

Remote control murder: Afghan drones operated from Nevada and Virginia

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Last week's admission that Britain's Royal Air Force killed four civilians and injured two others in Afghanistan has highlighted the growing resort to remote-controlled "drones" as weapons of choice by the major powers.

The *Guardian* reported that the incident took place on March 25 when a UK Reaper drone struck two trucks on the ground in the Now Zad district of north Helmand. Supposedly directed at a Taliban commander, an investigation by the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) confirmed that "civilians were discovered in the vehicles following the airstrike during a battle damage assessment".

Britain's military were quick to insist that it was the first instance in which an RAF drone had caused civilian deaths. A Whitehall source told the newspaper, "It was extremely unfortunate that the civilians were killed".

The article noted grimly, "The families of the civilian victims will be entitled to compensation if they report to a British base and can prove their identity".

Given that drone attacks are known to incinerate their victims, destroying them beyond recognition, this statement is particularly cynical.

The usual description of drones as "unmanned" is a misnomer. A separate article in the same newspaper explained that the March 25 attack was the responsibility of 39 Squadron, based at the Creech air force base near Las Vegas, Nevada.

Described as an "elite unit formed in some haste during 2007", the RAF unit works out of three metal "pods" resembling a cockpit, using "Playstation-style" technology to track down and launch murderous, sneak attacks on people several thousand miles away in Afghanistan.

Two RAF pilots, seated side by side and surrounded by a bank of TV screens delivering virtual real-time surveillance, "fly" and fire at targets.

"The aircraft can fire four Hellfire missiles and two 500 pound laser-guided bombs from five miles away; the target would have no idea a Reaper was overhead", the *Guardian* reported.

"Once they have been briefed about a mission, the pilots rely on an array of systems to run the aircraft; the decisions they make in Nevada travel by fibre-optic cable to Europe, where they are beamed up to a satellite and then back down to Afghanistan. There is a two second delay".

Drone use has risen sharply since 2001. The UK government has had three Reaper drones in Afghanistan, and also reportedly rents 450 Hermes drones from Israel on a "pay-as-you-go" basis. It is intended that, by 2030, some 30 percent of the RAF's capacity will be comprised of drones.

It is the United States, however, that leads in the use of technology targeting people for assassination from thousands of miles away.

US drones are operated by the CIA from close to its headquarters in Langley, Virginia, and by the military from airbases in Texas, Nevada and elsewhere. They can operate 24/7.

Aviation Week July 6 noted, "There is an unofficial but lethal drone war taking place over Pakistan, Yemen and Libya that has expanded the area of operation for US forces beyond Iraq and Afghanistan, with no real acknowledgement from the government that anything extraordinary is happening. The undeclared conflict on these three fronts might be the first Drone War, and warfare has never seen anything like it".

In Pakistan, an estimated 2,500 people have been killed in US drone attacks since 2004. The Bureau of

Investigative Journalism reported that in the week leading up to June 10 this year, more than 50 people had died as a result of such strikes. The attacks “show a return to levels last seen in mid March, prior to Osama bin Laden’s killing”, it said.

The Obama administration has ordered more than 200 such attacks since coming into office. Pakistan reported that US drone attacks had killed at least 42 people on Monday and Tuesday this week in the North and South Waziristan areas, bordering Afghanistan.

In late April, Obama authorized the use of drones in Libya as it escalated its intervention into the civil war with the aim of regime change. At the end of June, the US launched its first drone attack in Somalia, with the aim of assassinating Islamic militants. Several “fighters” were reportedly injured in the attack.

US author and journalist James Bamford said, “Death warrants for targets are signed by mid-level bureaucrats, and soccer moms and dads double as joystick killers. They operate in comfort and safety, half the Earth away from their targets and close enough for many to run home for lunch between kills”.

Bamford said that there are more than 5,000 robotic vehicles and drones deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan, more than 50 of which can fly at the same time.

A global scramble for drone technology is underway. A 2011 study by the Teal Group forecast that global spending on “unmanned” aircraft capacity would double to \$94 billion by 2021. Over that time, the US intends to double its own drone capacity by 2021—up from 340, currently, to 650. Israel is the second-largest manufacturer in the world, and regularly utilises the technology in its one-sided war against Palestinian militants.

Other countries are increasingly acquiring the technology. China has launched its own development programme, as has India. Pakistan is said to be seeking to obtain armed drones from China.

France and Britain are cooperating to develop a new unmanned system, in a partnership between Dassault and BAE Systems. The European Aeronautic Defence and Space Company (EADS), the pan-European defence corporation, has developed its own drone, the Talarion.

The *Aviation Weekly* report indicated the ramifications of the increased use of drones. It commented, “The notion that having access to armed,

unmanned platforms may make it easier for the order to be given to fly lethal missions, and therefore permit politicians to take nations to war sooner, or without the planning and deliberation that is essential to engaging in conflict, is one that the UK Defence Ministry has considered. The ministry’s Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre released a report titled ‘The UK Approach to Unmanned Aircraft Systems’ in March, which states ‘...the recent extensive use of unmanned aircraft over Pakistan and Yemen may already herald a new era. That these activities are exclusively carried out by unmanned aircraft, even though very capable manned aircraft are available, and that the use of ground troops in harm’s way has been avoided, suggests that the use of force is totally a function of an unmanned capability”.

The implications extend not only to overseas dissidents, or others who have become the targets of the major powers “overseas”.

In June, it was reported that the 5,000 MQ-9 Reaper drone will soon start flying training missions over the Adirondacks, northeast New York.

Pilots from the New York Air National Guard’s 174th Fighter Wing, are to fly the Reaper via satellite from bases at Fort Drum and Hancock Field air base in Syracuse. The latter has been the base for drone missions over Afghanistan since December 2009.

The drones will be unarmed and undetectable, it was reported. According to the *Watertown Daily Times*, “‘It will not be used to spy on residents, because federal law prohibits that use,’ Col. Charles Dorsey, vice commander of fighter wing, told members of the Fort Drum Regional Liaison Organization...”.

“For training purposes only, the aircraft crews, based out of Hancock Field, will train using random objects, such as structures and vehicles, from afar”.

The US Customs and Border Protection agency currently flies seven MQ-9 drones along southern and northern borders. It intends to regularly fly them over northern New York by 2016.



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