



Great Britain Needs to Figure Out Its Killer Drone Rules

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The United Kingdom must support the United States in its efforts to create an international framework on the export and use of drones. But first, it needs to fix the problems with its *own* use.

In recent weeks, the United States [has reportedly entered](#) into negotiations with exporters and importers of armed drones in order to develop an international agreement on the rules governing export and use of drones.

Washington is encouraging its allies to sign up to rules which include adherence to international law and human rights law, a dedication to existing arms control laws, “appropriate transparency,” responsible use and a review of a country’s human rights record before selling drones to them.

America’s own use of drones since 9/11 has drawn heavy criticism. The United States [expanded the definitions of core principles of international law](#) in order to justify a broad targeted-killing policy against Islamic militants “wherever they may be.”

This has led to a number of problems, including a [perceived lack of respect for national sovereignty](#), [high number of civilian casualties](#) and doubts surrounding its effectiveness.

In light of international and domestic criticism, Washington has sought to improve the legitimacy of these operations. [Transparency](#) and [oversight](#) of strikes has increased and in the spring of 2015, the United States developed its [own policy guidance](#) on the export of drones—and now is encouraging others to do the same.

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Special relationship aside, the United Kingdom may prove unwilling or unable to sign up to these important commitments. It has shunned all [previous attempts to create an international consensus](#), and the United Kingdom's [drone strike last year against Reyaad Khan](#), a U.K. citizen fighting for ISIS, revealed a lack of what might be called “appropriate transparency” over U.K. drone operations.

After then-prime minister [David Cameron's initial announcement](#), the government offered very little additional information on the strike. It also refused to release the attorney general's legal advice on the strike and has [categorically ruled out](#) judicial review.

Cameron argued that public oversight was not necessary because the strike was being investigated by the security cleared Intelligence and Security Committee. However, the chair of the ISC [admitted](#) he was not currently being provided enough information “to do a thorough job.”

More recently, London has increased the opacity of its use of drones more widely. For example, the government [will not disclose the number of drones](#) currently operating in Iraq and Syria, even though it will do so for the number of Typhoon and Tornado jet fighters.

Nor will it provide any insight into the use of drones outside these areas arguing, as it did in a response to [member of parliament Richard Burden](#) earlier [this month](#), that providing the information “would, or would be likely to, prejudice the capability, effectiveness or security of the armed forces.”

Many have also [criticized the United Kingdom's reporting of civilian casualties](#)—and especially the claim that it has killed virtually no civilians through drone

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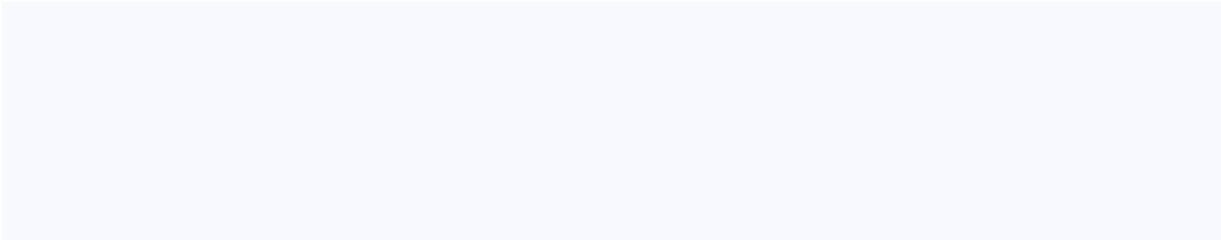
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strikes. [Chris Fuller](#) argues that the United Kingdom must learn from the mistakes of America and “and provide more transparency and oversight by choice, before such details are eventually forced out.”

The little we *do* know about the United Kingdom’s use of drones also demonstrates practices that could violate an international framework. In Yemen, [it was revealed](#) that London’s provision of training and intelligence plays a “critical” role in the Saudi-led airstrikes which have been roundly criticized for their high civilian casualties and disregard of international human rights norms.

This week, the [Royal Air Force’s own Reaper drones](#) were implicated in a coalition airstrike in Syria which mistakenly killed 62 soldiers who were fighting ISIS and injured hundreds more. These strikes also threaten a fragile ceasefire in the country.

The United Kingdom may, then, be unwilling to sign up to America’s framework. However, if it does not join the United States in acting now it may lose its chance. [Ninety countries now have drones and around 20 have or are *developing* armed drones.](#)



This includes a number of countries whose interests may not align with those of the West, such as China and Iran. Proliferation of this technology [undermines](#)

the United States' technological advantage and, with it, the ability to limit who has drones and how they use them.

Given this, the best way for the United States and its allies to ensure others use this newly acquired technology in ways that adhere to international law is through building an international consensus.

The U.K. government must seize this opportunity to help establish international standards. Washington is finally pushing for a system where drones can only be exported to countries that will use them responsibly and uphold humanitarian and human-rights law.

This is the time to encourage countries to adopt more restrictive rules on the use of drones before they spread further. London should push for an agreement which clarifies the legal basis for the use of drones and calls for the highest standards of transparency and accountability to their use, while doing its utmost to improve its own standards in turn.

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