

Targeted Killing or Death Squads: Is a Neutral Principle Possible?

This paper casts doubt on the prospects for legitimizing what is known as “targeted killing” — the use of assassins, death squads, or other murderous techniques—against identified civilians whose continued existence is thought to pose a serious threat of some kind to a given community and its members. We are familiar with the use of such techniques by Israel against Palestinian terrorists and also by the United States against Taliban and other jihadist leaders in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Many other countries use death squads against internal and external enemies, but do not seek to sanitize their characterization with the terminology of “targeted killing.” Whatever the terminology, my paper will consider whether these actions could possibly be supported by “neutral principles” of the kind that figure in most accounts of *ius in bello*—i.e. principles (like the principle requiring discrimination between military and civilian targets) that can be used by both sides and whose use and application does not presuppose judgements about who is waging a just war etc. A number of candidate principles are discussed, and a number of powerful objections to proceeding on a non-neutral basis are considered. The paper ends with a consideration of how war, the management of insurgency, the pursuit of national security, and international relations generally might be transformed by licensing every government to arrange for the killing of named civilians (either its own citizens or foreigners) whose existence it regards as particularly threatening.