**Stealth Bombing: Europe’s Hidden Involvement in the United States’ Drone Wars**

Armed drones are prized for their stealth. Silently operating above countries such as Afghanistan, Libya, Iraq, Mali, Nigeria, the Philippines, Syria and Yemen, armed drones enable the Western militaries who possess them to launch attacks on targets at a moment’s notice with little or no advance warning, something which maximises the damage they cause, particularly to the [civilians frequently caught up in the strikes](https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/projects/drone-war). But armed drone programmes have shown their ‘stealth bombing’ capacities in several other ways too. Under cover of state security, armed drone programmes have been allowed to silently circumvent the international legal agreements and frameworks that are meant to govern the conduct of armed conflict. In the process, they have undermined democratic accountability and eroded the oversight mechanisms European citizens could once have used to keep their militaries and their state’s use of armed force partially in check. As shocking, however, is the stealth European states have shown in extending support to the United States’ (US’s) drone wars. Freed from the demands of accountability, they have silently licenced and resourced those operations on a scale and at a cost few could imagine.

Problems with the US’s drone operations are well known. For almost two decades, human rights activists have repeatedly demanded that the US respond to charges that their drone-led targeted killing programme amounts to the institutionalisation of extra-judicial killing and breaches International Humanitarian Law (IHL). Despite calls for greater disclosure, however, the US refuses to enter extended discussions of their armed drone operations except to assert their legality. In recent months the Trump administration has rolled back the limited transparency measures introduced under President Obama and [all specifics have faded out](https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/stories/2018-03-14/trump-and-reduction-of-transparency) of US reports on drone strikes in Afghanistan. In some respects, the drones do continue to talk for themselves. The number of [strikes continue to rise](https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/stories/2017-12-19/counterrorism-strikes-double-trump-first-year), for instance, as does [the death toll](https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/projects/drone-war). Nonetheless, the wider silence works to deter the pursuit of greater political accountability around them: it is impossible to question drone operations if there is no independent access to them. What ought to cause considerable concern, then, is that European states have, if anything, been more silent on the matter of armed drones than the US has. In the absence of any acknowledgment at the governmental level, it is important therefore to draw attention to the European infrastructure underpinning the US’s use of armed drones and the various ways in which European nations contribute to keeping drone operations running.

In a report published this April, Amnesty International produced the [fullest account to date](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/ACT3081512018ENGLISH.PDF) of the hidden involvement of European states in US drone operations. Basing their position on Article 16 of the [International Law Commission’s Articles on the Responsibility of States for Internationally Wrongful Acts](http://legal.un.org/ilc/texts/instruments/english/draft_articles/9_6_2001.pdf), Amnesty have argued states who provide assistance to other states whose operations breach international law are themselves partially legally responsible for the outcomes. Given the nature of European states’ assistance to the US, outlined in the following, political, legal and moral responsibility for drone warfare should therefore be seen as shared between them. We broached these issues in a [previous p](https://braveneweurope.com/michael-mair-alex-holder-and-elizabeth-minor-the-future-of-european-militaries-will-be-remotely-piloted-and-that-should-worry-us-all)ost for Brave New Europe but the release of Amnesty International’s report warrants a return to them. From the United Kingdom (UK) to Germany, the Netherlands and Italy, the countries we focus on below, European assistance in US drone operations is expansive and growing, encompassing intelligence sharing, operational assistance and more. That this assistance implicates European states directly in the US’s drone wars is [something that requires urgent examination](https://www.efadrones.org/call-to-action/).

**The UK**

Intelligence sharing between the US and the UK is entrenched in the military histories of both nations, particularly their collaborations through the Second World War, the Cold War, the Gulf, Afghanistan and Iraq Wars, the Libya and Syria ‘interventions’ as well as the wider ‘War on Terror’ and the numerous proxy conflicts it has given rise to. It is unsurprising therefore that the leader of a UN based investigation into armed drones told the British parliament it was [“inevitable”](https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/stories/2013-12-05/uk-complicity-in-us-drone-strikes-is-inevitable-emmerson-tells-parliament) that UK intelligence would be used in US drone strikes.

In 2015, [Edward Snowden](https://snowdenarchive.cjfe.org/greenstone/cgi-bin/library.cgi) provided [documents](https://theintercept.com/drone-papers/) that outlined the scope of this collaboration around armed drones. The documents stated that the UK was instrumental in the gathering of signals intelligence (SIGINT), a [notoriously poor](https://theintercept.com/drone-papers/firing-blind/) form of intelligence which rests on the analysis of phone call data: who makes them; who receives them; their duration; and so on. This data was gathered as part of a US programme – codenamed OVERHEAD – which was operated by the [NSA](https://www.nsa.gov/) and [GCHQ](https://www.gchq.gov.uk/) together out of the Menwith Hill RAF Base in the UK. Data produced by OVERHEAD has been directly linked to US drone strikes in the Yemen.

The UK’s involvement extends beyond GCHQs work with the NSA to infrastructure in other areas as well. The RAF base at Croughton, for instance, is the headquarters for the US 422nd Air Base Group and has a direct fibre-optic connection to Camp Lemmonier in Djibouti, which is the US’s base of operations in the horn of Africa and the centre of drone operations in Somalia and the Yemen. The connection to Croughton makes it possible to analyse full-motion video feeds from drones and surveillance aircraft to identify potential targets from afar and it is estimated that a third of all US military communications in Europe pass through Croughton. Without Croughton, the capacity of US operations would be substantially reduced.

While clearly involved, the UK has refused to disclose information concerning the nature and scope of intelligence and other asset sharing with the US. In 2012, the UK’s Under-Secretary for Defence, Philip Dunne, asserted [the following](https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201213/cmhansrd/cm121106/halltext/121106h0001.htm): “for reasons of operational security, the Ministry of Defence does not comment on its intelligence sharing arrangements with coalition partners… it is a matter for the US administration to assure themselves that the actions they undertake are lawful”. As Amnesty make clear in the report [*Deadly Assistance*](https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/act30/8151/2018/en/), this position is itself legally problematic with intelligence sharing and joint infrastructure projects potentially opening the UK up to prosecution for US operations.

**Germany**

The German public have been continually critical of drone operations both international and domestic, and it has taken years of negotiation for the state to grant approval for the Bundeswehr to acquire arms-capable drones. On the 13th June 2018, the recently formed German coalition government agreed to a [billion dollar deal](http://www.dw.com/en/german-army-can-lease-arms-capable-israeli-drones-lawmakers-say/a-44212763) with Israel to lease Heron-TP arms-capable drones. Though the public response to this change is as yet unclear, it marks a shift in the German state’s approach to their domestic drone policy. It is perhaps unsurprising, however, given Germany sits at the very centre of US drone operations despite [the opposition of the German public](http://www.dw.com/en/ramstein-air-base-anti-drone-protests-the-germans-taking-on-the-us-military/a-40432117).

Situated about 70km West of Mannheim in South West Germany, around halfway between the continental US and the Middle-East, the Ramstein US Air Force base is one of the US’s largest overseas military bases. Just as the UK’s role in US drone operations did not become clear until the Snowden leaks, what was being done at Ramstein was shrouded in secrecy until the whistle-blower and former drone pilot [Brandon Bryant](http://www.dw.com/en/ramstein-involved-us-drone-programs-says-former-us-drone-operator/a-18785913) came forward in 2015. According to Bryant, in US drone operations “all data… that was transferred between aircraft and air crew was done through Ramstein Airforce base”. The simple upshot is that US drone operations [could not be conducted without Germany’s co-operation](https://theintercept.com/2015/04/17/ramstein/). Successive German administration’s ongoing tolerance of the activities that take place in Ramstein thus place them fundamentally at odds with the expressed democratic preferences of Germany’s citizens. That the involvement of Ramstein in US drone operations was hidden from the German people is thus a particularly scandalous example of the stealth with which drone programmes operate.

**The Netherlands**

Questions about the involvement of the Netherlands in US drone operations first arose in 2014 as part of the Edward Snowden leak, which in turn lead to an admission of involvement by the Dutch Ministry of Defence. It became clear that the Netherlands had provided the US with SIGINT in the form of 1.8 million metadata records of telephone activity in Somalia, an area of the world where the Netherlands has participated in extensive anti-piracy operations over the course of the last decade.

In 2015, two Somali shepherds initiated [legal action](https://www.volkskrant.nl/nieuws-achtergrond/somali-victims-of-us-drone-strike-take-legal-action-against-the-netherlands~bb62e8d8/) against the Dutch government for war crimes in light of their information sharing with the US, information sharing which led to an attempted strike on an al-Shabab leader in which the two shepherds were injured and the al-Shabab leader left untouched. The case is ongoing and has run into problems due to rising legal costs, but it remains important as an attempt to work through the legal implications of European states’ assistance in US drone strikes through domestic justice systems.

**Italy**

Italy’s role in assisting US drone operations is similar to that of Germany; it is primarily operational and infrastructural. The centre of that assistance is Sigonella Air Base in Sicily. Sigonella is affectionately referred to on its website as the “hub of the med”, a description which makes it sounds more like a busy market town than the centre of operations for targeted killing programmes in North Africa. The US has flown drone reconnaissance missions across North Africa out of Sigonella since 2011, but it wasn’t until early 2016 that the Italian government signed an agreement allowing the US to engage in armed drone operations in response to the rising threat of Islamic State.

Unfortunately, we know very little about that agreement, and, in the absence of whistle-blowers, it is unlikely that this will improve. The agreement in 2016 was not subject to parliamentary scrutiny in Italy, and subsequent freedom of information requests on the use of drones in Sigonella have all been ignored or denied. At present, the case for releasing the relevant documents has been taken to Italy’s Supreme Administrative Court in Rome, where a decision will be made as to whether to grant “[access to information on the legal framework regulating the presence and use of US drones at and from Sigonella](https://www.ecchr.eu/en/case/sicily-airbase-freedom-of-information-litigation-on-italys-involvement-in-us-drone-program/)”.

**Infiltrating European Politics By Stealth**

The brief overviews we have sketched above provide an initial indication of the extent to which US drone operations have infiltrated European politics by stealth. Our point is this: the primary function of drone ‘stealth bombing’ operations may be in practice as much about keeping domestic audiences in the dark as launching attacks on targets. Most of what we know about the assistance European states provide to the US has only come to light because of whistle-blowers – an indication of the lengths that European states go to in order to keep this information out of the public domain. Where there have been no whistle-blowers to provide the public with information, we have limited to no access to knowledge of what European nations are doing. The case that is now in Rome about the right to transparency around currently covert European support for drone operations is thus a critical one, as its success or failure could provide a very significant marker for the future. This is an issue that has been, up to this point, almost entirely hidden from us. That situation has to be reversed.