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What Has Been Learned in the Past Year of the Al-Aqsa Flood Truth About UK Airbase in Cyprus



Human chain protest at UK's Royal Air Force base Akrotiri in Cyprus
September 29, 2024

Unbeknownst to many, there is a British Royal Air Force (RAF) airbase in Cyprus that directly links the UK and U.S. to Israel's crimes in Gaza. The film *Investigating War Crimes in Gaza*, produced by the Investigative Unit (I-Unit) of Qatar-based news agency *Al Jazeera* and released on October 3, features reporting by *Declassified UK* about the base.

Declassified UK is an independent news organization that investigates "Britain's military and intelligence agencies, its most powerful corporations and its impact on human rights and the environment." It has done systematic work to uncover the use of the UK's Akrotiri base in Cyprus to conduct surveillance flights over Gaza, supply the weapons Israel is using to conduct its campaign of genocide against the Palestinian people, disrupt communications systems and more. *Declassified UK's* coverage provides more evidence of the direct involvement of the UK, U.S. and other countries in the commission of war crimes.

The British have been running surveillance flights over Gaza since early December 2023, supposedly to facilitate the rescue of Israeli captives. At least 200 "surveillance" flights are reported, 100 since the Starmer Labour government took office in July 2024.

In the film *Gaza*, Matt Kennard of *Declassified*^[1] argued that this aim to rescue captives "doesn't explain" the number of flights. There were "only two British

hostages in Gaza ... There was up to 1,000 hours of [surveillance] footage by March."

The R1 Shadow planes that fly out of Akrotiri have offensive target acquisition capacity, Kennard points out. Kennard has carried out detailed investigation on the use of this airbase and demanded answers from British government and military officials.



Bill Van Esveld, the associate director for the Middle East and North Africa at Human Rights Watch, explains why this information is pertinent.

"If you continue to know and continue to supply weapons and targeting information, if you're supplying targeting information, despite knowing what the result is, and the result is a gross human rights violation, then you also get to complicity, ... So, you know, the deniability that you're deeply involved in what's going on in Gaza begins to evaporate," Van Esveld says.

"When you start acting in a conflict to a level that the people on the ground who are doing the fighting are using your information as they fight," you may become "a party to the conflict," he further elaborates.

Al Jazeera's I-Unit asked the UK government about its surveillance flights. It reports receiving the following answer: "The UK is not a participant in the conflict between Israel and Hamas ... As a matter of principle, we only provide intelligence to our allies where we are satisfied that it will be used in accordance with International Humanitarian Law ... Only information related to hostage rescue is passed to the Israeli authorities."

"Our priority remains achieving a ceasefire in Gaza so hostages can be released, civilians protected and aid flood in," it added. *Al Jazeera's* film can be viewed [here](#).

U.S. Flies 'Routine' Spy Flights from UK's Cyprus Base Near Gaza for 'Third Party Governments'

— Matt Kennard, *Declassified UK* —

In November 2023, Kennard wrote an article on the use of the Akrotiri base in the U.S./Israeli war on Gaza which is reproduced below.

Leaked cable raises the possibility the U.S. is flying surveillance missions over Gaza from RAF Akrotiri and sharing the intelligence with Israel, which would further implicate Britain in war crimes in Gaza.



A U.S. U-2 spy plane parked at RAF Akrotiri, the British air base on Cyprus.
(Screengrab: Google Earth)

- UK official said U.S. spy flights from Britain's Cyprus base "have become routine" and included sorties over Turkey and Lebanon
- The "intelligence product" is often "passed to third party governments", he added
- The Cyprus base has become hub for international military support to Israel as it bombs Gaza
- "Other agencies" - believed to be the CIA -- are using RAF Akrotiri for spying missions
- "There are sensitivities" with Cypriot government about using the British base for U.S. spy missions, official wrote
- UK Ministry of Defence refuses to clarify if U.S. intelligence collected via Britain's base on Cyprus is being shared with Israel

The cable, published by *WikiLeaks* and classified as 'secret,' was written in April 2008 by the U.S. embassy in London and sent to Washington.

A letter included in the cable is from Will Jessett, then the UK Ministry of Defence (MoD) director of counter-terrorism, who asks for "new procedures for requesting intel flight clearances" regarding U.S. spy missions from British bases.

Jessett refers to "the regular intelligence flights that the U.S. undertakes from RAF Akrotiri" -- the huge British air base on Cyprus. He added that "these flights have become routine."

He goes on to write that the American aircraft are flown by the State Department and U.S. military "or possibly other agencies," assumed to mean the CIA.

The only U.S. equipment the British government has ever admitted to being located on the UK's so-called Sovereign Base Areas (SBA) on Cyprus is the U-2 spy aircraft. These have been permanently stationed at RAF Akrotiri for nearly half a century, and were originally operated by the CIA.

The 2008 letter adds that recent American U-2 spy flights from RAF Akrotiri had collected intelligence over Turkey, Iraq and Lebanon.

The cable is significant in light of current U.S. activities on Cyprus. The U.S. is moving arms to Israel from around Europe using RAF Akrotiri, but the Ministry of Defence has refused to tell *Declassified* what American aircraft are flying or what weapons are on board. U.S. surveillance drones are also known to be flying over Gaza.

For 50 years, the U.S. and Britain have attempted to keep secret the size and activities of the American presence at the UK bases and "retained sites" on Cyprus. This territory, which comprises three per cent of Cyprus's landmass, was kept by the British after independence in 1960.

Declassified also recently revealed that 129 U.S. airmen are permanently deployed to RAF Akrotiri, which is a staging post for bombing campaigns across the Middle East. The U.S. spy force, the 1st Expeditionary Reconnaissance Squadron, is permanently deployed at Akrotiri.

'Third Parties'

But the MoD official also noted that the "intelligence product" from these U.S. sorties was often "intended to be passed to third party governments."

The third party governments are not revealed, but it is likely this includes Israel, which sits just 200 miles from RAF Akrotiri and is a close U.S. intelligence partner. Edward Snowden's leaks in 2013 **confirmed** that the U.S. "routinely shares raw intelligence data with Israel."

The MoD official warned that "sensitive intelligence gathering operations" by U.S. assets from UK bases "where information is passed to third parties" could have worrisome legal implications.

The UK, he added, may be "indirectly aiding the commission of unlawful acts by those governments on the basis of the information gathered through the assistance we provide to the U.S."

The U.S. is the key military supporter of Israel's criminal bombing campaign in Gaza. It has been supplying large amounts of weapons to Israel and **sent** senior U.S. army officers to the country to advise on the Gaza ground operation.

The *New York Times* **reported** on 2 November [2023] that the U.S. is flying surveillance drones over the Gaza Strip. The drones were discovered by the paper on a flight tracker website and later confirmed by two U.S. Defense Department officials.

The aircraft are MQ-9 Reapers, which are operated by U.S. Special Operations forces, the paper noted.

Declassified understands the *New York Times* could not establish where the drones were taking off from. The flight path indicates that it could be RAF Akrotiri, among other possible locations.

The MoD would not confirm or deny if U.S. drones were flying from the British base on Cyprus, or if intelligence was being shared with Israel.

'Sensitivities with Government of Cyprus'

The use of RAF Akrotiri and other UK facilities on Cyprus by the U.S. military and intelligence services has long been controversial. Much of the activity is kept secret from the Cypriot government.

One Snowden [document](#) noted that American intelligence staff are required to dress as tourists around the bases because the UK has promised the Cyprus government that only British staff work there.

The secrecy appears to be continuing with regard to the U.S. support for Israel's bombing campaign in Gaza.

Declassified recently [revealed](#) that over 30 military transport flights, operated by the RAF, had flown from RAF Akrotiri to Tel Aviv since the bombing of Gaza began. But Cypriot government spokesman Konstantinos Letymbiotis [told](#) the *Cyprus Mail* he had received no information about the flights.

Declassified then [reported](#) that the U.S. was using Akrotiri to transfer weapons to Israel. The Cypriot president Nikos Christodoulides was [asked](#) about it in a press conference. "There is no such information, our country cannot be used as a base for war operations," he said.

The need for secrecy about U.S. spy flights was noted by the UK official who wrote of "the political risk that other governments become aware of, and potentially object to, the [U.S.] flights."

The official added: "In particular, there are sensitivities with Government of Cyprus regarding the use of Sovereign Base Areas in Cyprus."

"I am sure you will understand the sensitivities involved in the use of UK bases for covert or potentially controversial [U.S.] missions," he told the Americans.

The British have long used their bases on Cyprus for military and intelligence purposes behind the back of the Cypriot government. *Declassified* recently [revealed](#) that during the Cold War, the UK secretly turned non-aligned Cyprus into a key NATO asset.

A spokesperson for the UK Ministry of Defence told *Declassified*: "In response to the situation in Israel and Gaza, we are working with international partners to de-escalate the conflict, reinforce stability and support humanitarian efforts in the region. Any use of UK bases will be in line with these objectives."

The U.S. Department of Defense did not respond to *Declassified's* requests for information and comment.

Note

1. Matt Kennard is head of Investigations at *Declassified UK*. Matt is an investigative journalist and author. He was a fellow and then director at the Centre for Investigative Journalism in London. After receiving the *Guardian's* top student journalism prize, he went on to gain a masters at the Columbia University School of Journalism in New York, where he was a Stabile investigative fellow.

He then spent three years working as a staff writer for the *Financial Times* in London, New York, and Washington DC, covering, amongst other things, the Pentagon, the White House, Wall Street, and the City of London.

Matt has written extensively on the U.S. military and its conduct during the War on Terror. His first book, *Irregular Army*, investigated the recruitment practices of the U.S. military and exposed the *carte blanche* given to neo-Nazis, gang members and criminals to sign up and serve in the Middle East.

His second book, *The Racket*, is an exposé of the hidden instruments used by the U.S. government to apply economic and military control across the world. His third book, *Silent Coup*, is an investigation of the secretive mechanisms through which transnational corporations run the world, and was released in 2023.

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