

US conducting drone war from Germany

Elisabeth Zimmermann
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The American Ramstein military base in the German state of Rhineland-Palatinate plays a central role in Washington's global drone war. This has been revealed by research from the daily *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, and the radio networks *Norddeutsche Rundfunk* (NDR) and *Westdeutsche Rundfunk* (WDR), based on details from American military documents and former drone pilot Brandon Bryant.

Already early last summer, it was revealed that drone attacks in Africa were being directed from Germany. The central role is played by the Air and Space Operation Centre at the Ramstein base in Rhineland-Palatinate, which is the largest overseas US air base. Pictures from drones circling over African countries such as Somalia are evaluated there. The men and women in the flight centre receive their orders from Stuttgart, where Africom, the headquarters of the US's African command, has been based since 2007.

Representatives of the German and American governments have always denied that drone attacks are launched from German territory.

When US president Obama visited Germany last June, he claimed in reference to such reports that no drone attacks were conducted or ordered from German territory. "We don't use Germany as a starting point for unmanned drones in the war on terror. I know that there have been some reports here in Germany according to which that could be the case. It is not the case," said Obama.

German government representatives answered related questions in parliament, claiming they were not aware that such attacks were flown or directed from Germany.

Both statements were false. The latest revelations also prove that interventions in Pakistan and Yemen were handled from Ramstein. The US military base plays a crucial role in the drone war, which has executed thousands of "suspected terrorists" who had no judicial process or opportunity to defend themselves, as well as numerous civilians that even the US government admits are entirely innocent.

According to estimates from the Bureau of Investigative Journalists, approximately 1,000 civilians have been killed in Pakistan and Yemen by drone attacks since 2004. *Foreign Policy* magazine estimates that 2,000 "suspects" have been killed by drones since November 2001. The number of civilian deaths remains disputed and is likely many times more than the published figures.

The US Ramstein base serves as a centre for data collection in the drone war. The remote-controlled machines send their data via a satellite to the base, from where it is forwarded through fiber-optic cables to the United States.

In a bunker deep underground on the Ramstein base is the so-called distributed ground system (DGS). There are only five of these US Air Force installations globally that are permanently in operation. Three are located in the United States, one in South Korea, and another, DSG 4, has been at Ramstein since 2003. Only selected soldiers have access to this high security area. No outsider would have any idea of what is going on under their noses.

The DGS is the "central nervous system" of US drone interventions. All of the strands involved in a drone attack are brought together here. Live pictures supplied by drones from Yemen, Somalia, the Afghan-Pakistani border area or other countries are analysed and compared against intelligence information. Decisions are taken, meaning the orders for illegal killings, and then carried out in each target area.

Drone pilots, who are usually based in the US, receive analysis and instructions from DSG-4 in Ramstein through an encrypted chat system called mIRC.

"Without Germany, the US military's entire drone war would not be possible," former drone pilot Brandon Bryant told the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. He explained on the ARD television programme *Panorama*, "The air base at Ramstein plays a very essential role in the global drone war. Without this base in Germany, none of it would work. It is the epicentre for the flow of information for the US's overseas operations."

Bryant, 28, was stationed at an airbase in New Mexico until April 2011, from where he controlled drones. According to his own figures, he participated in the deaths of 1,626 people, including alleged terrorists, terrorist suspects, and probably civilians.

In the more than 6,000 hours that he flew, there was not a single operation "in which I did not call Ramstein to connect with my drone. At the airbase, virtually all information comes together, like in a funnel," Bryant said April 3 on the *Panorama* programme.

He left the air force because he had questioned the integrity of his superiors. "They broke international law and violated human rights. We were basically a killing machine," said Bryant in explaining his departure from the US military.

The German government responded with evasions to the new evidence that the Ramstein base plays a central role in the US global drone war.

“The American government gave assurances to the federal government that such armed and remote-controlled aircraft were neither flown nor guided from American bases in Germany,” claimed government spokesman Stefan Seibert, referring to the government’s previous level of awareness. But now there was “new information reported,” which the German government wished to make the subject of discussions with the US government. The German government took these reports “seriously.”

In reality, the German government not only knew a lot more about the US drone programme than it is admitting in public, but is directly implicated in it. However, to admit this would have wide-ranging consequences, since the drone programme is in blatant violation of German and international law.

A parliamentary report from January 20, 2014, cited by the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, comes to the conclusion that it was “indisputable that Germany” should not tolerate “military operations in violation of international law” that were being implemented by foreign states from German territory. If the US military executes a terror suspect by drone-fired missile outside of a combat zone and in breach of international law, this could “represent complicity in a crime against international law,” if the German government knew about it but didn’t protest.

German intelligence services pass information to the NSA and US military that assists in the identification of drone targets, receiving information in exchange. Three German citizens have also been killed as a result of such data in Pakistan.

Twenty-year-old Bünyamin E from Wuppertal lost his life on October 4, 2010, in a drone attack in Waziristan. The state prosecutor abandoned a full investigation in June 2013.

Patrick N from Offenbach, a German who had converted to Islam, travelled with his wife and two children to Pakistan in 2011 and allegedly joined the “Islamic movement of Uzbekistan.” The 27-year-old died on February 16, 2012, when rockets struck the pickup in which he was travelling near the border with Afghanistan. In addition to him, a further nine people are estimated to have lost their lives.

Samir H from Aachen was killed in a drone attack on a land rover on March 9, 2012. The 29-year-old had travelled to the Afghan-Pakistan border region with his wife and children in 2009 and allegedly also joined the “Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan.” The German government gave no statements on whether German security forces had passed information on Samir H to American intelligence. Investigations into his death were halted by the state prosecutor in August 2013.

These are the three cases made public. It is not known how many more cases there are where information obtained and passed on by German security forces have led to the deaths of those targeted. However, it is known that a broad range of

information flows from Germany to the United States daily, including names, telephone numbers and e-mail addresses from suspects who have travelled to Afghanistan, Pakistan, Syria or Yemen.

The close, and in many areas illegal, collaboration of German and American security forces goes back to the terrorist attacks of September 11 and the Social Democratic-Green Party government in Germany at the time.

So-called rendition flights, which took prisoners to secret “black sites” in various locations around the world, were allowed to stop over regularly in Germany without any obstruction. The German government refused to call for the release of Morat Kurnaz, who grew up in Bremen but sat in Guantanamo Bay for four years, having committed no crime. And in 2003, when the German-Lebanese Khalid El-Masri was kidnapped in Macedonia by the CIA, the German government did not lift a finger to support him.

Last week, the German parliament established an investigatory committee to focus on the surveillance practices of the NSA, while shedding light on Ramstein’s role in the global drone war. But like the investigation of the committee into the murders by the neo-Nazi NSU, all indications are that this will be a cover-up rather than an exposure.

This is shown by the treatment of the most important witness on the NSA programmes, Edward Snowden, who exposed the NSA’s surveillance systems. Although the investigatory committee has invited him as a witness, the German government at the same time refused to give him any assurance of asylum or a secure period of residency in Germany. As a result, Snowden, who understandably fears for his life, will not be able to appear in person before the committee.



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