Drones and Organized Violence: from Dystopian Sci-fi to the New Criminal Normal

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There is *a 2017 video* that many dismissed as dystopian science fiction: tiny autonomous drones, as small as the palm of a hand, equipped with facial recognition and a micro-explosive charge, seeking the right face in a crowd and striking it with surgical precision.

It was a short film intended as an ethical warning, not as an operational documentary. Yet, anyone working in security and defense had the same feeling watching it: **it's not a fantasy, it's a trajectory**.

After all, the difference between "science fiction" and "anticipation" is only one: time. That video showed a possible tomorrow; the news of recent years tells us that many of the necessary technological pieces are already here, available on the shelves of any e-commerce.

The drone as a new operational category

The first leap occurred on battlefields, not in our cities. **ISIS was among the first non-state actors** to realize that a small commercial quadcopter, designed to film weddings and landscapes, could become an improvised weapon platform in a few hours. In the skies of Mosul and Raqqa, drones with modified grenades began to appear, light ordnance dropped on trenches or Iraqi forces' vehicles, in a rudimentary but effective form of poor artillery.

It wasn't futuristic technology: it was the sum of three banal elements, **commercial availability, tactical creativity, lack of scruples**.

At the time, it remained a nascent strategy, limited and without real systematic use.

Since then, the evolution has been brutal. The war in Ukraine has made visible to the whole world what many analysts had feared for a long time: **the drone is no longer a niche support, but a structural component of the battlefield**. Low-cost FPV drones, born for racing and gaming, have been transformed into loitering munitions guided in the first person, loaded with explosives and launched against vehicles, positions, even individual soldiers. The operational life of these systems is often measured in a single flight, but the cost-to-potential damage ratio is so favorable that it makes mass deployment sustainable.

When an army plans to purchase millions of drones for just one year of war, we understand that we are no longer facing a technological novelty, but the definitive entry of a **new operational category**. In the feudal era, it was the horse that changed the rules of combat; in the 20th century, it was the tank and the airplane. Today it is the drone, and not only the flying one, but any remotely controlled or semi-autonomous platform that can move on the ground, underground, on water, or in the air. Entire units dedicated to their use are already forming, departments that represent the birth of a new branch on par with the most classic specialties.

In parallel, the "brain" of these systems has also changed. Initially, it was just the remote pilot: an operator with a tablet or visor guiding the drone as if it were a lethal video game. Today, **autonomous navigation algorithms, shape and vehicle recognition, assisted guidance systems** that correct the course in the last seconds of flight, fly-by-wire modes, and tools that allow overcoming electronic disturbances or signal loss come into play.

In Ukraine, for example, software is already being used that, once the area and type of target are indicated, helps the drone identify the target and complete the action even in conditions where a human operator would be blind. **It is still the human who decides whom to hit,**

but they are increasingly less alone in the most delicate phase: the terminal one.

The V-BAT MQ-35A integrates AI “Hivemind” allowing it to operate even in environments where GPS signals or communications are disrupted - Copyright Shield AI

From conventional front to organized crime

If we put together these pieces, cheap commercial drones, homemade explosives, open-source planning software, and artificial vision modules, we also understand why the phenomenon has not remained confined to conventional fronts.

In Latin America, and particularly in Mexico (but not only), **drug cartels have begun using drones with explosive charges against police and army**. In several episodes, modified quadcopters have dropped improvised ordnance on patrols and checkpoints, injuring officers, damaging vehicles, opening gaps in barricades and checkpoints. In at least one case, a police helicopter was hit during a combined operation, demonstrating that the line between "flying toy" and improvised anti-aircraft threat is thinner than we would like to believe.

It is no longer just about observation from above, already extremely valuable for those organizing kidnappings, robberies, or illegal trafficking, but about an **embryonic form of air power in the hands of criminal organizations**. An air power that does not require runways, trained pilots, or complex infrastructures: just an operator with a minimum of manual skill and some tutorials found online. Where once aircraft and state structures were needed, today a briefcase is enough.

The real acceleration, however, **is not only quantitative; it is qualitative**. The guidance of criminal and terrorist drones is following, with a few years' delay, the same curve as military systems. The first uses were crude, a commercial drone with a bomb tied underneath, piloted visually until it was close enough to drop.

Today we are talking about **pre-programmed missions on waypoints, automatic return to base, flight profiles that follow the terrain, very low altitude flights** to stay below electronic surveillance and even drones that are placed on the ground, turned off for hours like silent traps, ready to turn on autonomously when the target passes through their area. At that moment they take off, accelerate, and attack, leaving the victim practically no reaction window. It is a logic reminiscent of a mine, but with incomparably superior effectiveness, capable of approaching success rates that a traditional mine would never reach.

It is important to clarify one point: **the threat is not in the drone itself**. A quadcopter is not "bad" by nature any more than a kitchen knife or even a firearm is. The threat arises from the combination of an extremely versatile means and a very low entry threshold, economically, technically, and logistically.

The drone allows a relatively poor actor, a terrorist group, a cartel, a gang, to rise from street level and strike using the third dimension, without having to build anything from scratch. **It is the democratization of terror from above.**

A highly advanced drone seized by the Spanish Police: it was used by criminal organizations to transport drugs from Morocco to Spain - Copyright Ministry of the Interior Spain

The three security challenges

For security apparatuses, this poses at least three problems.

The first is perception: many citizens continue to see the drone as a gadget, not as a potential multiplier of violence, and most police forces still do not have structured programs or adequate equipment to counter this new threat.

The second is legal: the regulations born to regulate civilian and commercial use are often not designed to prevent criminal or terrorist use.

The third is operational: truly effective countermeasures, dedicated radars, jamming systems, kinetic interceptors, or hunter drones, have costs and complexities that make them difficult to deploy on a large scale. To be clear: while purchasing and adapting a commercial drone is relatively easy, quick, and cheap, creating and implementing an anti-drone system requires research, infrastructure, training, and continuous investments.

The result is a **growing asymmetry**: on one side, actors who, with a few thousand euros, can equip themselves with an adaptable micro-air arsenal; on the other, institutions that must defend critical infrastructures, law enforcement, and the population with tools still designed for traditional threats and completely ineffective against a drone.

It is not a reason to panic, but it is a mistake to continue considering armed drones as an exotic curiosity seen in some distant theater or as tools reserved for highly trained military units.

A Ukrainian soldier with a drone near Bakhmut, March 5, 2023 - Free Copyright Creative Commons

From dystopian video to new normal

What the dystopian videos of a few years ago tried to tell us, with a deliberately extreme language, today we can read in the reports of wars and security chronicles of various countries: **drones have gone from being a novelty to being a habit**.

The question is no longer if they will be used by crime and terrorism, but **how quickly they will spread in their more autonomous, more precise, more silent versions**.

And if we will be able to adapt our way of thinking about security to a sky that, like it or not, is no longer empty.