**European assistance to deadly US drone strikes**

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Since the start of the so-called “War on Terror” the USA has carried out hundreds of lethal drone strikes in at least seven countries (Afghanistan, Pakistan, Libya, Yemen, Somalia, Iraq and Syria).

According to the [Bureau of Investigative Journalism](https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/projects/drone-war), US drone strikes have killed up to 1,551 civilians since 2004 in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Yemen and Somalia. Amnesty International and others have exposed how some drone strikes have violated international law, and may amount to extrajudicial executions or war crimes.

Details of drone strikes are shrouded in secrecy, so you may not be aware that several European states provide crucial assistance to the US drone programme.

The reality is that US drone operators rely on a vast, complex network of intelligence-sharing, communications infrastructure and surveillance that extends from the North Sea to the Horn of Africa. Here’s your guide to the hotspots:

**UK**

UK intelligence is crucial for US drone operations. The UK insists that it only carries out drone strikes in defined conflict zones, but media and NGOs have shown how the USA has used information gathered from UK surveillance, including intercepted communications, to identify targets for drone strikes in areas outside conflict including [Yemen](http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2015/jun/24/gchq-documents-raise-fresh-questions-over-uk-complicity-in-us-drone-strikes) and [Pakistan](https://reprieve.org.uk/case-study/noor-khan/).

In addition, at least four military bases in the UK contribute critical communications and intelligence infrastructure to the US drone programme. One of these, RAF Croughton, has a direct fibre-optic communications link with Camp Lemonnier, a US military base in Djibouti from which most drone strikes on Yemen and Somalia are carried out.

**GERMANY**

Ramstein Air Base is a major US Air Force base in southwest Germany which plays a critical role in the US drone programme, sitting at the heart of a complex network of facilities across the USA and the globe.

Ramstein also hosts a geolocation system named [GILGAMESH](http://www.theintercept.com/2014/02/10/the-nsas-secret-role/) which is understood to be crucial to the US drone programme. GILGAMESH effectively turns a device attached to the bottom of a drone into a fake mobile phone receiver, which forces a target’s mobile phone signal to connect, without their knowledge, to the device. This allows an individual’s precise location to be pinpointed.

According to documents released by Edward Snowden, a whistleblower and former employee of the National Security Agency (NSA), Germany’s foreign intelligence agency regularly hands over “massive amounts of connection data” to the USA. This includes telephone numbers, email addresses and IP connections – all of which could be used to locate targets for drone strikes.

**NETHERLANDS**

In March 2014, media [reports surfaced](http://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2014/03/05/the-secret-role-of-the-dutch-in-the-american-war-on-terror-a1426677) revealing that the USA was using data gathered by the Netherlands to target individuals it suspected of being members of the armed group al-Shabaab in Somalia. These reports were based on documents made public by Edward Snowden and a later [admission](https://zoek.officielebekendmakingen.nl/kst-30977-79.html) by the Dutch government that it had provided the USA with 1.8 million metadata records of telephone conversations.

In 2015, [legal action](http://www.volkskrant.nl/buitenland/somali-victims-of-us-drone-strike-take-legal-action-against-the-netherlands~a4196845/) was initiated by two Somali shepherds against the Dutch government for war crimes. The shepherds claim in their legal action that intelligence data supplied by the Netherlands was used by the USA to target a known [al-Shabaab leader](http://www.voanews.com/a/sources-us-drone-strike-nearly-hit-alshabab-leader/1840174.html) in a drone strike in January 2014, and that, whilst he escaped unscathed (he was later killed in a subsequent strike), the strike killed two young daughters of one of the shepherds.

**ITALY**

Sigonella air base in Sicily is of great strategic and military importance to US operations in North Africa. In January 2016 the Italian government [granted authorization](http://www.wsj.com/articles/italy-quietly-agrees-to-armed-u-s-drone-missions-over-libya-1456163730) for the USA to launch armed drones from Sigonella base.

The agreement limited this authorization to ‘defensive’ strikes against the armed group calling itself Islamic State (IS) in Libya. But the US uses a highly expansive notion of self-defence to justify drone strikes.

Successive US administrations have asserted the right to treat the whole world as a battlefield, massively expanding the definition of what constitutes a threat, and what constitutes self-defence.

There is no publicly available official information on the terms under which Italy allows the USA to carry out armed drone strikes from Italian soil.

Under international law, European States who provide significant support to the drone programme could be held responsible for assisting unlawful strikes.

While we can’t make explicit links between European assistance and specific attacks, in part because of the secrecy surrounding that assistance, we do know that there is a very high risk of US drones being used in unlawful killings, and this risk has shot up under President Trump.

As well as dramatically expanding drone operations, President Trump has reportedly rolled back limited Obama-era safeguards governing the use of drones and lethal force abroad, which will likely increase the risk of unlawful killings and the threat to civilians.

In light of this growing threat, there is an urgent need for European States who assist the drone programme to be more transparent about their involvement. Amnesty International is calling for rigorous safeguards to be implemented to prevent these states from assisting in human rights violations and unlawful killings. These states also need to ensure independent investigations when allegations of such assistance emerge.

With President Trump ready to up the stakes, the UK, Germany, the Netherlands and Italy must urgently rethink their deadly assistance.