

European Countries' Use of Military Drones: Deployed in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Sub-Saharan Africa

A Review

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Two weeks ago a new coalition of European civil society groups (including Drone Wars UK) launched a [Call to Action on Armed Drones](#) at a meeting in Brussels attended by, amongst others, US [drone whistleblowers Cian Westmoreland and Lisa Ling](#).

The European Forum on Armed Drones (EFAD) launch was on the eve of an important European Parliament meeting, jointly organised by the subcommittee on Human Rights and the Subcommittee on Security and Security and Defence, focusing on [the human rights impact of armed drones in counter-terrorism operations](#). A video of the meeting, including inputs from Jennifer Gibson of [Reprive](#) and Radhya Almutawakel of the [Yemeni Mwatana Organisation for Human Rights](#) is available [here](#).

While the UK is the only European country so far to have used armed drones, other countries are on the verge of acquiring the capability and are already using large military drones on active military deployments. Here's a brief survey of how some other European countries are already using large military drones.

France

France currently has 5 drones – 3 Reapers and 2 French made Harfang drones – in active service in northern African as part of [Operation Barkhane](#). This is a French military counter-insurgency /terrorism operation spread across five countries (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger) in the Sahel region of Northern Africa. France has around 3,500 troops deployed alongside fighter aircraft, helicopters and drones. This long-term military operation grew out of the 2013 Operation Serval, launched following the request of the Malian government for military assistance against Islamist armed groups. Separate from the French military mission in the Sahel, around [12,000 UN peacekeepers](#) also operate in Mali around [70 of whom have been](#) killed since operations began in 2013.

France has been operating Harfang drones since 2008 and ordered [US Reaper drones in 2013](#). Two were deployed to the Sahel in January 2014, with a third delivered in June 2015. A third batch of three was ordered in December 2015 and are due to be delivered in 2019. France has stated that it wants a total of 12 Reaper drones in its air fleet.

France's drones in North Africa are based at Niamey in Niger, from where [US drones also undertake surveillance missions](#). A second US drone base in Nigeria is reportedly being

developed at Agadez, 750km north of Niamey. While the French drones are unarmed, they are very much involved in combat operations with Defence Minister Le Drian reporting soon after the French Reapers became operational that a French Reaper drone had led [French and Malian forces to engage and kill 10 suspected Islamist fighters](#). There have been [protests against the French military presence](#) and the arrest of locals suspected of having links with militants – with some protesters being killed by security forces.

BBC footage from Niamey of French drones

In 2014 airforce [pilots in France](#) took control of French Harfang drone operating in Mali in an experiment to conduct ‘remote split operations’ as the operation of drones at distance is called. While the experiment was successful, it seems there are no on-going plans to operate them in this way. Meanwhile France and the UK have been in discussion about launching [a joint training effort](#) to train more pilots for their reaper drones.

Italy

Italy currently operates 9 Predator and 6 Reaper drones, with the latter going through the process of being armed after gaining [US approval to carry weapons](#) in November 2015. Italy will be only the second country after the UK to operate armed US drones.

Like the UK, Italy operates its drones remotely from its home territory at [Amendola air base](#) in southeast Italy. US drones also operate from Italy, based at the [Sigonella Naval Station](#) in Sicily and later this year NATO’s five Global Hawks will arrive and be permanently based there (see below).



Italian Reaper and operator

Italy first acquired US Predators in 2004 and deployed them to [Iraq in early 2005](#) and then to [Afghanistan](#) in April 2007. In 2011 Italy deployed its Reapers (as well as other military aircraft) [over Libya](#) during the Coalition air campaign to oust Muammar Gaddafi.

From 2014 Italy began [replacing its Predators in Afghanistan with Reapers](#), with two of the Predators [re-deployed to Kuwait for operations against ISIS in Iraq](#) while others were [deployed to Djibouti](#) for anti-piracy operations on the Somali coast and in the Gulf of Aden.

In December 2015, Italian magazine L'Espresso was granted access to [Italian drone pilots and footage of one of their missions over Iraq](#). While some marvelled at the detail and very high resolution images in the footage, [analysts warned in the New York Times](#) that caution was needed as such clarity was rare (and may have been the reason this particular piece of footage was released).

Italy has also deployed its Predator and Reaper drones [over the Mediterranean](#) as part of Operation 'Safe Sea' to combat the threat of terrorism from Libya and in [Operation 'Our Sea'](#) to stop immigration from North Africa. In February 2015 the drones were [over Libya](#) during the closure of the Italian embassy in Libya and the evacuation of Italian Nationals from the country

In January 2016 [Italy gave permission for the US drones based in Sicily to fly armed missions](#) in order to undertake strike missions in Libya and elsewhere in North Africa on a case-by-case basis.

Like other nations operating drones, Italy has had its fair share of crashes. A Predator crashed in training accident in [2004](#), another crashed off Italian coast in [Jan 2010](#) with another in June 2011. Most recently in May 2016, the prototype of a new Italian developed drone called the [Hammerhead crashed](#) off the Sicilian coast.

Germany



Luftwaffe Heron drone

Currently the German Luftwaffe has three Israeli-made Heron 1 drones operating out of the Mazar-e-Sharif Base in northern Afghanistan since autumn 2010 as well as Luna drones operating from Gao in Mali in support of UN peacekeeping mission.

The drones operating in Afghanistan are leased from Israel via Airbus with Airbus contractors conduct the take-off and landings – the point most likely for crashes to occur. As of November 2015, the German Heron drones in Afghanistan had completed [more than 25,000 flight hours in support of German and Afghanistan Security Forces](#).

Germany has this month (July 2016) [deployed Luna drones](#) to Mali as part of its contribution to the UN peacekeeping force. These are to replace the much smaller Scan Eagle drones operated by the Dutch when they were on deployment. Germany has announced that it will deploy [two Israeli-made Heron drones for the operation in Mali](#) but this is unlikely to happen before November 2016.

In January 2016 Germany announced that [from 2018 it will lease between 3 and 5 of the larger Heron TP drones from Israeli](#) in a \$650m contract to bridge the gap until a new European combat drone is due to enter service in 2025. According to Defence News the German [Heron's may be armed with the British made Brimstone missile](#).

However the use of armed drones has been extremely controversial in Germany, with concerns about purchase of such systems written into the [German Coalition agreement](#) signed in 2013. There has also been huge disapproval of the role played by the [US base in Ramstein](#) in US targeted killing with [large protests regularly taking place](#). Nevertheless in September 2015 German as well as Swedish officers were [reported](#) to be taking part in US drone targeted killing operations in as part of US counter-terrorism operations in Afghanistan.

Others

A number of other European countries are on the verge of acquiring US or Israeli large military drones.

[The Netherlands](#) ordered US Reapers in 2013 and four were expected to be delivered in 2016 but these have since been [delayed due to budget issues](#). When confirming the deal [the US stated](#) that the Reapers

will enhance the intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capability of the Dutch military in support of national, NATO, UN-mandated, and other coalition operations. Commonality of ISR capabilities will greatly increase interoperability between U.S and Dutch military and peacekeeping forces.

In November 2015 [Spain](#) too ordered four US Reapers with the first two due to arrive in July 2017 and another two in 2019/20. In autumn 2015 [Switzerland](#) ordered six Israeli Hermes 900 drones in \$200m contract, with the drones expected to be delivered by 2020. The purchase was extremely controversial in Switzerland as the Hermes 900 have been used in Gaza operations.

[Poland](#), which is looking to acquire a large number of drones under various projects is considering between US and Israeli drones for its combat drone programme while the UK is offering an armed version of the Watchkeeper drone for a [tactical drone programme](#).

According to press report around 60 drones will eventually be based at a [dedicated drone base](#) in the north-west of Poland.

NATO

On top of these national programmes, five massive Global Hawk drones will [arrive in Europe by the end of 2016](#) as part of a new NATO programme. The Global Hawks, to be based at the Sigonella air base in Italy, are the core of [the Alliance Ground Surveillance \(AGS\) System](#) which is collectively owned by 15 of the 28 NATO allies (Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Germany, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Norway, Poland, Romania, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, USA) [under a \\$1.7 billion contract signed in May 2012](#).



One of the five NATO AGS (i.e. Global Hawks) drones due to be based in Italy from end of 2016

NATO states that the drones are to enable

persistent surveillance over wide areas from high-altitude, long-endurance (HALE) aircraft, operating at considerable stand-off distances and in any weather or light condition. Using advanced radar sensors, these systems will continuously detect and track moving objects throughout observed areas and will provide radar imagery of areas of interest and stationary objects.

Although only 15 nations are involved in the purchase of the aircraft, all members of NATO will participate in operating and supporting AGS in service. As part of the development plans, Global Hawks have already undertaken test flights across Europe including [across UK airspace](#)



BAE System's Taranis Drone

On top of these deployments of existing drones, two major combat drone development programmes are underway in Europe.

In the UK, BAE Systems has built and flown the [Taranis](#) combat drone prototype, while a number of nations (France, Greece, Italy, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland) have been involved in Dassault-led [nEUROn](#) programme.

While development work continues on both of these prototypes, the UK and France are also co-operating and jointly funding work on the development of a future unmanned system currently dubbed the [Future Combat Air System \(FCAS\)](#).



Dassault's nEUROn drone

There has rightly been much attention paid to the US use of drones, particular for extra-judicial targeted killing, over the past few years. However with the increasing proliferation of these system it likely that we may look back and see such use as having only been the tip of the iceberg. Armed drones are a real danger to global peace and security and it can only be right that much more attention is paid to all those nations operating such systems.

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