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## America's secret empire of drone bases

by Nick Turse

10/27/2011

The increasingly dot the planet. There's a facility outside Las Vegas where "pilots" work in climate-controlled trailers, another at a dusty camp in Africa formerly used by the French Foreign Legion, a third at a big air base in Afghanistan where Air Force personnel sit in front of multiple computer screens, and a fourth at an air base in the United Arab Emirates that almost no one talks about.

And that leaves at least 56 more such facilities to mention in an expanding American empire of unmanned drone bases being set up worldwide. Despite frequent news reports on the drone assassination campaign launched in support of America's ever-widening undeclared wars and a spate of stories on drone bases in Africa and the Middle East, most of these facilities have remained unnoted, uncounted, and remarkably anonymous – until now.

Run by the military, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), and their proxies, these bases – some little more than desolate airstrips, others sophisticated command and control centers filled with computer screens and high-tech electronic equipment are the backbone of a new American robotic way of war. They are also the latest development in a long-evolving saga of American power projection abroad – in this case, remote-controlled strikes anywhere on the planet with a minimal foreign "footprint" and little accountability.

Using military documents, press accounts, and other open source information, an in-depth analysis by TomDispatch has identified at least 60 bases integral to US military and CIA drone operations. There may, however, be more, since a cloak of secrecy about drone warfare leaves the full size and scope of these bases distinctly in the shadows.

## **A galaxy of bases**

Over the past decade, the American use of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and unmanned aerial systems (UAS) has expanded exponentially, as has media coverage of their use. On September 21, the Wall Street Journal reported that the military has deployed missile-armed MQ-9 Reaper drones on the “island nation of Seychelles to intensify attacks on al Qaeda affiliates, particularly in Somalia”.

A day earlier, a Washington Post piece also mentioned the same base on the tiny Indian Ocean archipelago, as well as one in the African nation of Djibouti, another under construction in Ethiopia, and a secret CIA airstrip being built for drones in an unnamed Middle Eastern country. (Some suspect it’s Saudi Arabia.)

Post journalists Greg Miller and Craig Whitlock reported that the “Obama administration is assembling a constellation of secret drone bases for counter-terrorism operations in the Horn of Africa and the Arabian Peninsula as part of a newly aggressive campaign to attack al-Qaeda affiliates in Somalia and Yemen.” Within days, the Post also reported that a drone from the new CIA base in that unidentified Middle Eastern country had carried out the assassination of radical al-Qaeda preacher and American citizen Anwar al-Awlaki in Yemen.

With the killing of al-Awlaki, the Barack Obama administration has expanded its armed drone campaign to no fewer than six countries, though the CIA, which killed al-Awlaki, refuses to officially acknowledge its drone assassination program. The air force is less coy about its drone operations, yet there are many aspects of those, too, that remain in the shadows. Air force spokesman Lieutenant Colonel John Haynes recently told TomDispatch, “For operational security reasons, we do not discuss worldwide operating locations of Remotely Piloted Aircraft, to include numbers of locations around the world.”

Still, those 60 military and CIA bases worldwide, directly connected to the drone program, tell us much about America’s war-making future. From command and control and piloting to maintenance and arming, these facilities perform key functions that allow drone campaigns to continue expanding, as they have for more than a decade.

Other bases are already under construction or in the planning stages. When presented with our list of air force sites within America’s galaxy of drone bases, Haynes responded, “I have nothing further to add to what I’ve already said.”

Even in the face of government secrecy, however, much can be discovered. Here, then, for the record is a TomDispatch accounting of America’s drone bases in the United States and around the world.

## **The near abroad**

News reports have frequently focused on Creech Air Force Base outside Las Vegas as ground zero in America’s military drone campaign. Sitting in darkened, air-conditioned rooms 7,500 miles from Afghanistan, drone pilots dressed in flight suits remotely control MQ-9 Reapers and their progenitors, the less heavily-armed MQ-1 Predators.

Beside them, sensor operators manipulate the TV camera, infrared camera, and other high-tech sensors on board the plane. Their faces are lit up by digital displays showing video feeds from

the battle zone. By squeezing a trigger on a joystick, one of those air force “pilots” can loose a Hellfire missile on a person half a world away.

While Creech gets the lion’s share of media attention – it even has its own drones on site – numerous other bases on US soil have played critical roles in America’s drone wars. The same video-game-style warfare is carried out by US and British pilots not far away at Nevada’s Nellis Air Force Base, the home of the Air Force’s 2nd Special Operations Squadron (SOS).

According to a factsheet provided to TomDispatch by the air force, the 2nd SOS and its drone operators are scheduled to be relocated to the Air Force Special Operations Command at Hurlburt Field in Florida in the coming months.

Reapers or Predators are also being flown from Davis-Monthan Air Force Base in Arizona, Whiteman Air Force Base in Missouri, March Air Reserve Base in California, Springfield Air National Guard Base in Ohio, Cannon Air Force Base and Holloman Air Force Base in New Mexico, Ellington Airport in Houston, Texas, the Air National Guard base in Fargo, North Dakota, Ellsworth Air Force Base in South Dakota, and Hancock Field Air National Guard Base in Syracuse, New York. Recently, it was announced that Reapers flown by Hancock’s pilots would begin taking off on training missions from the Army’s Fort Drum, also in New York state.

Meanwhile, at Langley Air Force Base in Virginia, according to a report by the New York Times, teams of camouflage-clad air force analysts sit in a secret intelligence and surveillance installation monitoring cell-phone intercepts, high-altitude photographs, and most notably, multiple screens of streaming live video from drones in Afghanistan.

They call it “Death TV” and are constantly instant-messaging with and talking to commanders on the ground in order to supply them with real-time intelligence on enemy troop movements. Air force analysts also closely monitor the battlefield from Air Force Special Operations Command in Florida and a facility in Terre Haute, Indiana.

CIA drone operators also reportedly pilot their aircraft from the agency’s nearby Langley, Virginia headquarters. It was from here that analysts apparently watched footage of Osama bin Laden’s compound in Pakistan, for example, thanks to video sent back by the RQ-170 Sentinel, an advanced drone nicknamed the “Beast of Kandahar”. According to air force documents, the Sentinel is flown from both Creech Air Force Base and Tonopah Test Range in Nevada.

Predators, Reapers and Sentinels are just part of the story. At Beale Air Force Base in California, Air Force personnel pilot the RQ-4 Global Hawk, an unmanned drone used for long-range, high-altitude surveillance missions, some of them originating from Anderson Air Force Base in Guam (a staging ground for drone flights over Asia).

Other Global Hawks are stationed at Grand Forks Air Force Base in North Dakota, while the Aeronautical Systems Center at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Ohio manages the Global Hawk as well as the Predator and Reaper programs for the air force.

Other bases have been intimately involved in training drone operators, including Randolph Air Force Base in Texas and New Mexico’s Kirtland Air Force Base, as is the army’s Fort Huachuca in Arizona, which is home to “the world’s largest UAV training center”, according to a report by National Defense magazine.

There, hundreds of employees of defense giant General Dynamics train military personnel to fly smaller tactical drones like the Hunter and the Shadow. The physical testing of drones goes on at adjoining Libby Army Airfield and “two UAV runways located approximately four miles west of Libby”, according to Global Security, an on-line clearinghouse for military information.

Additionally, small drone training for the army is carried out at Fort Benning in Georgia while at Fort Rucker, Alabama – “the home of Army aviation” – the Unmanned Aircraft Systems program coordinates doctrine, strategy, and concepts pertaining to UAVs.

Recently, Fort Benning also saw the early testing of true robotic drones – which fly without human guidance or a hand on any joystick. This, wrote the Washington Post, is considered the next step toward a future in which drones will “hunt, identify, and kill the enemy based on calculations made by software, not decisions made by humans”.

The army has also carried out UAV training exercises at Dugway Proving Ground in Utah and, earlier this year, the navy launched its X-47B, a next-generation semi-autonomous stealth drone, on its first flight at Edwards Air Force Base in California.

That flying robot – designed to operate from the decks of aircraft carriers – has since been sent on to Maryland’s Naval Air Station Patuxent River for further testing. At nearby Webster Field, the navy worked out kinks in its Fire Scout pilotless helicopter, which has also been tested at Fort Rucker and Yuma Proving Ground in Arizona, as well as Florida’s Mayport Naval Station and Jacksonville Naval Air Station.

The latter base was also where the Navy’s Broad Area Maritime Surveillance (BAMS) unmanned aerial system was developed. It is now based there and at Naval Air Station Whidbey Island in Washington state.

### **Foreign jewels in the crown**

The navy is actively looking for a suitable site in the Western Pacific for a BAMS base, and is currently in talks with several Persian Gulf states about a site in the Middle East. It already has Global Hawks perched at its base in Sigonella, Italy.

The air force is now negotiating with Turkey to relocate some of the Predator drones still operating in Iraq to the giant air base at Incirlik next year. Many different UAVs have been based in Iraq since the American invasion of that country, including small tactical models like the Raven-B that troops launched by hand from Kirkuk Regional Air Base, Shadow UAVs that flew from Forward Operating Base Normandy in Baqubah province, Predators operating out of Balad Air Base, miniature Desert Hawk drones launched from Tallil Air Base, and Scan Eagles based at al-Asad Air Base.

Elsewhere in the Greater Middle East, according to Aviation Week, the military is launching Global Hawks from al-Dhafra Air Base in the United Arab Emirates, piloted by personnel stationed at Naval Air Station Patuxent River in Maryland, to track “shipping traffic in the Persian Gulf, Strait of Hormuz, and Arabian Sea”.

There are unconfirmed reports that the CIA may be operating drones from the Emirates as well. In the past, other UAVs have apparently been flown from Kuwait’s Ali al-Salem Air Base and al-Jaber Air Base, as well as Seeb Air Base in Oman.

At Al-Udeid Air Base in Qatar, the air force runs an air operations command and control facility, critical to the drone wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The new secret CIA base on the Arabian Peninsula, used to assassinate Anwar al-Awlaki, may or may not be the airstrip in Saudi Arabia whose existence a senior US military official recently confirmed to Fox News. In the past, the CIA has also operated UAVs out of Tuzel, Uzbekistan.

In neighboring Afghanistan, drones fly from many bases including Jalalabad Air Base, Kandahar Air Field, the air base at Bagram, Camp Leatherneck, Camp Dwyer, Combat Outpost Payne, Forward Operating Base (FOB) Edinburgh and FOB Delaram II, to name a few. Afghan bases are, however, more than just locations where drones take off and land.

It is a common misconception that US-based operators are the only ones who “fly” America’s armed drones. In fact, in and around America’s war zones, UAVs begin and end their flights under the control of local “pilots”.

Take Afghanistan’s massive Bagram Air Base. After performing preflight checks alongside a technician who focuses on the drone’s sensors, a local airman sits in front of a Dell computer tower and multiple monitors, two keyboards, a joystick, a throttle, a rollerball, a mouse and various switches, overseeing the plane’s takeoff before handing it over to a stateside counterpart with a similar electronics set-up. After the mission is complete, the controls are transferred back to the local operators for the landing. Additionally, crews in Afghanistan perform general maintenance and repairs on the drones.

In the wake of a devastating suicide attack by an al-Qaeda double agent that killed CIA officers and contractors at Forward Operating Base Chapman in Afghanistan’s eastern province of Khost in 2009, it came to light that the facility was heavily involved in target selection for drone strikes across the border in Pakistan. The drones themselves, as the Washington Post noted at the time, were “flown from separate bases in Afghanistan and Pakistan”.

Both the air force and the CIA have conducted operations in Pakistani air space, with some missions originating in Afghanistan and others from inside Pakistan. In 2006, images of what appear to be Predator drones stationed at Shamsi Air Base in Pakistan’s Balochistan province were found on Google Earth and later published.

In 2009, the New York Times reported that operatives from Xe Services, the company formerly known as Blackwater, had taken over the task of arming Predator drones at the CIA’s “hidden bases in Pakistan and Afghanistan”.

Following the May Navy SEAL raid into Pakistan that killed Bin Laden, that country’s leaders reportedly ordered the United States to leave Shamsi. The Obama administration evidently refused and word leaked out, according to the Washington Post, that the base was actually owned and sublet to the US by the United Arab Emirates, which had built the airfield “as an arrival point for falconry and other hunting expeditions in Pakistan”.

The US and Pakistani governments have since claimed that Shamsi is no longer being used for drone strikes. True or not, the US evidently also uses other Pakistani bases for its drones, including possibly PAF Base Shahbaz, located near the city of Jacobabad, and another base located near Ghazi.

## **The new scramble for Africa**

Recently, the headline story, when it comes to the expansion of the empire of drone bases, has been Africa. For the past decade, the US military has been operating out of Camp Lemonier, a former French Foreign Legion base in the tiny African nation of Djibouti. Not long after the attacks of September 11, 2001, it became a base for Predator drones and has since been used to conduct missions over neighboring Somalia.

For some time, rumors have also been circulating about a secret American base in Ethiopia. Recently, a US official revealed to the Washington Post that discussions about a drone base there had been underway for up to four years, “but that plan was delayed because ‘the Ethiopians were not all that jazzed’.” Now construction is evidently underway, if not complete.

Then there is that base on the Seychelles in the Indian Ocean. A small fleet of navy and air force drones began operating openly there in 2009 to track pirates in the region’s waters. Classified diplomatic cables obtained by WikiLeaks, however, reveal that those drones have also secretly been used to carry out missions in Somalia.

“Based in a hangar located about a quarter-mile from the main passenger terminal at the airport,” the Post reports, the base consists of three or four “Reapers and about 100 U.S. military personnel and contractors, according to the cables.”

The US has also recently sent four smaller tactical drones to the African nations of Uganda and Burundi for use by those countries’ militaries.

## **New and old empires**

Even if the Pentagon budget were to begin to shrink, expansion of America’s empire of drone bases is a sure thing in the years to come. Drones are now the bedrock of Washington’s future military planning and – with counterinsurgency out of favor – the preferred way of carrying out wars abroad.

During the eight years of George W Bush’s presidency, as the US was building up its drone fleets, the country launched wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and carried out limited strikes in Yemen, Pakistan and Somalia, using drones in at least four of those countries.

In less than three years under Obama, the US has launched drone strikes in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Pakistan, Somalia and Yemen. It maintains that it has carte blanche to kill suspected enemies in any nation (or at least any nation in the global south).

According to a report by the Congressional Budget Office published earlier this year, “the Department of Defense plans to purchase about 730 new medium-sized and large unmanned aircraft systems” over the next decade. In practical terms, this means more drones like the Reaper.

Military officials told the Wall Street Journal that the Reaper “can fly 1,150 miles [1,850 kilometers] from base, conduct missions, and return home ... [T]he time a drone can stay aloft depends on how heavily armed it is.” According to a drone operator training document obtained by TomDispatch, at maximum payload, meaning with 3,750 pounds worth of Hellfire missiles and GBU-12 or GBU-30 bombs on board, the Reaper can remain aloft for 16 to 20 hours.

Even a glance at a world map tells you that, if the US is to carry out ever more drone strikes across the developing world, it will need more bases for its future UAVs. As an unnamed senior military official pointed out to a Washington Post reporter, speaking of all those new drone bases clustered around the Somali and Yemeni war zones, “If you look at it geographically, it makes sense – you get out a ruler and draw the distances [drones] can fly and where they take off from.”

Earlier this year, an analysis by TomDispatch determined that there are more than 1,000 US military bases scattered across the globe – a shadowy base-world providing plenty of existing sites that can, and no doubt will, host drones. But facilities selected for a pre-drone world may not always prove optimal locations for America’s current and future undeclared wars and assassination campaigns. So further expansion in Africa, the Middle East and Asia is a likelihood.

What are the air force’s plans in this regard? Lieutenant Haynes was typically circumspect, saying, “We are constantly evaluating potential operating locations based on evolving mission needs.” If the past decade is any indication, those “needs” will only continue to grow.