

Addressing the Honorable German Parliament:

My name is Lisa Ling and I used to work in the United States drone program. I did not “push the button” or guide the missiles; I was one of the faceless technicians who executed the so-called War on Terror from my home state of California. What I learned during my time in the Air Force drone program ultimately made me want to leave it: the nature of an armed drone flying overhead is terror and we cannot successfully consummate a war on terror by terrorizing country’s and communities. It is not necessarily firing the weapon that causes the most terror to those living below armed drones; it is the anticipation that anyone around them, or they themselves could be the next victim of a strike at any time without warning. That terror is constant and ever present when drones loiter above. I fail to see utility in this when there is no clear avenue to retreat. Arming drones is bad for civilians, for soldiers, and ultimately, I believe it is bad for German foreign policy. Additionally, there simply is no need for it while technology exists to deploy laser-guided missiles in areas of conflict that are far more effective for troop protection without firing them from drones.

When I left the military in 2012, I received two awards. Fancy pieces of paper proudly displaying my successful completion of over 121,000 targets. Those targets were the thousands of people, maimed or killed, living their lives under the terror of constant drone warfare. I cannot display these awards; they disgust me. Immediately after leaving the drone program I was compelled to visit the people trying to maintain a life under drones who rarely get a voice in the conversation. I went to Afghanistan and listened to the people describe living under constant threat from the skies. Drones don’t always drop bombs killing innocent people but, unlike planes that fly away after a few minutes, drones can linger for days overhead. Living under the constant threat of death was nearly impossible for the Afghans I spoke with. They explained how children wait for rainy days to play outside, when they are safer under cloud cover. They told me how the very markers of their culture have become impossible; from weddings to funerals, Afghan citizens have had to stay indoors and remain isolated from their communities under the constant presence of armed drones in their skies. While I was there the news over car radios described strike after strike, death after unnecessary death. It solidified my belief that what I participated in is unforgivable, yet these people forgave me. I did not go there looking for forgiveness, but there it was. All they asked of me was to ask America and the rest of the world to stop killing and terrorizing their innocent civilians with armed drones, so that is what I continue to do.

I watched a transformation happen during my military tenure. Drones went from an unarmed and lifesaving, troop-protecting platform to offensive killing machines secretly terrorizing innocent people leaving them with no avenue to retreat. This change in mission priority weighed heavily on soldiers’ hearts, even if many of us didn’t realize it. Young Air Force troops I worked with have ended their lives as a result of carrying the weight of what they’ve done. One particular young man, a single father, left behind his young child, an uncounted orphan of war. The mental health toll is impossible to quantify but I can tell you it is a massive strain on soldiers’ morale. Policy makers talk about the necessity of arming drones to make troops safer, but this is a myth. The truth is armed drones do not save lives; they kill and cause

the deep intergenerational hatred that leads to more terrorism and attacks. Today, soldiers from Germany aren't being targeted or killed, but soldiers from America are. The thought of the terror I helped create, the generations of people who will grow up hating the West because of what I participated in, keeps me awake at night and interrupts my life in profound ways. I urge Germany to consider their soldiers' wellbeing before possibly taking a principled lead in the propagation of drone technology.

During my time in Afghanistan, I was shown a gravity fed water distribution system Germany built for civilians to work around the financial impossibility of using the huge water pump left there by USAID. The Afghans I spoke with expressed a deep appreciation for the relationship Germany has with the Afghan people. That will certainly change if Germany becomes a country with armed drones. When drones are armed their mission changes from one of protection to one of terror, and if America has proven anything it's that fighting terror with terror transforms conflict into forever wars that have had disastrous effects on our foreign policy. By choosing to not arm drones prematurely Germany has taken an ethical path that all Germans can be proud of. Luckily, there are so many other effective options to deploy laser-guided missiles in an area of conflict that it is absolutely unnecessary to deploy missiles from the drone platform. To paint the target with the drone and fire from elsewhere is technologically possible today, and more effective. Germany can continue to lead the West in technologically advanced ways without sacrificing ethical diplomacy, the wellbeing of its soldiers, or the way of life of people living under them only if they remain steadfast in their decision to keep their drones unarmed.

Respectfully,  
Lisa Ling