



Implications of the Use of Drones following the Assassination of Qasem Soleimani QSD on 16 January 2020

On 16 January 2020, Lord Hodgson of Astley Abbotts (Conservative) is due to ask Her Majesty's Government "what assessment they have made of the implications of the use of drones to assassinate Qasem Soleimani for existing agreements on the use of drones".

Summary

- On 3 January 2020, the head of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards' overseas forces, General Qasem Soleimani, was killed in a drone strike conducted by the US military at the Baghdad International Airport.
- Mr Soleimani was an influential figure in the region, who the US President, Donald Trump, has suggested was involved in the preparation of "imminent and sinister" attacks on US personnel, charges that Iran denies.
- In response to the attack, Iran has launched two missile strikes against the al-Asad and Erbil airbases in Iraq, which house US and coalition forces. No fatalities have been reported.
- The UK Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, and Foreign Secretary, Dominic Raab, have called for a de-escalation of tensions and a diplomatic way through the crisis. In a further statement to Parliament, the Secretary of State for Defence, Ben Wallace, reiterated that the UK's focus was a de-escalation of the issue and the security of UK forces and civilians in the region.
- The drone used in the original attack was reportedly a MQ-9 Reaper, manufactured by General Atomics and capable of remote-controlled or autonomous flight operations.
- The use of military drones has grown steadily since the technology first deployed to spot hidden Serbian positions during the 1999 Kosovo war. According to statistics published by the *Guardian*, in four years of war against Isis in Iraq and Syria between 2014 and 2018, the UK deployed Reaper drones on more than 2,400 missions—almost two a day.
- As the Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament (ISC) investigated in its 2017 report, the assassination of three individuals in Syria on 21 August 2015—including UK national Reyaad Khan—marked the first time outside of participation in a military campaign that UK armed forces had conducted a lethal drone strike against a terrorist target.
- This incident was also examined by the Joint Committee on Human Rights, which called on the Government to urgently clarify its view of the legal basis under which the action was taken; to clarify the legal basis on which it contributes to the use of lethal force abroad outside armed conflict by other countries such as the US; and concluded there should be greater accountability for such uses of lethal force, proposing the ISC be given a more prominent role.

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- In its response to the Joint Committee, the Government said its policy was to defend the United Kingdom from terrorism using all lawful means necessary and that it believed there was a clear legal basis for such action in the case of the drone strikes in question, citing international law on self-defence including in Article 51 of the United Nations (UN) Charter.
- The Government has not published a substantive response to the report published by the ISC. In a statement on 20 December 2017, the then Prime Minister, Theresa May, reiterated a rigorous decision-making process had underpinned the 2015 airstrikes, and that the Attorney General had been consulted and was clear there was a legal basis for action.

James Tobin | 9 January 2020

Further Information

- House of Commons Library, [Iraq, Iranian Influence and the Death of Soleimani](#), 6 January 2020

A briefing paper exploring the death of Qasem Soleimani in the context of rising tensions in the region and examining what might happen next.

- [Statement by the Secretary of State for Defence, Ben Wallace, on 'Middle East: Security'](#), HC Hansard, 7 January 2020, cols 253–4

Statement by Ben Wallace on the UK's response to rising tensions in the Middle East, following the death of Qasem Soleimani.

- Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament (ISC), [Press Release: UK Lethal Drone Strikes in Syria](#), 2017

Press release summarising the ISC's report into the use of drones by the United Kingdom in Syria, including that of 21 August 2015, which was the first time outside of participation in a military campaign the UK had conducted a lethal drone strike against a terrorist target.

- House of Commons, ['Written Statement: Intelligence Oversight'](#), 20 December 2017, HCWS378

A written statement from the then Prime Minister, Theresa May, which referenced the Intelligence and Security Committee's report on the UK military's use of drone strikes in Syria.

- Joint Committee on Human Rights, [The Government's Policy on the Use of Drones for Targeted Killing](#), 10 May 2016, HL Paper 141 of session 2015–16, pp 5–11

The results of the joint committee's examination of the drone strikes of 21 August 2015, and subsequent recommendations for the Government urging clarification of the legal basis for such action.

- Joint Committee on Human Rights, [The Government's Policy on the Use of Drones for Targeted Killing: Government Response to the Committee's Second Report of Session 2015–16](#), 19 October 2016, HL Paper 49 of session 2016–17, pp 1–24

The UK Government's response to the joint committee, outlining its rationale and perception of the legal basis for the use of drones in Syria in 2015.

- Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), [Armed Drones in the Middle East](#), December 2018, p 5

A briefing examining the use of unmanned aerial vehicles and their implications for the Middle East.

Press Articles and Comment

- Chatham House, 'How the Soleimani Assassination Will Reverberate Throughout the Middle East', 6 January 2020
- Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), [Iran's First Response to Soleimani's Death, and Tehran's Future Moves](#)', 8 January 2020
- *Financial Times* (£), [Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei Tells US to Leave Middle East](#)', 8 January 2020; and [Iran's Top Military Leader Qassem Soleimani Killed in US Air Strike](#)', 3 January 2020
- Dan Sabbagh, [Killer Drones: How Many Are There and Who Do They Target?](#)', *Guardian*, 18 November 2019

Further Information

- Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament, [UK Lethal Drone Strikes in Syria](#), 2017
- House of Commons Library, [Operation Kipion: Royal Navy Assets in the Persian Gulf](#), 6 January 2020
- HM Government, [UK Counter-Unmanned Aircraft Strategy](#), 21 October 2019, CP 187
- Ministry of Defence, [MOD Launches £2m Fund to Counter Drones Threat](#)', 9 April 2019; and [£2.5m Injection for Drone Swarms](#)', 28 March 2019