Dear Chair, ladies and gentleman,

Thank you for providing us with the opportunity to speak here on the issue of armed drones.

Warfare and obscurity on tactics and tools are undercutting principles on justice, human rights and protection of civilians. It is exactly this that the current trend in the use of armed drones is bolstering: secret wars, devastated lives, scores of civilians killed and no accountability of those responsible. These actions could set a worrisome precedent. In many cases, assassination by remote control has not even served its expressed purpose, as extremist and terrorist groups in these areas have rapidly expanded their control and operations.

Hybrid wars, in particular in the Middle East, are taking a deadly toll on civilians, and a growing defence market is literally jumping the gun to provide state and non-state actors with the latest technologies under the guise of risk-free and low-cost warfare.

Although the willingness of states to use explosive violence is growing, reflection and evaluation of the tools and tactics used and their wider military and political implications are disturbingly absent. Instead, a global battlefield, or rather, hunting ground, has been created where those deploying deadly drones refuse to be held accountable for their actions. To accompany this technological capacity, states have developed perverse and convoluted legal justifications that erode human rights and challenge the rules of international humanitarian law.

Drones have almost certainly lowered the threshold for carrying out lethal attacks. The dramatic increase in the use of drones has taken place in the absence of transparency, accountability, and international standards and has seen an accompanying rise of deadly force, particularly outside of declared conflicts.

Despite a growing public disquiet, the international community has largely remained silent on these aforementioned issues, adopting a “wait-and see” attitude while extra-judicial killings continue, potentially setting a precedent for other states to follow. Reports from human rights organisations and UN Special Rapporteurs have been challenging the assumption that these new technologies lead to less civilian casualties and have demonstrated the negative impact of continued drone operations on livelihoods and the well-being of communities in affected areas. Therefore, they have pressed for action by calling for strong transparency and accountability mechanisms needed to ensure the safeguarding of human rights and humanitarian principles in times of armed conflict.

The drone industry is picking up pace and proliferation of drones is on the rise. Over 90 states have acquired military drones, 23 of which have the capability of using armed drones. We also see the increasing use of military and civilian drone technology by non-state actors and terrorist groups, in their operations in conflict zones, directly targeting communities or providing real-time data used for bombing and shelling in populated areas.

Chairperson,
We welcome the recently-published UNODA study on Unmanned Aerial Vehicles that lays out the aforementioned concerns and recognize this as an important step, as it provides significant findings and conclusions, and we strongly urge the First Committee to discuss these important issues, and to support and take additional action in order to facilitate further multilateral engagement. Such a process should not simply be about transparency around the current state of affairs, important as that is. There should be specific recommendations for overcoming the challenges posed by drones in and outside armed conflict.

States must acknowledge that drones pose specific challenges. The fact that such specific legal justifications have had to be developed to justify the use of drones is evidence enough of their problematic nature. Based on this acknowledgement, states should develop a clear international standard to tackle the specific problems drones pose to human rights, humanitarian law and international peace and security. The failure to set boundaries on the use of armed drones undermines the credibility of the international community to uphold shared values on protection of civilians and human rights.

Thank you.