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## Foreign complicity in the drone war

**The UK government's support for the CIA's drone campaign raises questions about the breadth of foreign involvement.**

Murtaza Hussain

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The CIA drone operations rely in part on intelligence gathered by foreign government agencies

On March 17, 2011 a US drone fired several **missiles at the Pakistani town of Datta Khel** in an attack which killed an estimated 42 people and wounded at least a dozen more. The strike hit a council of tribal elders and local businessmen who had come to discuss a dispute over a nearby chromite mine - a meeting about which **they had given prior documented notice** to local government officials. Around 10:45AM several missiles struck the two circles of people seated for the commencement of the meeting, sending shrapnel and shards of rock tearing into the crowd. Idris Farid, **one of the first responders to the scene, described the aftermath:** "Everything was devastated. There were pieces - body pieces - lying around. There was lots of flesh and blood."

Another man, Khalil Khan, whose father was among those attending the meeting, said that he was informed in plain terms that none of the elders had survived the attack and that "they were all destroyed, all finished". Unable to even identify the body parts of those who were only hours ago the leaders of their community, the people of Datta Khel were forced to "**collect pieces of flesh and put them in a coffin**" so that the relatives of those killed might be reasonably satisfied that the body they are burying truly belonged to their departed loved one.

### **Complicity in strikes**

While the Datta Khel attack was carried out by US forces and is but one of the many acts of extrajudicial execution which have occurred during the drone war campaign being carried out over the skies of countries such as Pakistan and Yemen, a legal campaign being waged by those whose family members have been killed suggests that complicity extends to other foreign governments as well. Noor Khan, whose father was killed in the attack last year, **launched a lawsuit against the British government** over reports that its Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ) had been providing locational intelligence to assist US drone operators carrying out strikes in Pakistan.

Previous statements by GCHQ that they were "**proud**" of this work became part of the basis for Khan's lawsuit. **In the words of his legal counsel Martin Chamberlain:** "The participation of a UK intelligence official in US drone strikes, by passing intelligence, may amount to the offence of encouraging or assisting murder," further adding that there may exist compelling evidence pointing to war crimes and crimes against humanity as well. The goal of Khan's lawsuit however, rather than seeking to bring criminal responsibility to any individual involved in the programme, was to compel a declaration by civil courts that the intelligence sharing which helped facilitate attacks such as the one which killed his father at Datta Khel is unlawful. As per the court filings and statements of his counsel the main goal was to seek clarification of Britain's role in CIA drone strikes as opposed to winning retribution against any of the specific parties involved.

In spite of this, **this past December Britain's High Court blocked Khan's motion** in an act which one member of parliament said creates "**a cloud of secrecy**" over the extent of British involvement in the CIA's campaign. The British government on its own part refuses to officially confirm or deny its role in intelligence sharing with CIA drone operators despite the preponderance of evidence indicating that such co-operation exists and their legal efforts to stifle inquiry into it. **In the words of Kat Craig**, legal director of the British advocacy group

Reprieve:

*Our co-operation with the CIA is unlawful but it is also immoral. We are killing innocent civilians and children. That doesn't make us safer and some may well argue that places us in greater danger.*

**Recent investigations by Reprieve have revealed** that the depth of official complicity potentially extends beyond intelligence co-operation but to the provision of lethal equipment as well. The UK government's Department for Business Innovation and Skills (BIS) has been found to have granted General Electric, a company better known in the popular imagination for manufacturing home appliances than for deadly weapons components, export licenses for products integral to the production of the Predator drones which terrorize the inhabitants of towns such as Datta Khel. A particular subsidiary company, General Electric Intelligence Platforms (GEIP) which sells components for drones in 2012 **published a brochure boasting of the military applicability of its products**. As part of the brochure states:

*There is no doubt that the presence of UAV platforms will continue to grow as military, security and emergency response forces continue to extoll [its]merits...*

### **Contravening law**

The granting of licenses for the export of these products in support of the CIA's extrajudicial drone war comes in complete contravention to the EU Code of Conduct on Arms Exports which prohibits member states from issuing export licenses if “**there is a clear risk that the intended recipient would use the proposed export aggressively against another country**”. By continuing to issue these licenses with the knowledge of their applicability to a campaign of extrajudicial executions which continues to operate without legal oversight in several countries around the world, the British government has added another layer of complicity to its involvement with the CIA in this effort.

At the UN Conference on Arms Trade Treaty in July 2012 public attention was brought to the “direct and indirect effects of the poorly regulated arms trade and the illicit trafficking of arms”. The UK government's trafficking of arms to the CIA through the issuance of export licenses to companies such as GEIP represents a clear - and seemingly brazenly illegal - example of the deadly harm to civilians which such trafficking can cause.

The new year has seen **a rapid uptick in the frequency of drone strikes** by the Obama administration, hitting targets in Pakistan as well as in Yemen. Some accounts have indicated that the ongoing drone war has now claimed **more civilian lives than all those killed in the 9/11 attacks**. The example of clandestine and surreptitious British support for CIA's drone campaign, conducted away from public and legal scrutiny, raises troubling questions about the ability of governments to circumvent the law and elude popular accountability in the pursuit of foreign military adventurism.

For Noor Khan and others who have lost family members in drone attacks the question of culpability colours perceptions of countries which they had scarcely heard of before their lives

were altered by them forever. In the words of one relative of a victim **describing life before drone strikes ravaged his hometown**, “We did not know that America existed. We did not know what its geographical location was, how its government operated, what its government was like, we don't know how they treat their citizens or anything about them. We didn't know how they treated a common man. Now we know how they treat a common man, what they're doing to us.”

Given the depth of complicity of governments in the UK and potentially other countries as well, it bears reflection as to how broadly the moral and legally culpability for these attacks truly lies.