

A-Z of Drones 2015: “Reducing Terrorism”, Targeted Assassinations, UAV Engines, Whistleblowers

Part Three

By [Chris Cole](#)

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Theme: [Militarization and WMD](#), [Terrorism](#)

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*Documents released by Edward Snowden brought fresh **questions** about GCHQ involvement in US drone strikes outside conflict zones. MPs took the unusual step of [writing to the 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 base](#) hosting the Combined Air Operation Center (CAOC). British military operations against ISIS are also run from ‘[RAF Al Udeid](#)’ in Qatar.*



Military officials from the US, UK, France and Italy began to meet as the [Reaper Users Group](#) during 2015. The group is aimed, we are told, at enhancing interoperability and reducing costs. More details emerged during the year of the role of the US air base at [Ramstein](#) in Germany in the on-going 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 over whether the use of drones for targeting killing is effective at [reducing terrorism](#) or a [recruitment tool](#) for terrorist groups continues. This year, [former military officers have been most vocal](#) in arguing the latter.



Around forty alleged militants were killed in a single reported US drone strike in [Somalia](#) at the end of January. Although the Pentagon publicly denied carrying out that particular strike, they were happy to [confirm](#) that US drones had struck Somalia on the very same day, [targeting a senior leader of al-shabab](#). There seems to have been a real change of tactics and an increase in drone strikes in Somalia as [Jack Serle of The](#)

[Bureau of Investigative Journalism](#) 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](#). [US](#), [Russian](#), [Israeli](#) and [Saudi Arabian](#) drones have all reported 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 recognized during the year. As sales of these small cheap drones takes off, the threat will simply grow.

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The normalisation of drone [targeted killing](#) took a step forward in 2015 as the UK wholeheartedly embraced the tactic. [Parliamentarians](#), [US Senators](#), [the United Nations](#) and [civil society groups](#) continue to struggle to, at the very least, limit such activity and gain some oversight of the process. [Transparency](#), however, is in short supply and [government contempt](#) for proper public oversight, never mind curbing the practice, is obvious. Meanwhile BAE Systems' [Taranis combat drone](#) continued its test programme 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 (FCAS) likely to see some funding decision in 2016.

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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 CPS dropped a case against nine protesters when the [company refused to co-operate 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 \(UAE\)](#).

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The UK MoD 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. While

the [Vatican](#) has long opposed the use of armed drones and the development of autonomous weapons, drones have this year 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 that have become labelled '[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 Menwith Hill. Finally, former US drone pilots went on the record to detail the [horrific consequences](#) of the US drone targeted killing programme. 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 £1bn 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 the [Ascension Islands](#) 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.



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 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% of the casualties are civilians](#) - the US continues to launch drone strikes, with the Bureau reporting around [20 confirmed 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 discretely confirmed as part of the SDSR in November.

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Articles by: **Chris Cole**

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