

Britain's Special SAS Forces in Gaza. The ICC Must Investigate British Politicians for Gaza War Crimes.

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Global Research, November 07, 2023

[Declassified UK](#) 3 November 2023

Region: [Europe](#), [Middle East & North Africa](#),
[USA](#)

Theme: [Intelligence](#), [Law and Justice](#),
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The UK military and intelligence services may be aiding Israel's attack on Gaza in at least seven ways. It is vital the International Criminal Court question Rishi Sunak, James Cleverly and Grant Shapps about this support.

The International Criminal Court (ICC) is the only permanent global court to have jurisdiction to prosecute individuals for the international crimes of genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes. It recently [issued](#) an arrest warrant for **Vladimir Putin** over Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Karim Khan, the ICC's chief prosecutor, has [said](#) the court has "active investigations ongoing" in relation to Gaza and the West Bank going back to 2014.

During its current campaign against Gaza, Israel has violated Article 31 of the Geneva Convention on Protection of Civilians by imposing collective punishment on 2.3m people by withdrawing all water, food and electricity.

By targeting civilian infrastructure such as hospitals and schools, Israel has also violated the same convention. Amnesty International has [referred](#) to Israel's "killing of civilians on a mass scale" and [documented](#) "indiscriminate" attacks on civilians.

A team of UN experts has [said](#) Israel's campaign in Gaza involves "crimes against humanity".

The ICC prosecutes individuals and any cases brought over Gaza should look at Israel's international accomplices. British prime minister Rishi Sunak, foreign secretary James Cleverly - who oversees the UK's foreign intelligence services - and defence secretary Grant

Shapps - who oversees the Ministry of Defence (MoD) - could all be vulnerable to prosecution.

British ministers have provided strong diplomatic support for Israel's military operations, including [vetoing](#) a resolution calling for a ceasefire at the UN Security Council.

Sunak has [defended](#) in parliament Israel's collective punishment of Gaza and its evacuation order to move over a million people from the north of the territory. He said the latter was "absolutely right", claiming this was about protecting civilians.

But the UK's support goes further and should concern the ICC. Britain may be more directly participating in Israel's crimes in Gaza with its military and intelligence assets.

However, the British military and intelligence relationship with Israel remains shrouded in secrecy. ICC investigators may be interested to investigate seven areas of potential UK support to Israel.

1. RAF in Eastern Mediterranean

The UK [announced](#) it was sending military assets to the eastern Mediterranean on 13 October to "support Israel" as it bombed Gaza.

This included maritime patrol and surveillance aircraft whose tasks include looking for covert transfers of weapons to Palestinian militant groups. A Royal Navy task group was also moved to the eastern Mediterranean.

The military package also includes two Royal Navy ships, three helicopters and a company of Royal Marines, who will "be on standby to deliver practical support to Israel and partners in the region".

The UK has a huge air base at RAF Akrotiri on Cyprus, 230 miles from Gaza. In recent years the base has had seven [Typhoon fighter jets](#) stationed there. It has also been central to the British war in Yemen.

BAE Systems-operated [flights](#) stopping at Akrotiri provide logistics support for UK-supplied aircraft and bombs used by the Saudi Air Force to strike Yemen.

The ICC would want to investigate the precise role that these UK military assets have played in Israel's Gaza campaign.

2. Secret Agreement

In December 2020, a military cooperation agreement was signed by Britain and Israel. Despite the UK MoD [describing](#) it as an "important piece of defence diplomacy" which "strengthens" military ties, the British parliament and public has never seen what is in it.

The MoD has refused to publish it and has only briefly mentioned it in parliament once, in a response to a direct question from an MP.

The agreement was signed by then chief of the defence staff Sir Nick Carter and his Israeli counterpart chief of general staff, Aviv Kohavi.

It was described as an “organising mechanism for our relationship” which “formalises our defence relationship”. It provides “a mechanism for planning our joint activity, allowing collaboration on a number of areas”.

It is suspicious that the agreement is being kept at a high security classification. It is possible the accord “strengthens” the relationship between the two militaries to the degree that it places some obligations on the UK to defend Israel, through the provision of information, intelligence or material support.

The ICC should want to see a copy of the agreement to assess the UK’s military role in Israel’s campaign in Gaza.

3. GCHQ in Cyprus

Britain’s so-called Sovereign Base Areas (SBA) in Cyprus are home to [important sites](#) for the UK largest spy agency GCHQ. Its communication interception facility at Ayios Nikolaos in the Eastern SBA, Dhekelia, hoovers up calls, texts, and emails from across the Middle East, and sits 220 miles from Gaza.

GCHQ has a central role in UK warwaging and has explicitly [said](#) that “wherever and whenever the military have deployed over the years, we have supported them”.

GCHQ also has a close relationship with Israel. Documents revealed by US whistleblower Edward Snowden in 2013 showed the US National Security Agency was providing data to its counterpart, the Israeli SIGINT National Unit (ISNU), which monitors and targets Palestinians.

A [key partner](#) of the NSA and ISNU was GCHQ, which fed the Israelis selected communications data it collected. In 2009, during Israel’s Operation Cast Lead in Gaza that left nearly 1,400 people dead, including 344 children, this involved sharing information on Palestinians, the documents showed.

The then director of GCHQ, Robert Hannigan, said in 2017 that his organisation had a “strong partnership with our Israeli counterparts in signals intelligence” and that “we are building on an excellent cyber relationship with a range of Israeli bodies”.

It is unclear what this amounts to. Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu said in a 2017 BBC interview that there was “intense cooperation between our security intelligence agencies” which “has saved many lives”.

The ICC would want to assess the degree of GCHQ intelligence sharing with Israeli counterparts as part of its current Gaza campaign.

4. SAS in Gaza

The *Sun* [reported](#) on 27 October that Britain’s Special Air Service (SAS), an elite special forces unit which is completely outside of democratic oversight, is now on “standby” in Cyprus to – it was claimed – rescue British hostages held captive by Hamas and Britons who are trapped in Gaza.

The leak of this information is likely to have come from the UK military, which carefully manages its media profile. It is possible, however, that the SAS may also have an advisory military, or even combat, role in the region, in support of Israel.

British covert forces recently [operated](#) with Saudi Arabia in a secret war in Yemen.

The UK military's "D-Notice" committee, which seeks to stop the media publishing information it claims would damage national security, requested on 28 October all media editors to not publish information relating to SAS operations in Gaza.

The only media outlet which [publicised](#) and defied the D-Notice was *Socialist Worker*, a small weekly newspaper. It is assumed the rest of the British media has acceded to withholding information related to UK special forces' involvement in Gaza.

The ICC would want to request information from the British government about the role played by its special forces in Gaza and the immediate region.

5. US Spy Force on British Cyprus

The US Air Force has had a base on British territory on Cyprus for nearly half a century, but its size was long kept secret from the public on both sides of the Atlantic.

Declassified recently [revealed](#) that the US is expanding its deployment on RAF Akrotiri to 129 airmen and building a new 147-room installation across 1.5 acres to house its personnel.

Declassified also revealed that a US spy force, the 1st Expeditionary Reconnaissance Squadron (ERS), is permanently deployed at the British base despite Pentagon claims it only has one airman on Cyprus.

This squadron is the US military's oldest flying unit and [responsible](#) for training all high-altitude intelligence and reconnaissance aircrew for the U-2 spy plane, which was [originally](#) operated by the CIA.

The ERS, which is headquartered at Beale Air Force Base in California, also flies 2,400 hours of "[combat support](#)" missions annually with the RQ-4 Global Hawk, a surveillance drone manufactured by US arms company Northrop Grumman.

This US squadron is based 230 miles from Gaza and could be supplying intelligence and "combat support" to aid Israeli military operations, given the US is Israel's most important military ally.

The UK MoD refuses to disclose the number of US military personnel on British territory. A Cypriot working on the UK base area told us last year: "There is a big US presence, I don't know how that works or why."

The ICC would want to request information from the British government about the potential role of this US spy force operating on British territory in the Gaza campaign.

6. NSA in Cyprus

Edward Snowden's leaks in 2013 revealed the extensive US National Security Agency (NSA) presence across the British territories on Cyprus. A top secret GCHQ document [noted](#): "Cyprus hosts a wide range of UK and US intelligence facilities".

These facilities were said to include the communications interception facility at Ayios

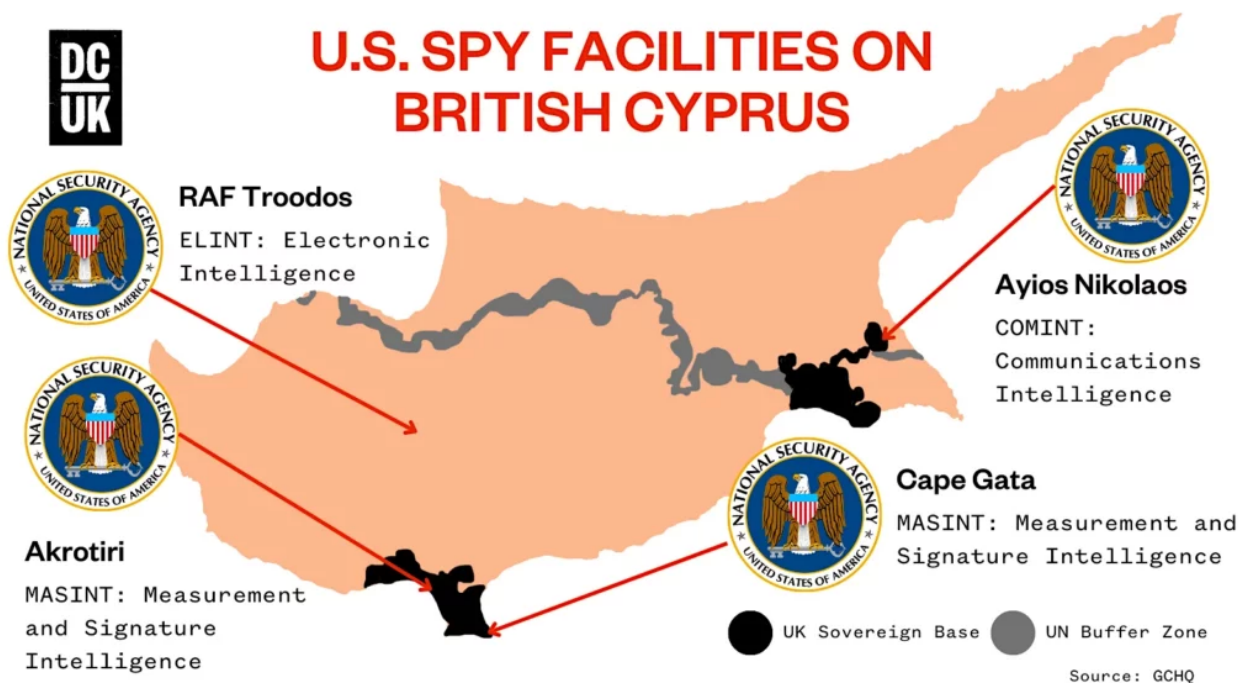
Nikolaos in the Eastern base, Dhekelia, which also hosts a measurement and signatures intelligence, or MASINT, component. This highly technical field detects and describes the specific characteristics of target objects and sources.

Two more MASINT locations operating in partnership with the US are found on the Western base, including an unmanned facility at Cape Gata, just up from RAF Akrotiri.

At RAF Troodos, a British “retained site” near the border with northern Cyprus, the US operates another listening post, which utilises covert electronic intelligence gathering. The Troodos site, GCHQ noted, “has long been regarded as a ‘Jewel in the Crown’ by NSA as it offers unique access to the Levant, North Africa, and Turkey”.

The document added: “Weapons-related collection from Troodos is used to support technical [signal intelligence] analysts in the US and UK.”

The ICC would want to investigate whether the NSA on British Cyprus is sharing intelligence with the Israelis regarding their campaign in Gaza.



7. UK military in Israel and West Bank

The UK government has said it has [three](#) permanent military personnel in Israel, all based in the British embassy in Tel Aviv. The MoD has said they “carry out key activities in defence engagement and diplomacy”. Meanwhile, the Israeli military has [five personnel](#) on duty in Britain for liaison and training purposes, according to the MoD.

The MoD is also a key player in a multimillion pound British aid [project](#) in the Israeli-occupied West Bank – called the Middle East Peace Process Programme – to develop “more capable” Palestinian security forces who can prevent the “potential overspill of violence into Israel”.

The project is funded through the £1.3bn Conflict, Security and Stability Fund, which a parliamentary committee has [compared](#) to a “slush fund” for financing projects that do not “meet the needs of UK national security”.

A funding [breakdown](#) of the programme shows the MoD received £2.3m in 2017-18 for the “British Support Team” based in Ramallah in the West Bank, through which the training of Palestinian forces is organised.

The MoD has [refused](#) to disclose the location and numbers of these UK military personnel for security reasons.

But *Declassified* has [revealed](#) the team consists of seven British military personnel drawn from the army and air force and is led by a brigadier.

The ICC would want to investigate what role the UK military personnel in Tel Aviv and Ramallah play in Israeli operations.

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