

The use of Fairford air base for US military strikes against Iran



USAF B1 bomber at Fairford air base, Gloucester, 21 March 2026. Image: Drone Wars UK

This briefing analyses the UK government's position on allowing the US to undertake "defensive" strikes on Iran from UK-controlled air bases. It discusses command and control structures governing US strikes on Iran and the significant challenges the UK faces in ensuring that its involvement remains within the legal and policy boundaries of "defensive" operations. It concludes with a number of questions which policy makers and journalists should be asking the government about US bombing missions from UK bases.



The use of Fairford air base in Gloucestershire by United States military forces to conduct strikes against targets in Iran has highlighted important issues surrounding the UK's role in the current conflict in the Middle East.

Following an initial refusal in February 2026, the UK government has authorised the use of certain military bases for what it terms "specific and limited defensive action" against Iran. This decision has raised major questions about the nature of this military support, its legal basis under international law, and the extent to which the UK can verify and control operations launched by the US from its sovereign territory.

The UK has shown a reluctance to recognise Iran as the target of illegal acts of aggression under international law or to criticise attacks by the US and Israel. At the same time, anti-Iran rhetoric from Ministers has led some to question whether the government is refraining from "wider involvement in the broader ongoing conflict", as it claims, or is instead quietly providing material support for US offensive operations.

Fairford air base supports the deployment of US bomber task forces in Europe. Its proximity to the Middle East, compared to US bases in North America, allows for quicker flight times to targets, facilitating logistics and increasing the intensity of the bombing campaign. Eighteen US Air Force B1-B and B52 bombers arrived at Fairford over the period 6 – 13 March 2026 and commenced bombing operations on 10 March.¹ Diego Garcia air base in the Indian Ocean, under the control of the UK government, has also been mentioned as a potential base for US bomber strikes on Iran. At the time of writing it is not known whether US aircraft are using Diego Garcia.

This briefing analyses the UK government's position, the command and control structures governing US strikes on Iran, and the significant challenges the UK faces in ensuring its involvement remains within the legal and policy boundaries of "defensive" operations that it has established.

The UK government's stated position and its legal basis

The UK government's position on the use of its bases for attacks on Iran has evolved under significant pressure. In late February 2026, Prime Minister Keir Starmer reportedly denied a US request to use bases such as Fairford and Diego Garcia for pre-emptive strikes, citing concerns over international law.² However, following the onset of US and Israeli strikes on Iran on 28 February and subsequent Iranian retaliatory attacks on regional allies, the government altered its stance.

1 3x American B-1Bs launch out of RAF Fairford on first mission since arrival - 10/3/26 4K

Aviation In 4K Youtube channel, 10 March 2026.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TU6BtfULbZE>

2 Oliver Wright, George Grylls, and Geraldine Scott: 'UK blocking Trump from using RAF bases for strikes on Iran'. Times, 19 February 2026.

<https://www.thetimes.com/uk/politics/article/trump-chagos-islands-deal-iran-attack-british-bases-kcj0gzbr8>

On 1 March, the government published a summary of its legal position, justifying its support under the international legal principle of 'collective self-defence', as articulated in Article 51 of the United Nations Charter.³ Collective self-defence is a legal concept that allows states to use military force to assist another state that has been attacked by a foreign power, provided the attacked state requests aid and has suffered an armed attack. The UK argued that it is acting to defend itself and regional allies from an "ongoing armed attack" by Iran by helping to "intercept drones or missiles targeting countries not previously involved in the conflict" and by responding to a US request "which will facilitate specific and limited defensive action against missile facilities in Iran which were involved in launching strikes at regional allies".⁴

On 20 March Ministers decided to extend the agreement for the US to use UK bases to include "operations to degrade the missile sites and capabilities being used to attack ships in the Strait of Hormuz".⁵ The change marks a broadening of the government's position, apparently intended to support US efforts to frustrate Iran's ability to prevent the movement of shipping through the Straits of Hormuz. To date no legal case has been published to set out the basis for this change, which is open to challenge over how far operations can be characterised as "defensive" when they are aimed in part at protecting commercial shipping and third-country assets. The distinction that the government is trying to draw between limited defensive support and direct participation in the war is blurring. Iran has already rejected that distinction, saying it considers allowing US forces to use British bases to launch attacks as "participating in aggression".⁶ The broader the target set becomes, the harder it will be for the government to sustain its case.

The government has avoided commenting on the legality of the US-Israeli strikes on Iran, merely stating "it is for the US to set out the legal basis for the action it took",⁷ while condemning Iran's "reckless and ongoing indiscriminate attacks against countries in the region".⁸

3 'Summary of the UK Government legal position: The legality of defensive action in respect of Iranian regional attacks'. Prime Minister's Office, 10 Downing Street. 1 March 2026. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/summary-of-the-uk-government-legal-position-the-legality-of-defensive-action-in-respect-of-iranian-regional-attacks>

4 'Summary of the UK Government legal position: The legality of defensive action in respect of Iranian regional attacks'.

5 'Statement on the conflict in the Middle East: 20 March 2026'. Prime Minister's Office, 10 Downing Street. 20 March 2026. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/statement-on-the-conflict-in-the-middle-east-20-march-2026>

6 Athena Stavrou, Kate Devlin & Dan Haygarth: 'Starmer allows Trump to use British bases for strikes to help reopen Strait of Hormuz'. Independent, 21 March 2026. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/iran-us-war-uk-bases-aggression-b2942419.html>

7 Alasdair Ferguson: 'John Healey refuses to say if US-Israeli strikes on Iran were legal'. The National, 1 March 2026. <https://www.thenational.scot/news/25897019.john-healey-refuses-say-us-israeli-strikes-iran-legal/>

8 'Summary of the UK Government legal position: The legality of defensive action in respect of Iranian regional attacks'.

To understand the limitations of the UK's position, it is necessary to examine how US operations against Iran are commanded. The campaign against Iran is overseen by US Central Command (CENTCOM), which co-ordinates all US army, navy, and air force operations into a unified plan of attack on Iran.⁹ It is likely that attacks are being co-ordinated by an operations centre at the CENTCOM headquarters at MacDill Air Force Base in Florida.¹⁰

Over recent years the planning and direction of air strikes in Syria, Iraq, and elsewhere in the Middle East have been directed from CENTCOM's Combined Air Operations Center (CAOC) at Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar. Al Udeid co-ordinates and de-conflicts missions by US coalition partners in the Middle East. It is possible that CAOC is playing a role in co-ordinating strikes on Iran by US and Israeli forces and also in controlling defensive flights by US allies aimed at destroying Iranian missiles and drones. Al Udeid has been the target of attacks by Iranian forces since war commenced on 28 February.¹¹

Missions are assigned to aircraft flying from Fairford by a US operations centre on the basis of US intelligence and mission objectives. Fairford air base itself plays a minimal role in operations planning, and it is even possible that aircraft taking off from Fairford are not assigned a target until after they have left the ground. During the 2003 Iraq war bombers flying from Fairford were assigned to a 'pool' of coalition aircraft stationed over Iraq and called into attack by controllers through a dynamic targeting process when required.

This operational structure presents a fundamental challenge to UK oversight. UK military personnel may conceivably be embedded within CAOC or other operations centres, and could hold a 'red card' to prevent the use of British aircraft in an attack which does not comply with UK rules of engagement.¹² However, it is unlikely that they would be in a position to veto the use of a specific US aircraft for a US commanded mission. The operational reality is that bombers from Fairford take off as part of a US-only chain of command, executing tasking orders generated thousands of miles away.

The Ministry of Defence has declined to answer media questions about whether they are allowed to approve the target list for Fairford bombers in

9 Natalia Kaminski and Noah Chase: 'Tampa's MacDill Air Force Base at the heart of U.S. military operations in Iran'. WWSB local media, 4 March 2026. <https://www.mysuncoast.com/2026/03/04/macdill-air-force-bases-centcom-playing-central-role-us-war-efforts-iran/>

10 'Secretary of War to Visit CENTCOM Headquarters'. US Central Command, 4 March 2026. <https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/PRESS-RELEASES/Press-Release-View/Article/4421301/secretary-of-war-to-visit-centcom-headquarters/>

11 Mostafa Salem: 'Exclusive: Iranian bombers were 'two minutes' from striking US air base before Qatari planes shot them down'. CNN News, 5 March 2026. <https://edition.cnn.com/2026/03/04/middleeast/qatar-downs-iran-bombers-us-base-intl>

12 Katja Lindskov Jacobsen and Rune Saugmann: 'Optimizing Coalition Air Warfare: The Emergence and Ethical Dilemmas of Red Card Holder Teams'. Global Policy, Vol 10(3), 14 June 2019. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1758-5899.12670>

advance of missions or check it afterwards to make sure that only defensive targets have been bombed, and has also declined to say whether it is monitoring how many civilian deaths have been caused by US bombing missions from Fairford.¹³

Lack of transparency over US bomber strikes

A number of other factors cast doubt on the UK government's assurance that US strikes from Fairford are to be confined to "defensive" actions against missile facilities.

Ambiguity of "defensive" action: The classification of strikes on facilities "involved in launching strikes" is open to broad interpretation. Is an empty missile depot, a command and control node, or a research facility "involved" in the same way as an active launch crew? Is the UK government permitting attacks on facilities located in civilian areas, where there may be a high risk of civilian deaths? Without a clear, public definition of the targeting criteria, the distinction between a "defensive" strike and a strategic campaign to degrade Iran's military infrastructure - a classic offensive objective - becomes blurred .

Lack of independent verification: The UK is reliant on US assurances regarding the nature and target of each bomber mission from Fairford. It is unlikely that the UK has independent intelligence capabilities which are able and available to cross-check US assertions about what is being targeted or to match individual bomber missions to attacks on specific targets. The government has not outlined a mechanism for independent, real-time monitoring of targeting decisions, and neither is such information available from open sources. The US Air Force is systematically concealing information about bomber flights from Fairford by flying almost all missions as 'dark' flights which do not show up on publicly available flight trackers¹⁴ and erecting secrecy screens at the base to prevent observers from monitoring types of ordnance loaded onto aircraft.¹⁵

Modern targeting methodologies: The US and Israel are known to employ advanced artificial intelligence (AI)-based systems for rapidly identifying targets.¹⁶ The rapid speed at which these systems can generate targets compounds shortfalls in rules of engagement, quality of intelligence information, and human oversight of targeting decisions, resulting in a high risk of civilian deaths. By their nature such systems do not operate in transparent and reproducible ways, and it is not possible to validate the

13 Declassified UK. Instagram, 17 March 2026.

<https://www.instagram.com/p/DWGpHOiRi5/>

14 'For the First Time, a B-1B Lancer from RAF Fairford Is Tracked During a Strike Mission Toward Iran'. Itamilradar, 13 March 2026.

<https://www.itamilradar.com/2026/03/13/for-the-first-time-a-b-1b-lancer-from-raf-fairford-is-tracked-during-a-strike-mission-toward-iran/>

15 Joe Skirkowski: 'Roads closed and screens put up around RAF base'. BBC News Gloucestershire, 16 March 2026.

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cp854ez929yo>

16 Jon R. Lindsay: 'US military leans into AI for attack on Iran, but the tech doesn't lessen the need for human judgment in war'. The Conversation, 11 March 2026.

<https://theconversation.com/us-military-leans-into-ai-for-attack-on-iran-but-the-tech-doesnt-lesser-the-need-for-human-judgment-in-war-277831>

accuracy and currency of their decision-making. Without rigorous oversight the US – let alone the UK - cannot be certain that a strike on a target identified by an AI system as a missile facility involved in launching strikes will not contravene the laws of war. The risk is exacerbated by the apparently casual approach that the US is taking to selecting targets in Iran, with Secretary of War Pete Hegseth stating that the war will be fought with “no stupid rules of engagement”.¹⁷

Legal culpability and UK complicity in an illegal war

There is a broad consensus of legal opinion that the US and Israel's attack on Iran is illegal under international law.¹⁸ Even if the UK's support is limited to "defensive" strikes, it may still incur legal responsibility for supporting the broader US / Israeli campaign. International law on state responsibility holds that a state can be held complicit in the unlawful acts of another if it provides aid or assistance with knowledge of the circumstances of that act.¹⁹ This raises a critical question: by providing a launch platform for strikes that are part of a wider campaign, is the UK shielded from responsibility for the parts of the campaign that it deems "offensive"? By allowing bombers to fly from bases in the UK and assisting in “defensive” operations to intercept drones the UK is effectively freeing up other bases and equipment to take part in offensive operations, and is breaching principles of neutrality

Assisting with “defensive” action in support of regional allies has already made the UK a party to the conflict between Iran and these states. If Gulf states decide to respond by striking back against Iran the UK may become more deeply drawn into the war.

Questions requiring investigation and clarification

To establish whether US bombers operating from Fairford are genuinely involved in specific defensive actions and to allow proper public scrutiny of UK government decisions, policy makers, media representatives, and civil society should ask the government the following questions:

- What specific verification mechanisms are in place? Can the UK confirm it has an independent, real-time ability - through personnel or technical means - to verify the exact targets of every mission flying from Fairford airbase? If not, how can the government assure Parliament that all strikes remain within the "specific and limited" defensive mandate?

17 'Secretary of War Pete Hegseth and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Dan Caine Hold a Press Briefing'. US Department of War, 2 March 2026. <https://www.war.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/4418959/secretary-of-war-pete-hegseth-and-chairman-of-the-joint-chiefs-of-staff-gen-dan/>

18 Tom Hals: 'Explainer: Are the US attacks on Iran legal?' Reuters, 4 March 2026. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/are-us-attacks-iran-legal-2026-03-04/>

19 Gregory P. Noone and Sindija Beta: 'What responsibility do States that supply (i) weapons or (ii) other assistance to Russia have under international law?'. Public International Law and Policy Group, 8 October 2024. <https://www.publicinternationallawandpolicygroup.org/lawyer-justice-blog/2024/10/8/what-responsibility-do-states-that-supply-i-weapons-or-ii-other-assistance-to-russia-have-under-international-law>

- What is the definition of a "missile facility involved in launching strikes"? Will the government publish the precise targeting criteria agreed with the US to clarify what infrastructure is considered a legitimate defensive target under this agreement?
- Has the UK negotiated a 'red card' or veto power over US missions? Does the agreement with the US allow UK officials to deny permission for a specific sortie if its intended target is deemed to fall outside the agreed "defensive" parameters?
- How does the UK safeguard against excessive and unlawful civilian deaths? Given concerns over the use of AI systems and Hegseth's dismissal of rules of engagement, what steps is the UK taking to ensure that US targeting for flights from Fairford is accurately assessed and legally scrutinised to minimise the risk of unlawful civilian deaths?
- What is the status of operations from Diego Garcia? Is Diego Garcia involved in strikes on Iran? If so, what are the specific terms of use for Diego Garcia, and are strikes launched from there subject to the same "defensive" limitations?
- What are the UK's rules of engagement for its support of US operations? Has the Ministry of Defence issued specific rules of engagement for US forces operating from UK bases in this conflict, and if so, what are their key provisions? What are the terms of engagement for UK aircraft directly involved in shooting down drones and missiles launched by Iran?
- What is the legal advice on UK support to US operations? Will the government publish the full legal advice it received on the distinction between supporting "defensive" strikes and becoming complicit in a broader conflict that may be considered an illegal use of force?
- Which nations have requested help from the UK in defending themselves against action by Iran, and what specific assistance was requested by them? Will the government publish the notifications it has given the United Nations Security Council on actions taken under Article 51 of the United Nations Charter?
- Are any UK personnel embedded with US military forces as commanders in operations centres or combat units involved in attacks on Iran? What instructions have they been given on involvement in the conflict?

Published by Drone Wars UK. Drone Wars UK is a small British NGO established in 2010 to undertake research and advocacy around the use of armed drones and emerging military technologies. Since 2024 we have been investigating and challenging the operation of USAF drones from 'RAF' Fairford.

Drone Wars UK is a member of the Fairford Action coalition which opposes the illegal military action against Iran.

