.

On one formulation, a selected theory of self-defense is applied directly to individual targeted killings. The other formulation focuses on national self-defense rather than individual self-defense. Its central claim is that targeted killings are morally permissible as a means by which the United States exercises its right of self-defense against terrorist aggression.

In this essay, I offer reasons for doubting that either of these approaches to defending targeted killings is viable. I also propose an alternative account that I believe identifies conditions under which targeted killings count as morally permissible defensive homicide. The proposed account applies theories of self-defense to targeted killings in conjunction with an explanation of how individuals can perform actions that are *jointly* defensive or aggressive.

This alternative account allows targeted killings to count as defensive homicides even if they aren't individually defensive, and even if the actions to which they are responses aren't individually aggressive. At the same time, the proposed account eliminates the apparent need for attributions of agency to political communities and terrorist organizations *per se* - to the United States and al-Qaeda in particular. As is explained in the essay, such attributions are at best unhelpful in the present context.

Although the paper's purpose is to explain how targeted killings can be defensive and morally permissible, it concludes by suggesting some conditions under which they are impermissible even if defensive.