

Britain Has Flown 50 Spy Missions Over Gaza in Support of Israel

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Global Research, January 21, 2024

[Declassified UK](#) 18 January 2024

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

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The UK military refuses to tell Declassified what intelligence it is sharing with Israel as we reveal the extraordinary number of surveillance flights Britain is undertaking over Gaza from its base on Cyprus.

The UK military has flown 50 surveillance missions over Gaza since December, it can be revealed.

The flights have taken off from Britain's controversial air base on Cyprus, RAF Akrotiri, and averaged around one a day since the beginning of December.

When asked the UK government refused to provide the number of spy flights, but *Declassified* has analysed flight tracking records.

The British plane used is the Shadow R1, which is known as an intelligence, surveillance, target acquisition and reconnaissance (ISTAR) aircraft.

The Shadow R1 is operated by the UK military's [No.14 Squadron](#), which is based at RAF Waddington in Lincolnshire, east England.

The UK military recently [awarded](#) a £110m contract to the plane's manufacturer, US weapons company Raytheon, to update the aircraft and increase the British fleet from six to eight.

The British flights began on 3 December when two R1s flew over Gaza. The flights have continued nearly daily up until now, with around half the days featuring two flights. On 3 January, the British sent an R1 over Gaza three times.

The flights appear to last around six hours.

Intelligence

The UK Ministry of Defence [announced](#) on 2 December that it would begin surveillance flights over Gaza “in support of the ongoing hostage rescue activity”.

“The safety of British nationals is our utmost priority,” the department said. “Surveillance aircraft will be unarmed, do not have a combat role, and will be tasked solely to locate hostages”.

It added:

“Only information relating to hostage rescue will be passed to the relevant authorities responsible for hostage rescue.”

But the extraordinary number of flights, and the fact that they started nearly two months after the hostages were taken, raises suspicions that the UK is not collecting intelligence solely for this purpose.

Foreign secretary David Cameron [confirmed](#) last week that Hamas holds just two British hostages.

Israeli forces are also on the ground in Gaza, and notoriously have wide-ranging surveillance capabilities in the territory. It is unclear what Britain’s R1s can add to the hostage rescue mission.



A British R1 Shadow surveillance aircraft, which is collecting intelligence over Gaza, at RAF Waddington in Lincolnshire. (Photo: Creative Commons)

Change in Role

The British government previously said its surveillance assets had a more wide-ranging role for Israel.

On 7 November, defence minister James Heappey [told parliament](#) that British “flights have

provided surveillance support to Israel, including preventing the transfer of weapons to terrorist groups, and to wider regional security.”

Heappey [also said](#) the surveillance flights were to “improve our situational awareness in the region and provide assurance to our partners”, assumed to mean Israel.

Heappey refused, however, to disclose the number of flights Britain had made over Gaza.

“For operational security reasons, I cannot comment on the specifics of this activity,” he said.

A week after the 7 October attack, the UK government announced military units would be deployed to the eastern Mediterranean “to support Israel, reinforce regional stability and prevent escalation”. The military package included P8 surveillance aircraft alongside other reconnaissance assets.

Declassified has previously [revealed](#) the US spy force, 1st Expeditionary Reconnaissance Squadron, is permanently deployed at the British base on Cyprus alongside 129 American airmen.

Declassified also [reported](#) on a leaked US cable in which a UK official said American spy flights from Britain’s Cyprus base “have become routine” and the “intelligence product” is often “passed to third party governments”, which is likely to include Israel.

The UK Ministry of Defence and US Department of Defense both refused to comment to *Declassified* on what intelligence they are sharing with the Israelis.

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Featured image: Flight path of a British spy flight on its way to Gaza on Monday. (Screengrab: RadarBox)

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