“Today, at my direction, the United States launched a targeted operation against that compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan. A small team of Americans carried out the operation with extraordinary courage and capability. No Americans were harmed. They took care to avoid civilian casualties. After a firefight, they killed Osama bin Laden and took custody of his body... Justice has been done.”

President Obama, May 1, 2011

Precision is a doubly demanding concept. It is used in two related senses: in the calculation of an action aimed at the target to be hit and only that target, and also with regard to the distinction between civilians and combatants. This is one of the reasons why the policy of targeted killings is, no doubt, the most emblematic example of all forms of preventive action. Widely vaunted for their precision, “targeted killings” (the criterion and the term are both worthy of discussion) are one of the marks of Israel’s battle against those it refers to as enemies who kill its citizens. The United States uses similar methods.

Israel is eliminating those who would be responsible for future terrorist attacks: this is the main reason given by the armed forces and the government. In theory, it is not possible to apprehend the persons targeted. If the preventive strike does not occur, the terrorist action will kill civilians. The decision to kill will ultimately have conformed with the imperative of protecting civilians from the greatest of dangers, while also minimizing civilian losses among the Palestinians.
These strikes are the anticipatory actions par excellence. Military and politicians are in agreement over their assessment of the threat represented by an enemy and the probability it will be implicated in future attacks. The decision to take preventive action is expressed in a metaphor: “mowing the grass,” a more colorful and at the same time more precise variant on the model of the “ticking bomb” (ptzatza metakteket in Hebrew), in which terrorists are regarded as time bombs that have to be defused. As with preventive warfare, targeted killings often require the most sophisticated of weapons technologies and the most detailed exploitation of intelligence. These operations shadow the development of precision in the recent history of bombing. The decisions to carry them out are now taken within a general framework, the war on terror. The equivalent of this term exists in Hebrew: hamilchama ba terror. The American wars and action on the ground in Israel are closely related. There is another point of agreement in these patterns of security-related action: the decision to pull the trigger is taken in terms of a balancing of military necessity (or, in the wider sense, security needs) against the minimization of unnecessary suffering (in the opposing camp, for both civilians and combatants).

Targeted killings are among the measures favored by Israel in this asymmetric war. It has to be said that the country represented a test-bed for the United States. It is well established that in Yemen in 2002 the United States eliminated presumed al-Qaeda members by firing a missile from a drone at the car in which they were traveling. This intervention, admitted by the CIA, took place in a country with which the United States was not at war. The Americans are said to have received the assent of the Yemeni government before unleashing the operation. Admittedly, these acts seem to be more the exception than the rule today. Several NGOs note that similar measures have been used on the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, and also in Iraq. Targeted killings are at the heart of legal polemics that overlap with debates on preventive war; they are a crucial question for the future of law.

Targeted killings deserve our full attention. By dint of their manifold aspects, the study of such events is at the intersection of several disciplines—law, moral philosophy, and political science. Unlike many other practices employed in the battle against terrorism (torture, for example), targeted killings divide the community of lawyers and philosophers, who pose questions about their validity from outside the state. This is a sign of the trouble and perplexity into which the policy of prevention plunges these people, despite their being accustomed to expatiating on warfare. Once again, lawyers and ethicists working for