

US makes bizarre claims of Iranian plot against UK's RAF Fairford base

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Several weeks after the still unexplained arrests on September 27, the Trump administration is pushing claims that Iran was planning a drone attack on Royal Air Force (RAF) Fairford in Gloucestershire, England. They make the claim that is ludicrous on its face that the planned attack was modelled on Operation Spiderweb—Ukraine's June 2025 strike on Russian airbases thousands of miles inside Russia.

The allegation was circulated by anonymous US sources after the Pentagon pulled 12 of its B1 bombers from the base on October 4.

Fairford, with its long runway, and on the territory of a NATO power, is the preferred bomber forward operating location in Europe for US Air Force Global Strike Command. It has been used by the US to bomb Iran since March, with permission granted by then Labour Prime Minister Keir Starmer and maintained by his successor Andy Burnham.

Operation Spiderweb was carried out after over 18 months of planning, as confirmed at the time by Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky. It used 117 drones, smuggled in on lorries, in coordinated strikes on Russia's long-range aviation at five airbases: Belaya, Dyagilevo, Ivanovo Severny, Olenya and Ukrainka. The current US-Israeli war on Iran began little more than *seven months ago* and repeating such an operation with no shared border and no direct military involvement would be impossible.

In addition, the claims come as the five men originally arrested at Fairford, all Britons from London in their twenties, remain free on bail. They were initially detained under the Explosives Act and later under Section 5 of the Terrorism Act. They were released the following day, despite the ability to detain terror suspects for up to 14 days without charge.

Two more men have been arrested since then in Westminster: a 25-year-old British-Iranian dual national on October 1, alleged in the media to be the plot's "mastermind" but then also bailed, and a 22-year-old Briton on October 6. No one has been charged.

As the WSWWS noted after the release of the five, Chris

Phillips, a former head of the UK's National Counter Terrorism Security Office, told *Al Jazeera*, "If there had been any trace of explosives found in the vans, or any thoughts that these men were actually terrorists, they would not have been released."

On the day of the arrests, US President Donald Trump declared a "terror plot" by men "looking to do big damage", claiming the US "had them under view for a long time". Challenging this the *Telegraph* wrote on Monday that "at the time, British sources said the operation wasn't intelligence-led."

This did not stop Burnham, eager to prove his militarist credentials to Trump, from telling the BBC September 30, "There are strong indications that Iran played a part in what happened over the weekend at RAF Fairford." He too provided no evidence.

Counter Terrorism Policing officials have also indicated their inquiries are focusing on the possibility that the men were engaged, *wittingly or unwittingly*, in a proxy operation inspired by a foreign state, probably Iran. On October 1, Vicki Evans, Senior National Coordinator for Counter Terrorism Policing, said, "we're looking at all possible angles – including possible foreign state involvement."

The three vans the men involved were in contained no explosives. Police said they could "confirm that no improvised explosive devices were found" and that they only recovered "a quantity of petrol".

One of the five even called the police to the scene. Nothing more has been revealed about this staggering fact. The *Financial Times* reported on September 29, two days after the arrests, "Officials declined to speculate on the motive for the 999 call, which appears to have been made before a farmer alerted authorities to the men, clad in balaclavas, and three vans."

A full week after the arrests, the US withdrew the bombers on Sunday October 4. On Monday, Trump said as he departed the White House for Nebraska, "They didn't fly out by accident... There were some threats." He added, "Rather than tempting the enemy, we'll capture the enemy

and beat the enemy. But why should we leave [the bombers] there? So we moved them around a little bit.”

Asked by reporters whether Iran had smuggled combat drones into Britain, Trump said, “I can’t tell you that.” Pressed on who he thought had made the threat, Trump said, “They would be linked to Iran,” without elaborating.

Following this the “Spiderweb” narrative was advanced. It surfaced on October 5 and 6, being widely reported in the media, with every outlet relying on anonymous US sources. The BBC cited “one source close to the White House”. The *New York Times* wrote that “some of the officials said they believed that the plot was loosely modeled on an audacious attack that Ukraine launched against Russia last year.” ITV News said Washington feared a “multiple drone attack, similar to Ukraine’s Operation Spiderweb”. No named official has since backed up the claim.

Pointing to mixed signalling within the Trump administration, Secretary of State Marco Rubio this week even refused to link the US withdrawal to the arrests. “We’ve documented what happened last week. I wouldn’t directly tie that to the move that was made,” he said. He sought, in the *Guardian*’s words, to “downplay any discrepancies with the UK”, saying “with the Brits, we’ve worked very closely for a long time, including on this investigation, and they couldn’t be more cooperative”.

Having lent support to Trump’s initial claims of Iranian involvement, the British government is distancing itself from the latest US claims. On Monday, Burnham’s spokesperson declined to comment on “foreign nations’ military operations”. Asked whether RAF Fairford was safe, the spokesperson replied “yes”, citing Defence Secretary Wes Streeting that there were “tried and tested approaches to defend our bases around the country and throughout the world”.

The *Guardian* reported Monday, “UK sources cast doubt on whether Iran had the capability to launch such a complex operation 2,700 miles away. The Ukrainian operation took about 18 months to plan.” It added, “UK sources indicated they were not aware of a new terrorism threat to the base and that they would be surprised if Iran could orchestrate a fresh attack.”

The *Guardian* also noted that although “Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps said in July that the [Fairford] base was a legitimate military target,” the US withdrawal had taken place “without any kind of attack taking place”. Its authors, including defence and security editor Dan Sabbagh, offered a likelier explanation: “Some experts said Washington was engaging in a wider redeployment that could lead to a scaling up of operations against Iran after the US midterm elections in November.” Trump approaches the mid-terms with record low approval rates with the war on

Iran deeply unpopular.

The most authoritative rebuttal came from Air Marshal Greg Bagwell, a Distinguished Fellow at the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI)—Britain’s globally renowned defence and security thinktank. Writing on X, Bagwell stated, “The Pentagon spokesperson has achieved the headlines they wanted, rather than the more significant one of a wider US withdrawal of most strategic assets deployed for the Iran War.”

“There are a few clues that this is not what it seems,” he continued. “The USAF [United States Air Force] statement is far more measured in talking about a routine redeployment. The status of RAF Mildenhall and Lakenheath (two major US bases in the UK with significant permanent air wings) remains unchanged.” He pointed to “significant reports of a much wider withdrawal across the Middle East and beyond for strategic assets that were deployed for Iran operations.”

Bagwell concluded, “So why the security angle for the Fairford withdrawal? Well, it does three things: Backs up the previous (unfounded) claims made by President Trump about the local arrests. Masks the wider withdrawal and failure to achieve any War aims. Heaps pressure on a Government that is less sympathetic to MAGA objectives. Pick any one of those 3, or perhaps all of them to get a bit closer to the truth than Fairford is about to be overrun by terrorists.”

Bagwell’s RUSI biography records that after 36 years in the Royal Air Force, he retired as the Deputy Commander and a member of the Air Force Board. He oversaw combat operations in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and Syria, and was appointed in 2011 “the UK’s first Director of Joint Warfare, where he was responsible for the development of all UK military capability.”



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