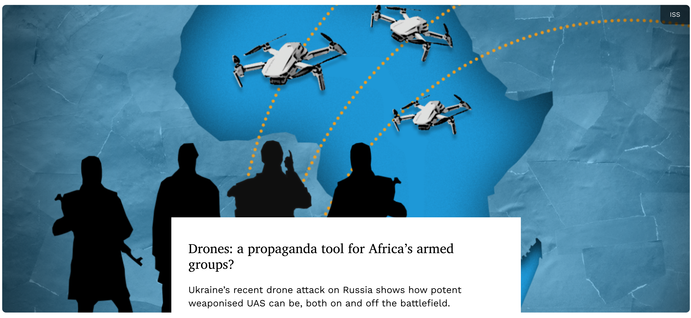

Drones: a propaganda tool for Africa's armed groups?

Ukraine's recent drone attack on Russia shows how potent weaponised UAS can be, both on and off the battlefield.

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Africa is experiencing a rapidly expanding drone environment in terms of localised manufacturing, deployment and use, bringing a complex array of players and proxies. In combat, drones provide not only intelligence and lethal force, but can enable non-state armed groups to disseminate propaganda at scale and speed.

To date, around nine armed groups in Africa have acquired military-grade drones – in Burkina Faso, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Kenya, Libya, Mali, Mozambique, Nigeria, Somalia and Sudan. That suggests the prospect of using drones for multiple tasks is expanding.

Scholars argue that violent non-state actors '[use] drones for propaganda generation, both to advertise their newfound aerial capabilities and their effects and to publish striking cinematography of other operational successes.'

Africa should take note of how new technologies enable threat actors to project power in the air and on the ground. The affordability of drones and the transfer of know-how between armed groups and their affiliates, make the prospect of drones being integrated into their arsenals increasingly likely. These groups, including Islamic State, were considered early adopters of drone technology in the Middle East.

Drones, or unmanned aerial systems (UAS) and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV), clearly illustrate the democratisation of technology. African militaries and non-state armed groups use both to lethal effect, along with cheap hobbyist models and locally produced drones – closing the gap between their respective (real or perceived) capabilities.

> Estimates are that nine non-state armed groups in Africa have acquired military-grade drones

African armed groups' use of hobbyist and commercial drones came later than in the Middle East. However the Ukraine–Russia war has been a source of inspiration and technology adaptation for state and non-state actors in Africa and beyond. Ukraine's Operation Spider's Web on 1 June showed the scale of drone warfare – using what the country claimed were 117 drones smuggled in months before to target Russian military infrastructure.

As well as the physical harm inflicted by UAS, there's the propaganda value – an area that has attracted far less media and academic attention than drone-led strike missions. While governments have their well-oiled propaganda machines, there are two ways non-state armed groups use drones for influence.

First, the mere claim to be using UAS sends a significant psychological message. This is especially true in the 'arms race', which sees proxies supply hobbyist and military-grade drones to armed groups, enabling them to project power beyond their capabilities. According to the Danish Institute for International Studies' Maria-Louise Clausen, 'the status and prestige associated with possessing drones can itself become a primary objective.'

Second, UAS serve as information-gathering tools providing video, stills and audio for sharing online and via social messaging sites. Across Africa and the Middle East, there are examples of both. Ansar Allah, more commonly known as Yemen's Houthi group, has recently led drone warfare in the region. The technology has given them tactical and symbolic successes, which could embolden their allies in Somalia as armed groups develop closer alliances.

> Al-Shabaab's drone propaganda may expand as it deepens ties with other armed groups, especially Ansar Allah

The propaganda value of owning UAV is 'especially apparent' with this group, argues Kerry Chávez, who describes how the Houthis 'explicitly market their drone use,' saying that even just 'launching a UAV makes a statement.' The Houthis are among 57 armed groups globally that Chávez and others identify as using the technology for kinetic and non-kinetic purposes.

Communication tools and visual imagery have major symbolic value. In the case of Islamic State and its affiliates, researchers have found that 'drone imagery is a significant component of its propaganda media machine.' While states have traditionally monopolised control of air space, they argue that drones operated by armed non-state actors can 'symbolically undermine the [state's] sovereign authority.'

Al-Shabaab in Somalia has also exploited the technology. Images of a downed military-grade drone on the group's news channels in 2016 provided an early indication of drones' propaganda potential – either by owning them or hijacking an adversary's aerial assets and bragging about this publicly. State militaries use the same tactic.

Furthermore, video footage of the deadly January 2020 Manda Bay attack in Kenya showed al-Shabaab's media apparatus as 'particularly adept at [psychological operations],' says the Combating Terrorism Center. Indeed, al-Shabaab's drone propaganda programme may expand further as it deepens ties with other armed groups, especially Ansar Allah, which is aggressively integrating drone technology into its arsenals.

In the Sahel, groups such as Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province are also experimenting with propaganda videos disseminated through UAV. In a paper for the Global Network on Extremism and Technology, Francis Okpaleke argues that such videos 'serve not only as a tool for recruitment but also to demonstrate technological prowess, enhancing the group's perceived legitimacy and power.' It may also help raise funds by positioning the group as technologically progressive.

> The Houthis are among 57 armed groups globally identified as using drones for kinetic and non-kinetic purposes

In the DRC, the United Nations (UN) Institute for Disarmament Research found in 2024 that the Allied Democratic Forces used UAS to 'record videos and take pictures of its camps for propaganda.' This assessment was based on interviews with ex-combatants and former abductees through the UN Group of Experts on the DRC.

In addition to gathering video or stills via drones for influence or strategic positioning, AI enables propaganda wins to be significantly multiplied. Chávez told *ISS Today* that 'feeding the imagery into online [AI helps] to economise their propaganda production and dissemination' because the technology enables rapid publication and re-versioning of material.

The UN Security Council has adopted numerous resolutions addressing the misuse of UAS, but future actions should focus governments' attention on monitoring and risk awareness, while noting the developmental benefits of drone technology.

An initiative to kick-start the Berlin Memorandum on Good Practices for Countering Terrorist Use of Unmanned Aerial Systems has included webinars and greater public outreach. However in Africa, where weapons smuggling is rife, the illicit trade in drone parts may be worthy of further study.

That major world powers, including Russia, struggle to detect or intercept smuggled drones like those deployed recently by Ukraine is a reminder of how potent weaponised UAS are proving to be.

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