

AN A TO Z OF DRONES IN THE NEWS IN 2015

The use of drones, or remotely piloted aircraft systems (RPAS), is increasing rapidly worldwide, and drone targeted-killings are also on the rise. Protests at drone bases and factories are becoming more common, while the public is being given scant information by politicians and military officials.

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A Despite the end of NATO combat operations in December 2014, US drones continued to launch strikes in Afghanistan throughout 2015 as part of its (ahem) non-combat mission. British drones departed Afghanistan for the Middle East, with TV presenter Adrian Chiles giving us an inside view of Royal Air Force (RAF) Waddington, home of British drone operations. Meanwhile, defence companies are now unashamedly marketing anti-drone devices to protect us from the drones that they are selling. With all the money sloshing around the industry, it's perhaps no wonder that the ASTRAEA (Autonomous Systems Technology Related Airborne Evaluation & Assessment) program was denied further government funding.

B This year saw the publication of a number of excellent new books examining the technology, politics and ethics of the growing use of armed drones. Also expanding are the number of US drone bases around the globe, with Africa being a particular focus. Recent reports also suggest that Suffolk in the UK is to be the site of a new US drone operations centre. Pakistan surprisingly joined the armed drone users club in 2015, with its Burraq drone launching strikes in North Waziristan. Less surprising perhaps is the fact that despite all the media hype, Britain's Brimstone missile has yet to be integrated into British drones.

C Civilian casualties from drone and air strikes in Iraq and Syria are mostly invisible in mainstream media reports, yet casualty recorders such as Airwars report that they are growing week by week. The use of civilian contractors to maintain US military drone programs came under the spotlight in a Bureau of Investigative Journalism (TBIJ) analysis this year—and is likely to increase with the push to increase combat air patrols. In the UK, Project CLAIRE (Civil Airspace Integration for RPAS in Europe) took a worrying step forward with the first flight of a military drone in unsegregated civil airspace.

D More British drones were deployed to the Middle East for operations against ISIS in Iraq and Syria at the beginning of the year. Despite calls for greater openness and transparency, the number of British drones in use against ISIS is officially a secret (but shhh!—the Defence Secretary seemed to have forgotten this when he told the French press that all 10 are in operation). Prime Minister David Cameron committed again to double the UK's armed drone fleet (after doubling the number in operation in 2014) as part of the Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR). David Davis took over as Chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Drones and initiated an important debate around the use of drones for targeted killing. The UK's Cross Government Working Group on drones promised a public dialogue on drones, which so far, at least, has been neither public nor a dialogue.

E The debate on whether the growing use of armed drones is an effective means of creating peace and security continued throughout the year, the rancorous TV debate between journalist Glenn Greenwald and Dr Christine Fair being an extreme example. Meanwhile, a US government report found that the use of Reaper drones by US Homeland Security to protect US borders had been largely ineffective. Enrique Iglesias needed surgery on his hand after grabbing a drone during a concert in May, one of numerous reports of injuries from civil drones. At the end of the year, Germany announced that it is taking over leadership of the European combat drone development program.

F Funding for drone development and operations seems limitless despite ongoing spending cuts in the UK and the US. Leaders from different faith communities spoke out against the use of drones for targeted killing, with leaders writing a joint letter to US President Obama and congressional leaders. Despite the "pinpoint precision" of drone strikes, there were a number of reported friendly-fire deaths from strikes in Iraq during 2015. Meanwhile, the organisers of the Farnborough International Airshow are keen to have a Reaper or a Global Hawk drone take part in the 2016 flying display to "help people get comfortable with the idea" of drones. Chances of either the drones' flying or the public's being comforted are slim to nonexistent.

G A new report from Corporate Watch detailed the impact of Israeli drones in Gaza—an issue that receives little attention from most drone-watchers—while Israeli security services began to use surveillance drones to monitor protests in the West Bank. We learnt this year that RAF pilots are lent as a "gift of services" to the US Air Force (USAF) in order to operate US armed drones. Meanwhile, leaked documents suggested that the General Communications Headquarters (GCHQ) is also gifting intelligence to the US for its drone strikes. Google's attempts to steal Amazon's thunder ended in tears as its massive solar-powered drone crashed shortly after takeoff.

H The USAF's main drone training centre, Holloman Air Force Base (AFB) in New Mexico, is to undergo a dramatic expansion in 2016 to match the ever-growing need for drone pilots. The 21-year-old British hacker Junaid Hussain was killed in a US drone strike in Syria in August, one of 10 Britons killed in such strikes according

to TBIJ figures. After President Obama apologised and promised an investigation into the deaths of two Western hostages in a US drone strike, a coalition of human rights groups urged the same treatment for all civilian victims of US drone strikes.

I Reported Israeli drone strikes in Syria and Sudan received scant attention, as Israel simply refuses to acknowledge such operations. India abandoned development of its indigenous Nishant drone and turned its sights on procuring armed drones from Israel, while Italy received permission from the US to arm its Reaper drones. The Pentagon's Inspector General launched an investigation into allegations that military officials have skewed intelligence reports to provide more positive accounts of the progress of the campaign against ISIS ("Islamic State"). Some suggested that documents have since been destroyed, seemingly as part of a cover-up.

J US officials confirmed in September that the Joint Special Operations Command, in conjunction with the CIA, is conducting drone operations aimed at killing "high-value targets" in Syria. The British hacker Junaid Hussain was said to have been one of the first targeted. Mohammed Emwazi, the British ISIS militant known as "Jihadi John", was killed in a US drone strike in the centre of Raqqa in November. Despite strong lobbying from Republicans, Jordan was refused permission to purchase US drones; Israel has stepped in to supply them instead.

K The Campaign to Stop Killer Robots continues its efforts to ensure that a preventive ban is put on the development of autonomous weapons systems. While US and UK diplomats insist that such weapons are not being pursued, simultaneously military officials argue that drones, "particularly autonomous ones", have to be "the new normal". Officials repeatedly refuse to disclose where British drones are currently based in the Middle East, although several reports—and satellite photos—suggest they are at the Ali Al Salem Air Base in Kuwait.

L Both the Israeli military and US Special Forces operated drones over Lebanon during the year, while the US also deployed drones to Latvia as part of the "European Reassurance Initiative". Drone industry lobbyists were as active as ever behind the scenes, aiming

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to "relax" controls on drone exports while also challenging restrictions on drones flying in domestic civil airspace. While US drones have been flying some surveillance missions over Libya (and apparently crashing), such operations are likely to increase during 2016.

M Hollywood's discovery of the drone wars has resulted in several movies including *Good Kill*, starring Ethan Hawke, and the forthcoming *Eye in the Sky*, with Helen Mirren and Alan Rickman. Many more are apparently in the pipeline. Michael Fallon, the British Defence Secretary, changed the methodology for calculating British drone and air strikes during the year, leading to "fewer" strikes on paper if not on the ground. Leaked US National Security Agency (NSA) documents showed clear links between the North Yorkshire US spy base RAF Menwith Hill and US drone strikes in Yemen.

Nigeria's acquisition of Chinese armed drones was a complete surprise and clearly showed the global spread of drones, with the Netherlands being one of a number of European countries gaining US approval to purchase Reaper drones. Naming continues to be an issue for the industry, with the UK choosing to rechristen the Predator B (Reaper) drone as the more soothing and acceptable "Protector" drone. The preposterously named nEUROn, the European combat drone prototype, continued its test program during the year with test flights in Italy and Sweden.

OA number of commentators highlighted that President Obama's much-promised openness on US drone strikes outside conflict zones has failed to materialise. In fact, there has probably been even less oversight of the targeted killing strikes within Iraq and Syria. Authors George R. R. Martin and Will Self as well as General Stanley McChrystal (US Army, Ret.) were among a diverse and growing number of people voicing opposition to the way that drones are lowering the threshold for war.

PThe pressure on pilots due to the ever-increasing demand for drones was a regular news item during the year. In December, the USAF announced changes that will now see enlisted personnel (and not just officers) fly drones—surveillance flights at first, but this will also likely change. Police use of drones took a significant step forward in 2015, with many local forces announcing they are to trial the use of drones. At the same time, the number of drone incidents being reported to the police has rocketed. Protests at drone bases and factories continued during

the year, with Creech AFB in Nevada and RAF Waddington in the UK being key focuses of attention.

Q Documents released by Edward Snowden brought fresh questions about GCHQ involvement in US drone strikes outside conflict zones. Members of Parliament took the unusual step of writing to the UK Director of Public Prosecutions, Alison Saunders, suggesting it was time "to consider and issue clear guidance on the law, policy and procedure concerning the investigation of complicity into extraterritorial targeted killing". Qatar continues to be an important hub for US and UK drone operations, with the Al Udeid Air Base hosting the US Combined Air Operations Center. British military operations against ISIS are also run from RAF Al Udeid in Qatar.

R Military officials from the US, UK, France and Italy first met in January as the Reaper Users Group, which we're told is aimed at enhancing interoperability and reducing costs. More details emerged during the year of the role of the US air base at Ramstein, Germany, in the ongoing drone wars. The base is a key communications hub linking the US with its armed drones around the globe. Hundreds marched on the base in September in response to the revelations. The debate continues over whether the use of drones for targeted killing is effective at reducing terrorism or is a recruitment tool for terrorist groups. Former military officers have been most vocal in arguing the latter.

S About 40 alleged militants were killed in a reported single US drone strike in Somalia at the end of January. Although the Pentagon publicly denied carrying out that particular strike, it was happy to confirm that US drones had struck Somalia on the very same day, targeting a senior leader of al-Shabaab. There seems to have been a real change of tactics and an increase in



Aerial view of RAF Menwith Hill spy base near Harrogate, North Yorkshire.
(Source: Wikipedia)

drone strikes in Somalia, as Jack Serle of TBIJ noted early in the year. Perhaps inevitably, the increasing use of drones has been followed by the rise in numbers of military drones being shot down. American, Russian, Israeli and Saudi Arabian drones have all reportedly been downed during the year, although it is impossible to confirm all these reports. The safety and security threat from small civil drones began to be recognised during the year. As sales of these small, cheap drones take off, the threat will simply grow.

The normalisation of drone targeted-killing took a step forward in 2015 as the UK government wholeheartedly embraced the tactic. Parliamentarians, US senators, the United Nations and civil society groups continue to struggle to limit, at the very least, such activity and gain some oversight of the process. Transparency, however, is in short supply, and government contempt for proper public oversight, never mind for curbing the practice of targeted killing, is obvious. Meanwhile, BAE Systems' Taranis combat drone continued its test program with a third (and reportedly final) set of flight tests in November. The drone, or a derivative of it, is likely to be a contender for the UK's Future Combat Air System, likely to see some funding decision in 2016.

British-based, Israeli-owned UAV Engines' attempts to curb protests at its factory in Staffordshire were botched during the year when the company failed to abide by court rules. In February, the Crown Prosecution Service dropped a case against nine protesters when the company refused to cooperate with court-mandated disclosures. In July, protesters successfully overturned in the courts a "forbidden zone" around the factory, and then in October the High Court threw out an injunction as the company had in effect misled the Court. This led to the collapse of the case against a further 19 people arrested for breach of the injunction at a protest in July. Maybe UAV Engines should join US drone manufacturer General Atomics in setting up shop in the United Arab Emirates.

The UK Ministry of Defence has suddenly developed a taste for releasing videos of British drone strikes. Since March 2015, there have been nine videos of such strikes published online—as opposed to just six released over the past seven years. The Vatican has long opposed the use of armed drones and the development of autonomous weapons, and this year drones have been banned from flying over Vatican City due to security fears.

Whistleblowers helped us have a better understanding of the drone wars during 2015 with the release of a set of documents labelled as "The Drone Papers". Edward Snowden's NSA revelations also revealed GCHQ links to US drone strikes and that personnel from Project *Widowmaker* were based at RAF Menwith Hill. Finally, former US drone pilots went on the record to detail the horrific consequences of the US drones targeted-killing program. The information released by whistleblowers is crucial to the public's understanding of drone warfare—thank you. The manifest failings of the UK's Watchkeeper drone were laid bare this year. After spending almost £1 billion on its development, the UK got barely six days' use out of the (ahem) state-of-the-art drone in Afghanistan. Army training with the "all weather" drone is now being conducted in Ascension Island as the weather in the UK is not, er, suitable. Wimbledon was not immune to the intrusion of rogue drones, something that occurred at numerous sporting events during the year.

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While Northrop Grumman was happy to feature the X-47B drone in its Super Bowl ad, the much more mysterious X-37B drone took off on another classified mission into space in May 2015. Don't expect it to be back any time soon: the previous secret mission lasted almost two years. Despite the

chaos and horror of the ongoing war in Yemen—in which more than 90 per cent of the casualties have been civilians—the US continues to launch drone strikes, with TBIJ reporting around 20 confirmed strikes and an additional 10 possible strikes. The extremely high altitude Zephyr drone was purchased by the UK for use by its Special Forces. Airbus executives mistakenly let the cat out of the bag ahead of the SDSR in September. After a rushed Airbus retraction, the deal was discreetly confirmed as part of the SDSR in November. ∞

About the Author:

Chris Cole founded Drone Wars UK in May 2010 to undertake research, education and campaigning on the use of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and the wider issue of remote warfare. It is recognised as a credible and reliable source of information on drones and unmanned technology. Cole is the co-author of *Convenient Killing: Armed Drones and the Playstation Mentality* (2010). An extract from his report, "Drone Wars Briefing", was published in NEXUS 19/03. His article in this issue is an edited version of his three-part series "A-Z of Drones 2015", which includes hyperlinks; part one is at <http://tinyurl.com/j5hgqzw>.

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