

# How Europeans are opposing drone and robot warfare

## An overview of the anti-drone movement in Europe\*

By Elsa Rassbach

### A Rapid Proliferation of Combat Drones

So far only three countries are known to have used armed combat drones to carry out attacks: Israel, the US, and the UK. But this could soon change.

Analysts see demand for military UAVs (unmanned aerial vehicles, also known as drones) quadrupling over the next decade. [Global spending on drone technology](#) is expected to jump from an estimated \$6.6 billion this year to \$11.4 billion in 2022. Israeli weapons manufacturers have long been actively marketing military drones to other countries, and in the fall of 2012, [the US announced that as many as 66](#) countries would be eligible to buy US drones under new Defense Department guidelines. However, the US Congress and State Department have final approval of drone exports on a case-by-case basis and have [denied the request of NATO-partner Turkey](#) to purchase Predator drones because of ongoing tensions between Turkey and Israel. Soon, however, countries that cannot obtain US or Israeli drones may be able to purchase them from [weapons manufacturers in other countries such as China and South Africa](#).

[European weapons manufacturers also seek](#) a share of the drone market, not only for European military use, but also for export to other countries. Though it will likely be many years before a European-made combat drone will be operable, defense departments of several European countries are seeking to acquire for their arsenals US or Israeli combat drones capable of carrying weapons for targeted killing.

[Italy requested US permission to weaponize](#) the Italian fleet of six US Reaper two years ago. In May 2012, [the Obama administration announced](#) that it would soon notify the US Congress of plans to sell Italy "weaponization" kits, a move that, [according to the Wall Street Journal](#), "could open the door for sales of advanced hunter-killer drone technology to other allies." But so far there have been no reports that approval to Italy has yet been granted.

In May 2013, [France announced](#) the purchase two unarmed US Reaper drones for the intervention in Mali, and [the drones could later be armed](#). Holland is already using drones extensively for [domestic police surveillance](#) and is reportedly considering purchase of US Reaper drones for [military purposes](#). And the German Bundeswehr, which some years ago leased three Israeli Heron drones for surveillance in Afghanistan, is now negotiating with the US and Israel to acquire armed combat drones.

### Europe, Targeted Killing, and the International Rule of Law

By offering combat drones to European allies, the US seeks not only military "burden-sharing" in Afghanistan and elsewhere, but also undoubtedly hopes to gain more international acceptance and legitimacy for drone warfare. European drone opponents hope to instead bring European governments solidly behind international efforts to ban weaponized combat drones and to stop the threat of drone warfare to the international rule of law.

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Prior to September 11, 2001, the [US government was critical of the Israeli practice](#) of targeted killings, deeming them to be extra-judicial executions. However, after the attack on the World Trade Center, the US government under the Bush administration began using drones for targeted killings in the "war against terror." And the Obama administration has greatly increased the number of drone strikes. "The US has set a moral precedent," [says Jenifer Gibson of the British human rights group Reprieve](#). "A state can declare someone a terrorist and just go out and kill them."

As a former head of the Israeli Defense Force Legal Department, [Colonel \(res.\) Daniel Reisner, stated to Haaretz](#) in 2009: "What we are seeing now is a revision of international law. If you do something for long enough, the world will accept it. The whole of international law is now based on the notion that an act that is forbidden today becomes permissible if executed by enough countries. International law progresses through violations. We invented the targeted assassination thesis and we had to push it. At first there were protrusions that made it hard to insert easily into the legal moulds. Eight years later it is in the center of the bounds of legitimacy."

But significant international challenges are being mounted against a legitimization of drone warfare. Philip Alston, former UN Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial, Summary or Arbitrary Executions [stated in his report to the UN Human Rights Council](#) in 2010 that the US practice of targeted killings "threatens to destroy the prohibition on the use of armed force contained in the UN Charter, which is essential to the international rule of law. If other states were to claim the broad-based authority that the United States does, to kill people anywhere, anytime, the result would be chaos." And in January 2013 the [United Nations Special Rapporteur for Counter Terrorism and Human Rights](#), Ben Emmerson QC, announced a United Nations inquiry regarding [possible violations of international law](#) through the use of unmanned drones in the Palestinian territories, Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia and Afghanistan.

Among the first to bring attention to these issues were grassroots activists in the US, the UK, and in targeted countries such as Pakistan, who have for many years held hundreds of rallies, demonstrations, and vigils, filed court cases, and engaged in civil disobedience to bring public attention to the dangers of drone warfare and drone proliferation. As Brian Terrell, one of fourteen defendants [charged with trespassing onto the Creech base](#) in Nevada in 2009, explained at trial: "(T)he trend toward using drones in warfare is a paradigm shift that can be compared to what happened when an atomic bomb was first used to destroy the city of Hiroshima in Japan. When Hiroshima was bombed, though, the whole world knew that everything had changed. Today everything is changing, but it goes almost without notice...but there is certainly more discussion of this issue after we were arrested for trespassing at Creech Air Force Base on April 9, 2009, than there was before."

Since then, the US anti-drone movement has often made headline news in Europe, with reports on actions at US drone bases and delegations of US and UK anti-drone activists to Pakistan and Yemen; [a lawsuit brought by relatives of three US citizens killed by US drone strikes](#) in Yemen; the [Stanford/NYU report "Living Under Drones"](#); a thirteen-hour filibuster by US Senator Paul Rand; and widely publicized disruptions [of the Senate confirmation hearing of CIA Director John Brennan](#) and [of a speech by President Obama](#) by members and allies of [CODEPINK Women for Peace](#). (It is beyond the scope of this article to describe the US anti-drone movement in detail, but interested readers may want to consult US Internet resources such as [Drones Watch](#) and [No Drones Network](#); a good overview can be found in CODEPINK co-founder [Medea Benjamin's article, "War on Demand"](#) as well as her 2012 book *Drone Warfare*.)

Perhaps at least in part in response to this public scrutiny, in his speech on May 23, 2013, [President Obama called](#) for increased regulation of drones and an eventual end to the so-called "war on terror." But [a majority of the US public still supports drone strikes](#), according to a [Wall Street Journal/NBC News poll](#) conducted from May 30 to June 2, 2013. In the poll, 66% said they favored the use of unmanned aircraft to kill suspected members of al Qaeda and other terrorists, while only 16% said they were in opposition and 15% said they didn't know enough to form an opinion. A [recent scholarly study](#) (*Democracy at Risk: How Terrorist Threats Affect the Public*) found that in the US, both Republicans and Democrats "reacted similarly to a threatening news story by becoming more supportive of drone strikes." The study also found that "the same type of increase in support for drones

among those who read an article about weaknesses in the US economy."

A recent survey by Pew Research found that Europeans view drone strikes far more negatively. The [Pew Research international survey of 20 countries](#), conducted in 2012, found "widespread international opposition" to US drone strikes. A majority of the population in all the countries of continental Europe surveyed by Pew disapproved of drone strikes: 51 percent in Poland disapproved as did 55 percent in Italy, 59 percent in Germany, 62 percent in the Czech Republic, 63 percent in France, 76 percent in Spain, and 90 percent in Greece. And a plurality of 47 percent in the United Kingdom told Pew they disapproved of drone strikes, while only 43 percent approved of them. In contrast, the Pew survey found that 62 percent in the US still approved of drone strikes, while only 26 percent disapproved of them.

### **A Discussion in the European Parliament**

When the European Union in 2004 committed to cooperating more closely with the United States in the fight against terrorism, it took special care to emphasize that this cooperation must be in keeping with the rule of law and international law, [according to Nathalie von Raemdonck in a briefing for Istituto Affari Internazionali](#). Yet neither the European Commission nor the European Council have thus far released any statements about US targeted killings, and the member states have generally followed a similar pattern. "This is striking," says Raemdock, "as the Council has been quite vocal on the matter on other occasions, notably on the targeted killings carried out by Israel in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT)."

"Of course we should be asking questions about the use of the drones in the context of international law" a Greens party leader and German legislator in the European Parliament, [Reinhard Buetikofer, told The New York Times](#) in the summer of 2012. However, he said, "There is a kind of moral detachment from the issue because, in the case of Germany, we don't have armed drones, so the legal context is rarely questioned."

But now that some European governments are actively seeking to include armed drones in their arsenals and some EU leaders are calling for increased European investment in military drones to be used on the battlefield and even for border patrol, some Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) are calling for substantive discussion of the ethics of drone warfare. On January 16, 2012, in a written declaration on the use of drones for targeted killings, [four MEPs urged the EU and its Member States](#) "categorically to prohibit drone operations for the purpose of targeted killings and to advocate that they be proscribed internationally" and also "to commit to ensuring that, in the event of unlawful killings, measures are taken against the perpetrators and identified perpetrators are penalized."

On April 25, 2013, in a joint hearing organized by the human rights and security and defense subcommittees of the European Parliament, MEPs voiced concerns about drones being used for targeted killings and called for a worldwide debate on the use of unmanned aircraft and the creation of global standards. Though the MEPs failed to mention that the EU has been providing generous [research and development subsidies to Israel Aerospace Industries \(IAI\)](#), the state-owned manufacturer of Israeli drones, they did issue [a statement urging the European Union and its Member States](#) to "speak up against a practice that will set a dangerous and unwelcome precedent for International Law." The British Liberal Democrat European justice and human rights spokeswoman, [MEP Baroness Sarah Ludford, stated](#) that "US drone killings operate in disregard of the long-established international legal framework about when it is lawful to kill people... Silence will be taken as European acquiescence, with potentially disastrous results." She added: "It is the EU that has the clout to lead this fight back on behalf of international law."

### **A Campaign to Stop Killer Robots**

An initiative involving several European countries is the [Campaign to Stop Killer Robots, launched](#) in

April 2013 to address the mounting concern that the spread of armed drones could rapidly promote the technological development of fully automated weapons systems. Killer robots could decide upon targets and execute missions without any human intervention to provide a moral framework.

The [Campaign to Stop Killer Robots is a global coalition](#) comprised of 33 non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in 16 countries and is working towards a pre-emptive international ban of fully autonomous weapons. The steering committee is made up of representatives from Human Rights Watch, Article 36, Association for Aid and Relief Japan, International Committee for Robot Arms Control, Mines Action Canada, Nobel Women's Initiative, IKV Pax Christi, Pugwash Conferences on Science & World Affairs, Women's International League for Peace and Freedom.

While the Campaign to Stop Killer Robots is working for a ban of fully autonomous weapons, some experts argue that it would be essential to halt the further proliferation of weaponized combat drones in order to have any hope of stopping the trend towards full automatization of these weapons systems. In their report "[Combat Drones – Killing Drones: A Plea against Flying Robots](#)" for the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik - SWP), Marcel Dickow and Hilmar Linnenkamp write that "it could be difficult at a later point in time to push through the disarmament of autonomously acting UAVs." Therefore, they argue, "the separation of platform and weaponry seems to make sense in this present day technological phase," and Germany should "consciously accept" a resulting limitation in military capability to avoid "the legal and ethical consequence of future weapons deployment by robotic platforms."

### **Initiatives in European Countries**

In order to have any hope of either halting the proliferation of weaponized combat drones or banning killer robots, European citizens will need to build vigorous national campaigns country by country throughout Europe.

Initiatives have begun in number of European countries. In June 2013, activists in Sweden hosted the "[High North](#)" international conference, focusing on US-NATO efforts to use the North European Aerospace Test Range (NEAT) in Sweden and areas of Norway and Finland to test high-tech weapons, such as space radars, satellite downlink stations, and drones. In Switzerland there is a [petition campaign against a proposed Swiss acquisition of Israeli drones](#). And in July 2013, twelve Austrian organizations launched a [petition campaign against Austrian involvement in EU drone projects \(link in German\)](#).

Broad-based European drone campaigns have so far emerged in the UK and in Germany. In both countries, anti-drone campaigns oppose their own governments' use of drone technology for war, surveillance, and oppression; and they also challenge their governments' complicity in assisting US drone warfare.

### **The United Kingdom**

The arrangements for [intensive intelligence sharing by Western allies](#) go back to World War II, when the United States, Canada, Britain, Australia and New Zealand agreed to continue to collaborate. Thus since 2004 at the latest, British government and intelligence officials have been working closely with the US on the drone strike program. And [British pilots and analysts were flying US drones](#) under an embedding program for years before the US granted the British Royal Air Force (RAF) permission to purchase its own US Reaper drones for the war in Afghanistan.

In 2007 [Great Britain purchased three MQ-9 Reapers](#) from the California firm General Atomic for hi-tech surveillance in Afghanistan. The fleet of three drones was later increased to five after one crashed. The RAF decided to "weaponize" the Reapers in 2008, becoming the first (and so far still the

only) country in Europe to use weaponized combat drones. Initially, British drone surveillance and strikes were controlled by RAF pilots working out of Creech Air Base at Indian Springs in Nevada.

Since 2008 [British drone strikes have been rapidly increasing in number](#) and now make up nearly a third of the Coalition drone attacks on the Afghan people. In July 2011, in an attack by a remotely controlled Royal Air Force drone, four [Afghan civilians in Helmand Province were mistakenly killed](#) and two others injured. The [UK Ministry of Defense has stated](#) these are the only Afghan civilians known to have been killed by UK drone strikes but admits that it is not possible to accurately ascertain the extent of civilian deaths in drone strikes.

In the spring of 2010, drone researcher Chris Cole founded the NGO [Drone Wars UK](#) to undertake research, education and campaigning on the use of UAVs and on the wider issue of remote warfare. Other British NGOs also began extensive public education on drone strikes, including [Reprive](#) (which has also advocated for death row and Guantanamo prisoners) and [The Bureau of Investigative Journalism](#). UK drone researchers and activists came together in [The Drones Campaign Network \(DCN\)](#) to share information and coordinate collective action in relation to military drones. Member organizations include the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND), Fellowship of Reconciliation, Pax Christi, Scientists for Social Responsibility, War on Want, and War Resisters. [Stop the War Coalition](#) works closely with the Network on certain campaigns regarding drone strikes and targeted killings.

Some Members of the British Parliament (MPs) have been responsive to the concerns of these UK drone researchers and activists. On October 18, 2012, the [MPs launched the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Drones](#) "to scrutinise the rapid spread of drones both on the battlefield and in civilian life". Labour MP Tom Watson is president, and Conservative Zac Goldsmith is vice president. As of June 2013, [twenty MPs were members](#) of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Drones; ten of the MPs are members of the parties in the ruling government coalition and ten are members of the opposition parties. The Group has held discussions with representatives of Drone Wars and Reprive.

Nevertheless, in the fall of 2012, the RAF announced that plans to increase its arsenal of hi-tech weaponized Reapers from five to ten. The RAF also revealed the plan to move the control center for the UK drone operations from Creech Air Force Base in Nevada to a British air base, RAF Waddington in Lincolnshire, which would establish what is likely [the first European-based control center for drone warfare](#). A broad coalition of UK organizers began mobilizing to march in Waddington.

In the lead-up to the march, the British government admitted that, on top of hundreds of missions carried out by the RAF's own Reaper drone fleet in Afghanistan, RAF crews have carried out more than 2,000 missions using "borrowed" US weaponized drones. [Conservative MP Rehman Chishti warned](#) that armed drone operations in Afghanistan by the RAF and the US Air Force have become so interchangeable that Britain "may no longer be able to determine accountability and responsibility if civilians are killed." The British Ministry of Defence also revealed that British military personnel have been directly embedding with the US Air Force, flying combat drone sorties in the recent Libyan and Iraq wars, as well as in Afghanistan.

On April 25, 2013, the RAF announced that [the first British drone strikes directed from UK soil](#) had begun that day, and on April 27, more than 600 activists gathered from all over the United Kingdom to march the four miles from Lincoln to the Royal Air Force (RAF) base at Waddington in the [Ground the Drones demonstration](#). Called by a broad coalition of UK organizations, this was the largest anti-drone demonstration that had yet taken place in Europe. "The opening of this new drone warfare centre has brought home to many people that the use of drones by British forces is not after all, temporary and time-limited. Rather the use of drones to launch 'risk-free' airstrikes at great distances is being normalised," [said Chris Cole of Drone Wars UK](#). The drones are being used to continue the "deeply unpopular war on terror" with no public scrutiny, [said Chris Nineham, vice-chairman of Stop](#)



[the War Coalition](#).

Then on June 4, 2013, [six UK peace activists breached the security RAF Waddington](#) and entered the base. Calling themselves "Disarm the Drones," the group planted a peace garden to mark the [fifth anniversary of the first UK drone strike](#), which coincides with the International Day of Innocent Children Victims of Aggression. The activists were arrested and charged with "conspiracy" and "intent to trespass and cause criminal damage" and became the first UK activists to face charges for anti-drones related offenses. "We cut the fence in order to prevent more serious crimes in Afghanistan," said one of the activists. The [Ministry of Defence later confirmed](#) that British drones controlled from RAF Waddington had already made their first kill in Afghanistan.

For their court appearance, the six activists planned to challenge the RAF legal defense for British drone use in Afghanistan as set forth in "[The UK Approach to Unmanned Aircraft Systems](#)." Their [attorneys would argue that Afghanistan is a UN-declared conflict zone](#) and thus subject to the [European Convention on Human Rights \(ECHR\)](#). According to the activists' attorneys, "application of the ECHR would limit the use of drones solely to situations in which there is an immediate threat to life. This prevents the carrying out of 'targeted killings' and narrowly circumscribes their use even on 'the battlefield'."

Anti-drone and human rights activists in the UK have also challenged British assistance to the CIA for targeted killings. In his article "[US drone operations from UK?](#)" Chris Cole describes RAF Croughton Air Force Base as part of a network of US intelligence bases in the UK led by [Menwith Hill](#) in Yorkshire. According to Cole: "The existence of a secure military communications link between Camp Lemonnier in Djibouti (from which US drones operate over Yemen and other countries in North Africa) and the UK shows that Croughton and Menwith Hill are no doubt involved in analyzing information and video from US drone flights in that area. It is also possible that information obtained in this way and analyzed by US personnel in the UK could be used to direct further US drone strikes."

In 2012, [Noor Khan brought a civil suit in a British High Court](#) to challenge British intelligence sharing with the US for targeted killings. The court heard that Mr. Khan's father had been killed, along with dozens of other tribal elders, in a CIA drone strike in a community in northern Pakistan in 2011; the community was still living in a constant state of fear because they could regularly hear drones passing overhead and that might attack again.

The legal team for Mr. Khan, which included lawyers from Reprieve, [argued that British officials](#) had arguably become "secondary parties to murder" by passing intelligence to American officials that was used in illegal US drone strikes. [Khan's attorneys requested](#) "a judicial declaration that British intelligence officials may be liable for assisting acts of murder, war crimes, and crimes against humanity if they share targeting intelligence with the US government."

The [High Court declined to require that the UK government reveal](#) if it is providing intelligence for US drone strikes. Mr. Khan and his attorneys have said that they will appeal this decision. A recent decision by the [Peshawar High Court \(PHC\) in Pakistan declared the CIA's drone campaign](#) to be a war crime and ordered the Pakistani Government to take steps to put an end to it. A [UN investigation also suggests](#) that US drone strikes in Pakistan are in violation of Pakistan's sovereignty and territorial integrity. [According to Reprieve](#): "By sharing intelligence in support of the campaign, GCHQ may have broken both domestic and international law."

Current and former [British government and intelligence officials have told \*The New York Times\*](#) that Britain does provide intelligence to the United States that is almost certainly used to target strikes. According to *The Times*, many in Britain's intelligence community "are now distinctly worried they may face prosecution."

The UK has also not taken any steps to protect its own British nationals from US drone strikes, and the UK has even been [accused of assisting the US in targeting](#) them. [British nationals have been killed or](#)

[wounded by US drones strikes](#) in Pakistan and in Africa soon after their passports were unilaterally revoked by the British Home Office.

## Germany

German citizens have also been killed by US drone strikes. After up to eight German nationals were killed in Pakistan by US drone strike on October 4, 2010, the Left parliamentary group made an official inquiry in the German Parliament (Bundestag), asking for information regarding a possible role of German intelligence agencies in [aiding the US to target German nationals \(link in German\)](#). It has been reported that the German government was alarmed by this incident and quietly [banned intelligence sharing with the US](#) when such information might lead to the targeted killing of their citizens, stating that EU law is clear that this is not to be allowed.

In the case of one of the Germans killed in Pakistan, Buenyamin E., the [Office of the Attorney General of Germany initially deliberated](#) to decide whether German prosecutors would even have jurisdiction over the case. Finally, the Attorney General began an investigation to determine [whether a war crime as defined by German Criminal Code \(link in German\)](#) might have been committed against the victim. (In accordance with German privacy rules, the victim was identified only as Buenyamin E.; the Bureau of Investigative Journalism gives his full name as [Buenyamin Erdogan](#).) On July 1, 2013, the Office of [the Attorney General announced that it will not prosecute \(link in German\)](#) in the case of [Buenyamin E.](#) on grounds that he is believed to have been a member of an armed group involved in an armed conflict and therefore not a person protected under international humanitarian law.

Critics of the Attorney General's decision not to prosecute point out, according to the [ruling of the Peshawar High Court in Pakistan](#), all US drone strikes conducted in Pakistan are illegal; moreover, there is no public access to scrutinize the secret evidence the Attorney General used to characterize Buenyamin E. as an armed combatant after he was killed. As [Wolfgang Janisch of Sueddeutschen Zeitung wrote \(link in German\)](#): "The termination of the proceeding conveniently spares the Attorney General of Germany from having to identify the perpetrator of the drone attack -- though no one doubts that it was a US drone. And now the German authorities will not need to address the question of whether German security agencies conveyed intelligence about the German Islamist to the Americans and thereby made the attack possible."

Though the German government has so far been able to avoid full disclosure regarding German assistance to the US for illegal drone attacks, German politicians cannot fully ignore the concern of the German public regarding extra-judicial killings, a concern that is in part rooted in German history. As [the former editor of Die Zeit, Theo Sommer, wrote](#): "Under German law, killer drone attacks on non-combatants are murder – no matter whether President Obama in the Oval Office puts terror suspects on his kill list as 'enemy combatants.' On this point, Germany's and America's interpretation of international law are radically different."

Thus in 2012, when German Defense Minister Thomas de Mazière of the ruling Christian Democratic Party (CDU) began a campaign to win approval to acquire weaponized drones for the German Air Force (Luftwaffe), he made every effort to publicly distance himself from US policies and to argue that Germany would use drones differently than the US has done.

In May 2012, [de Mazière told a group of German reservists](#) that he considers the US use of drones for targeted killings to be a "strategic mistake." In August [he told the German newspaper Die Welt](#) that he sees no contradiction between the nature of the unmanned aerial vehicles and Germany's non-aggressive military code. "Ethically, a weapon must always be perceived as neutral," he said. He even scheduled meetings with church leaders and peace activists to assure them that weaponized drones can save not only German soldiers' lives, but also lives of civilians because of more accurate targeting. "German drone, good drone" ("[Deutsche Drohne, gute Drohne](#)" - [link in German](#)) was the ironic headline of one article in a leading German daily describing one such meeting of the German Defense Minister with Catholic and Protestant church leaders. (However, [a recent US military study found](#) that drone strikes in Afghanistan during a year of the protracted conflict caused ten times more civilian

casualties than strikes by manned fighter aircraft.)

German drone opponents argue that even if the German Bundeswehr were to restrict the use of combat drones to "battlefield" support, drones are quite evidently designed for use in aggressive wars in foreign countries. A great many Germans view with dismay the increasing tendency towards German military interventions in other countries, which they view as in violation of Article 26 of the 1949 German law, still in force, that prohibits the planning of aggressive war on German soil. According to many polls, a majority of Germans have long opposed German military involvement in Afghanistan; combat drones would appear to be a way for the military to continue the Afghan involvement, even as troops are withdrawn.

In January 2013, the Merkel government finally admitted that it had already had already made a decision to acquire weaponized combat drones. Many Members of the German Parliament were outraged. [Andrej Hunko, a parliamentarian with the Left Party, told Spiegel](#): "I'm vehemently opposed to the Bundeswehr's drone strategy...I'm also critical of expanding the use of reconnaissance drones." Hunko said he fears such aircraft might also be used domestically. Both the Left Party and the Green Party [submitted formal motions](#) against the German government's plan to obtain combat drones.

In early March 2013, representatives of numerous German peace and civil rights organizations met in Hannover to launch a [German Drone Campaign](#) opposing the German government's plans "to use drone technology for purposes of combat, surveillance and oppression." They drafted a petition ([the Appeal "No Combat Drones!"](#)) and began circulating it over the Easter weekend. The Appeal calls for the German government to work towards a worldwide ban of combat drones on the grounds that the deployment of such drones "lowers the threshold to armed aggression even further; entails 'targeted' killing of people within and outside warzones – without indictment, trial and conviction; terrorizes the population of the targeted territory by threatening life and limb; encourages the development of autonomous killer robots, thereby making more horrifying wars likely; (and) initiates a new round in the arms race."

By the end of April, the Appeal had already [received 125 endorsements](#) from key national and local peace and civil rights organizations and groups and from several political parties. Two of the endorsing parties, the Left ("Die LINKE") and the Greens, with between them more than 20 percent of the seats in the German Parliament. The Appeal also received a few endorsements from prominent members of Social Democratic Party (SPD), with 23 percent of the seats in the Parliament.

On April 25, 2013, a parliamentary debate was held on two separate motions of the Left and the Green parliamentary groups opposing acquisition of combat drones; the motion of the Left group also called on the German government to work towards an international ban of combat drones.

When the first CDU parliamentarian came to the speaker stand to argue in favor of combat drones, [four members of the Peace Coordination Berlin stood up](#) in the observer gallery, raised hands covered in blood-red paint, and shouted "Ban Combat Drones, Sir!" The activists were ushered out of the observer gallery and told that charges could be filed against them. In a subsequent [press release](#), the activists explained that they "sought to bring attention the gravity of the upcoming decision by the German government, either for or against weaponized drones, in light of the growing international struggle to ban such weapons."

Earlier on April 25, the Berlin activists had delivered the German Drone Campaign's [Open Letter to the British Ambassador in Berlin](#) in support of the British demonstration in Waddington that was to take place two days later. The letter states the objection of the German Drone Campaign to the "unilateral decision" of the British government to establish "what will likely be the first European-based control center for drone warfare" and could "provoke a competitive rush of governments in Europe and elsewhere to acquire and use combat drones."

In mid-May 2013, Defense Minister de Maizère came under intense parliamentary criticism after he



revealed that [the German defense ministry would be forced to abandon the Euro Hawk](#), a German surveillance drone project with a design. More than half a billion Euros had already been invested in the Euro Hawk project. Following opposition calls for de Mazière's resignation, he survived a confidence vote. However, de Mazière continued to reiterate that, if the CDU were to prevail in the German federal election in September 2013, [the German government would move to procure 16 drones](#), at least five of them to be operational by 2016.

Then on May 30, 2013, the *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* and the prime time ARD television program *Panorama* together [broke the news](#) that the Stuttgart-based US Africa Command (AFRICOM) and the Air Operations Center (AOC) at the US/NATO air base Ramstein have been [directly involved in US targeted killings](#) in Africa. Quoting from an internal policy brief of the US Air Force, *Sueddeutsche* and *Panorama* reported that "the drone attacks in Africa could not be carried out" without the support of the satellite relay station in Ramstein, through which the drone pilots in the US maintain contact with combat drones deployed from US drone bases in Africa, such as Djibouti, Niger, Ethiopia and Seychelles. According to the reports, about a thousand experts, including CIA agents and "All-Source" analysts, work in Stuttgart on target identification, while up to 650 US military personnel work on ca. 1,500 computers in Ramstein, surveying on huge monitors photos made by reconnaissance drones in Europe's and Africa's airspace.

Despite the fact that AFRICOM is known to be the US supreme command for all US military operations in Africa, the German government denied knowledge of any involvement of US facilities and personnel based in Germany in the US drone strikes in Africa. AFRICOM was established in Stuttgart in 2008 with the permission of the German government after several African countries refused to host the US Africa Command. *Panorama* reported that at that time the [German Foreign Ministry wrote to the US government \(link in German\)](#) to request that Stuttgart not be publicly mentioned as the new AFRICOM home in order to avoid "unnecessary public debate" in Germany. Up until 2008, the US European Command (EUCOM), also based in Stuttgart, had supervised US military and intelligence engagement in Africa. US drone strikes in Africa are thought to have begun as early as 2007.

In [an interview with Sueddeutsche, Professor Thilo Marauhn](#), a Giessen-based specialist in international law, said: "The killing of suspected individuals with the help of armed drones outside an armed conflict situation" could constitute "being an accessory in an abuse of international law," if the German government knew about this but didn't protest. [Professor Marauhn told Panorama \(link in German\)](#) that consideration should be given as to "whether criminal proceedings should be undertaken in these cases."

The opposition demanded clarification from the German government. A parliamentarian of Greens, [Omid Nouripour, called on Chancellor Merkel to investigate](#). He said that if facilities based on German soil were being used to conduct drone attacks, the German government should prohibit the US "from continuing to conduct illegal killings from Germany. But a member of the parliament's defense committee for the opposition Left Party, [Paul Schaefer, pointed out](#) that under the present statute that governs the stationing of US troops in Germany, "the German government's opportunities to intervene are limited" and Germany lacks "the legal authority" to properly investigate. In other words, the German government may in fact not know all of what the US military is doing on German territory; to obtain adequate oversight and accountability, Germany might need to renegotiate its relationship with the US.

President Obama visited Berlin on June 19, 2013, less than three weeks after the *Sueddeutsche* and *Panorama* reports appeared. In a joint press conference with Chancellor Merkel, Obama stated: "We do not use Germany as a launching point for unmanned drones as part of our counter-terrorist activities. I know that there have been some reports here in Germany that that might be the case. It is not." [Panorama responded \(link in German\)](#) that they had not reported that US drones are physically launched from Germany but had reported that the facilities in Stuttgart and Ramstein are in fact essential to the US for carrying out drone strikes in Africa.

On June 10, a week before Obama arrived in Berlin, [the SPD issued a press statement \(link in German\)](#) announcing that the SPD will oppose German acquisition of combat drones and will work towards an international ban of fully automated weapons systems. The SPD stated that targeted killings in countries against which no war has been declared are a violation of the Charter of the United Nations and of international law. It also mentioned that the international community has previously been successful in establishing international conventions banning land mines and cluster bombs.

The leadership of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) had not previously joined the Left and Green initiatives against the combat drones, and the SPD press statement in the lead-up to the September 2013 election can be seen as another indication of the [growing popular opposition to drones in Germany](#). But whether the SPD will continue to oppose German drone acquisition after the election remains to be seen.

## **Perspective**

European anti-drone activists are heartened that the [international campaigns that brought about conventions banning land mines and cluster bombs](#) have been effective, even though the US and some other countries have so far refused to agree to these conventions.

Through international networking, activists hope to build the groundwork for international campaigns to ban combat drones and automated weapons systems and to strengthen the campaigns in their own countries, whether in the streets, the courts, or the parliaments.

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Elsa Rassbach is a German-American filmmaker, journalist, and peace activist.

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