

‘Deceitful Activities’: US Expands Its Intelligence and Military Presence in the UK

The US is quietly preparing to upgrade its presence in Britain in moves with huge implications for UK security and vulnerability in an international crisis.

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Upgrading US air bases in the UK would enable Washington to intercept international communications and launch military strikes from Britain more quickly and with more devastating effect.

This is what is taking place at Menwith Hill in North Yorkshire, the US National Security Agency’s biggest surveillance facility outside America, the US bomber base at Fairford in Gloucestershire, and the CIA base at Croughton in Northamptonshire.

All three bases are misleadingly described as Royal Air Force stations. While in theory the British government could veto US operations from these bases, the amount of money Washington continues to spend on them makes clear it does not expect any objections.

In its latest spending package, the US has earmarked \$40 million to expand Menwith Hill, \$300 million to Fairford and an undisclosed sum to Croughton. The figures on Menwith Hill and Fairford were given in [response](#) to a parliamentary question from the Labour MP Alex Sobel.

They are part of a £2.8 billion project to upgrade US military and intelligence-gathering bases in Britain. This [includes](#) expanding the US air force station at Lakenheath in Suffolk to enable American F-35 fighter/bombers to be based there.

GCHQ’s listening post in Cyprus, a facility whose product is shared with US intelligence agencies, is also being [upgraded](#).

‘Concealed from your parliament’

The moves come as a former US intelligence officer based at Menwith Hill has accused US and British officials of carrying out “deceitful” activities at the base. In a conflict the base

could be a “significant military target”, he says.

The warnings have come from Lee Baker, a former NSA satellite engineer and cryptologist in correspondence with a campaign group, the Menwith Hill Accountability Campaign (MHAC).

“I have found both the leadership of the National Security Agency and that of Menwith Hill Station (American and British) to be very deceitful and disloyal to their own respective citizens”, he says.

“They have certainly been concealed from your parliament, and thus your citizens as well.”

He calls for more accountability and “public awareness of the deceitful activities within the vast American Intelligence Complex at Menwith Hill”.

He adds that although those activities “are NOT [his emphasis] entirely unknown to your potential adversaries...they have certainly been concealed from your parliament, and thus your citizens as well”.

If the question, adds Baker, “is, do the intelligence activities at Menwith Hill Station, by the United States of America, in support of their unique and specific ‘Intelligence, Political or Economic’ goals, make that entire region a significant Military Target, the answer is yes”.

Directed against the British

Baker also makes it clear, in a memo to Martin Schweiger of the MHAC, that the US does not share with Britain some of the intelligence it collects from the base. Some of that intelligence could be used to target British citizens, he says.

“I am absolutely certain”, Baker continues, “that not all of the American intelligence collection activities at Menwith Hill Station have been or ever will be fully shared with the British government.”

“The US does not share with Britain some of the intelligence it collects from the base.”

He adds:

“Additionally it is absolutely possible, if not probable, that some intelligence collection activities directed against the British themselves, have been or will be conducted from British soil at Menwith Hill Station”.

Baker describes his comments as “merely my unclassified opinion” based on his experience of 36 years in the NSA.

He also says that he participated in operations that “actually thwarted several real-world threats to both the British and American people...some very bad players in the world would love to see NSA and GCHQ be totally wiped off the map”.

Gagging order

Baker’s suggestion that GCHQ and US intelligence bases in Britain are used to serve American rather than British interests was made clear in a GCHQ staff manual of 1994 I

reported some years ago.

The manual told GCHQ staff that the agency's contribution must be "of sufficient scale and of the right kind to make a continuation of the Sigint [signals intelligence] alliance worthwhile to our partners".

It admitted: "This may entail on occasion the applying of UK resources to the meeting of US requirements."

Baker's concerns about the lack of accountability and scrutiny of this close US-UK intelligence relationship reflect those made by Dennis Mitchell, a senior cryptanalyst who resigned in 1984 in protest against the banning of trade unions at GCHQ.

GCHQ's product is intelligence, he said. He added: "Intelligence imparts power; power which may be used to withstand a threat, or to apply one; to avert an ill, to bestow a benefit – or to exploit".

The only real watchdog, said Mitchell, was the workforce. "It is they on whom the general public must rely if errors of judgment, excessive zeal or malpractices are to be averted in a department which has considerable discretion."

Mitchell told the then cabinet secretary, Sir Robert Armstrong:

"I have arrived at the point at which I either make my concerns public, which means breaking the Official Secrets Act, or I fail to discharge my responsibilities to account for actions which I believe would be considered unacceptable by the general public were it aware of them."

He was immediately served with a court gagging order preventing him from disclosing anything about his work at GCHQ.

Covert drone strikes

MPs rarely dip their toes into the realm of security and intelligence. Although in recent years it has questioned failures by MI5 and MI6, even the parliamentary Intelligence and Security Committee, which meets in secret, has been loath to question the activities of GCHQ.

Menwith Hill has been expanding significantly with new radomes – "golf balls" housing surveillance satellite ground stations – and there are [plans](#) to construct what is described as a large "communications container compound" there.

The Menwith Hill Accountability Campaign noted in a recent [report](#) that according to documents from whistleblowers, programmes developed at Menwith Hill have been used to support British and American troops in conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan and as part of covert missions in Yemen, Somalia, Pakistan, and Lebanon.

It refers to leaked documents identifying Menwith Hill as providing intelligence used in "a significant number of capture kill operations", including targeting information for US covert drone strikes.

Kept under wraps

What the British government allows the CIA and other US agencies to get up to in “RAF” Croughton is also kept under wraps.

Alba MP Kenny MacAskill last month [asked](#) the government what role RAF Croughton had in “facilitating US drone operations in the Middle East; and how that base is linked to the US military facility at Camp Lemonnier in Djibouti”.

The defence minister, James Heappey, replied:

“RAF Croughton is part of a worldwide US Defence Communications network, and the base supports a variety of communications activity. For operational security reasons and as a matter of policy, neither the Ministry of Defence nor the US Department of Defense publicly discuss specifics concerning military operations or classified communications regardless of unit, platform or asset.”

Heappey added:

“Any details of US intelligence personnel are classified. It is Government practice not to disclose the information of personnel working in intelligence roles to protect national security.”

Anne Sacoolas, who claimed diplomatic immunity after she was charged over the death of a young motorcyclist, Harry Dunn, outside the Croughton base, has been [described](#) as being an American intelligence officer.

Forward base Fairford

At least activities at “RAF” Fairford are more visible. Assigned to both Nato and the US air force, it has one of the longest runways in Europe. It has been the forward base for American long-range B52 and Stealth bombers for operations throughout the Middle East (as has Diego Garcia, the “British Indian Ocean Overseas Territory”).

It was recently [announced](#) that a British consortium had been appointed as a “delivery partner” by the MoD’s Defence Infrastructure Organisation on the US Visiting Forces Infrastructure Programme at Fairford and Menwith Hill.

The [programme](#), which will last for five years, includes a B52 bomber maintenance hangar, weapons storage, a mobile air base, and a facility for rapid repairs to aircraft damage. The population of the base is expected to increase from about 500 to more than 1,000.

Lindis Percy, co-founder of the Campaign for the Accountability of American Bases (CAAB UK) told *Declassified*: “It is clear that the UK government has no say or control of what happens on these bases.”

She added: “Through persistence and determination by many people over the years, we now know it is because there is little meaningful accountability or public scrutiny and the democratic process to bring before Parliament to decide important issues does not happen.”

It is time parliament and civil society groups confronted the secrecy surrounding military and intelligence-gathering operations that are playing an increasingly significant but hidden

role in the way the British government conducts both domestic and foreign policies.

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Featured image: A B-52 Stratofortress arrives at RAF Fairford in 2018. (Photo: USAF / Ted Daigle)

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