

Where are British Reaper Drones Heading after Afghanistan?

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David Cameron with RAF pilots at Al Minhad Air Base in UAE

As the December 2014 Afghan drawdown deadline approaches the UK government has accepted that it can't bring its fleet of ten armed Reapers back to the UK except packed up in boxes. Due to safety concerns Reaper drones will not be allowed to fly in the UK even in segregated airspace. The [MoD however wants to keep the drones flying](#) so the question that is exercising senior British politicians and officials is where in the world shall we put our armed drones now?

Although it was thought that some UK drones might remain in Afghanistan as part of a post-conflict security arrangement, this option has become much less attractive as there is a desire by the UK to draw a line under the Afghan war and 'move on'. This conclusion has only been hardened with the increasing possibility that the US forces [may not stay in Afghanistan at all](#) after 2014 unless a Bilateral Security Agreement is [signed by August](#).

If the UK wants to keep its armed drones operational it appears to have two broad options; deploy them alongside other British aircraft in the Gulf or deploy them alongside US drones undertaking surveillance and counterterrorism in Africa.

The Gulf Option

UK military forces in the Gulf receive little publicity as the host countries do not want the presence of foreign troops highlighted while the UK is (a little) sensitive about being seen to support such autocratic regimes. Nevertheless [a squadron of RAF Typhoons is based at Al-Minhad Air Base](#) near Dubai in the United Arab Emirates and even more discreetly an eavesdropping RAF Sentinel aircraft (note this is different from the RQ-170 drones also called Sentinel) is believed to be deployed to the Al Mussanah Air Base in Oman.

Over the past few years the [UK has been trying to bolster its relationship with Gulf states](#) and especially with the United Arab Emirates (UAE). This has included the signing of a defence [partnership agreement in late 2012](#). Though this has been in part about trying to gain lucrative arms sales (which embarrassingly [did not come to fruition](#)) it has also been about the UK becoming more focused on the Gulf as a key strategic military location.

In the foreword of a briefing paper on the UK-Gulf relationship published in April 2013, Michael Clarke, the Director General of RUSI, the MoD-linked think-tank wrote ([pdf](#))

"The military intends to build up a strong shadow presence around the Gulf; not an evident imperial-style footprint, but a smart presence with facilities,

defence agreements, rotation of training, transit and jumping-off points for forces that aim to be more adaptable and agile as they face the post Afghanistan years from 2014. The Minhad airbase at Dubai in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has emerged as the key to this smart presence.”

Although the UK also has a military presence in other Gulf states including Bahrain, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia (where officially at least RAF personnel are ‘seconded’ to the Saudi Royal Air Force), Al Minhad in the UAE is the most likely option. Firstly there is already an RAF Squadron present which means the communications and control infrastructure is already in place. And secondly the UAE was the first non-NATO country to have been allowed to [buy the unarmed ‘export’ version of Reaper](#) and may well see an advantage to having UK Reapers based alongside them.

Asked about the possibility of establishing a permanent presence in the Gulf during an April 2014 visit to Qatar Defence Secretary [Philip Hammond stated](#): “It’s a possibility that we are looking at and we’re interested to discuss how to take that forward...We haven’t decided for sure to do this yet, but certainly it’s one of the options we are looking at.”

US Predator and Reaper drones regularly patrol the Gulf in what it calls “routine maritime surveillance” and “routine classified surveillance missions”. At least twice this has led to confrontations between the drones and Iranian aircraft, once in [November 2012](#) and again in [March 2013](#). It is known that US Global Hawks and RQ-170 Sentinel drones [fly from Al Dhafar airbase in UAE](#) but it is not clear if Predator/Reaper drones are also based there especially since a [US drone base in Saudi Arabia](#) was revealed by US media last year.

If UK drones are deployed to the Gulf it may well be that they take on these patrols and potential clashes with the Iranian air force.

The Africa Option

Another option for the UK appears to be basing its drones alongside US and French drones in Africa. The known location of deployed US drones is mapped below although it is highly likely that there are other bases that are not in the public domain (rumours include Quagadodo in Burkina Faso and Al-Wigh in Libya) .



Known locations of US drone bases in the region (click to enlarge)

Country	Location	Type
Afghanistan	Jalalabad and Kandahar	Reapers, Predators & Sentinel
Djibouti	Camp Lemonier	Predators / Reapers
Ethiopia	Arba Minch	Reapers
Italy	Sigonella	Global Hawks & Reapers
Kuwait	Ali Al Salem	Predator
Niger	Niamey	Reapers
Saudi Arabia	Unknown	Predator?
Seychelles	Mahe	Reapers
Turkey	Incirlik	Predators
United Arab Emirates	Al Dhafra	Sentinel & Global Hawk
Yemen	Al-Anad Air Base	Reapers

Both [Michael Clarke of RUSI](#) and UN Special Rapporteur [Ben Emmerson](#) have suggested that UK drones may be deployed to Africa after Afghanistan. So far all the MoD has been willing to say is that ‘no decision has yet been taken on future basing of UK Reapers’.

While the British Army has a small training unit in Kenya (about 50 UK personnel are permanently stationed there to facilitate training exercise by British troops) it has no permanent air base. It is likely therefore that if UK Reapers are to be deployed to Africa it will be alongside US drones based at (or [nearby](#)) Camp Lemonier in Djibouti, Arba Minch in Ethiopia or Niamey in Niger. Given that [French Reapers have also been deployed to Niamey](#) in Niger, if deployed to Africa it is perhaps most likely that British drones would be deployed there.

Decisions, Decisions

It is highly likely that, in consultation with international partners, British politicians, military officials and diplomats are at this moment debating the pros and cons of each of the basing options for the UK’s Reaper drones. From their perspective the advantage of basing UK drones in the Gulf is that the infrastructure is already in place. However, how much and how often the drones would be allowed to fly is debatable. It is also likely that being in the Gulf, UK drones would take part in patrols over Gulf waters. Although relations between the West and Iran are stabilising at the moment, drone flights over the Gulf have led to military confrontations in the past. The UK could easily get drawn into such a confrontation in the future.

Although there is no RAF infrastructure in Africa, it is likely there will be more opportunity for RAF pilots to fly missions there than in the Gulf. If the drones end up being based at Niamey where US and French drones are already based this would also facilitate co-operation between three nations operating Reapers. However just as in the Gulf, it would be easy once these systems are deployed to become further entangled in military operations within Mali or whatever crisis erupts.

A third possibility is that the UK’s drones could be deployed to the Sigonella airbase in Italy

alongside Italian and US drones or to various bases in North America where they could simply be involved in training exercises. This however is apparently an unlikely option.

Whatever happens, it should be remembered that behind the decision to re-deploy drones from Afghanistan to either the Gulf or to Africa is not some magnanimous desire to create security for the people living in that part of the globe. Rather it is simply the wish to keep the drones operational – to be part of the drones club. However once the drones are re-deployed, it increases the likelihood that the UK will become embroiled in further armed conflict. The best option, the one that will really increase global security, is simply for the drones to be disassembled and packed back into their boxes for storage at RAF Waddington. This option however, appears to be off the table.



An RAF Reaper being assembled at Kandahar in 2010. Time for British drones to be put back in their box

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