

A-Z of Drones 2015: Civilian Casualties, Afghanistan, Gaza

Part One

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Theme: [Militarization and WMD](#)

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Part 1 of 3. Read [part 2](#) and [part 3](#).

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 [Adrian Chiles](#) giving us an inside view of RAF Waddington, home of British drone operations. Meanwhile, in a classic example of having your cake and eating it, 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](#) programme was denied further government funding.

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2015 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 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 onto British drones.

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[Civilian casualties](#) from drone and air strikes in Iraq and Syria are mostly invisible in mainstream media reports, yet casualty recorders like Airwars report they are growing week by week. The use of [civilian contractors](#) to maintain US military

drone programs came under the spotlight in a TBIJ investigation 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.



More British drones [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 [secret](#) (but Shhh! the Defence Secretary seemed to have forgot when he told the French press that [all ten are in operation](#)). David Cameron committed to again [double](#) the UK's armed drone fleet (after doubling the number in operation in 2014) as part of the strategic defence and security review. [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.



The debate on whether the growing use of armed drones is an [effective](#) means of creating peace and security continued throughout the year with the rancorous [TV debate between Glen Greenwald and Christine Fair](#) being an extreme example. A US government [report](#) meanwhile 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 was taking over the leadership of the [European combat drone](#) development programme.



[Funding](#) for drone development and operations seems limitless despite on-going 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 President Obama and Congressional leaders. Despite the 'pinpoint precision'

of drone strikes, there have been a number of reported [friendly fire](#) deaths from strikes in Iraq during 2015. Meanwhile the organisers of the [Farnborough air show](#) are keen to have a Reaper or Global Hawk drone take part in the flying display next year to “help people get comfortable with the idea” of drones. Chances of either the drones flying, or the public being comforted, are slim to non-existent.



A new report from Corporate Watch detailed the impact of Israeli drones in [Gaza](#) – an issue that gets 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 USAF in order to operate US armed drones, while leaked documents suggested [GCHQ](#) 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 take-off.



The USAF’s main drone training centre, [Holloman AFB](#) in New Mexico, is to undergoing a dramatic expansion in 2016 to match the ever expanded need for drone pilots. 21-year old British [hacker](#) Junaid Hussain was killed in a US drone strike in Syria in August 2015, one of ten 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.

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