A Brief Introduction to the Menwith Hill U.S. Spy Base

'RAF' Menwith Hill is situated 8 miles outside Harrogate in North Yorkshire on the A59 to Skipton. From the outside it looks like an ordinary RAF station, but there are no runways present and no aircraft are stationed there. Although nominally called 'RAF', there is only 1 RAF officer there and the base run by the US National Security Agency (NSA) and the US National Reconnaissance Office (NRO). Both organisations are members of the United States Intelligence Community. The NRO designs, builds, launches, and operates US reconnaissance (spy) satellites, while the NSA is responsible for the global monitoring, collection, and processing of information and data for intelligence and counterintelligence purposes.

A 2021 Parliamentary Written Question to the MOD put the total number of personnel at the base at 1,070, including many people from the UK Government Communications Head Quarters (GCHQ) who work closely with the NSA.

Menwith Hill is a major part of the US worldwide network of signals intelligence (SIGINT) monitoring stations that gathers information from the interception of all kinds of electronic communications. 37 satellite dishes covered by giant, white, golf-ball like radomes at Menwith Hill, receive data from US spy satellites which are positioned over areas of interest or intercept foreign satellite communications. In addition, there is access to the national and international fibre optic communications network that carries email, telephone and internet traffic.

A major role of the base is to gather intelligence data from Europe, Africa and the Middle East, after a preliminary analysis anything of interest is passed on to NSA HQ at Fort Meade, Maryland. In 2013 Edward Snowden revealed that the eavesdropping technologies at Menwith Hill can collect data from hundreds of millions of emails and phone calls a day and help pinpoint communication devices on the ground. It has been used to help US and UK military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq together with drone strikes and covert missions by special forces in the Middle East and North Africa. More recently it has almost certainly been involved in the US/Israeli war in Gaza and the US war on Iran.

Menwith Hill is also the 'European Ground Based Relay Station' for the US Space Based Infra-Red System (SBIRS) – a missile detection, tracking and targeting component of US National Missile Defense – soon to be part of Donald Trump's 'Golden Dome' project. In March the Times reported that the US missile defence radar at Fylingdales was used to track Iranian missiles and could provide warning and interception data. Fylingdales cannot detect missile launches but SBIRS can and Menwith Hill will have relayed information on missile launches and provided initial targeting data to tracking radars.

Last February, Declassified UK published an article revealing that there are at least 24 US military bases in the UK and government figures published in March show that there are around 11,000 US permanently based military personnel in the UK. This is a military occupation and every year on July 4th CND supporters join the Menwith Hill

Accountability Campaign (MHAC) in the reading of a ‘Declaration of Independence from America’ at the main gate of Menwith Hill.

The US has about 850 military bases around the world in more than 90 countries, all used to project US military power in one form or another. Some (like Lakenheath) house US nuclear weapons, some provide strategic airfields (like Fairford) others are communication hubs (like Croughton) or offer refuelling support (like Mildenhall) or long-range radar facilities (like Fylingdales) but a small number are used for collecting and handling intelligence (such as Menwith Hill) and these are just as important for US military ambitions as airfields.

In June the Guardian reported that the US plans to spend $4bn on its bases in the UK, $63m of it will go to Menwith Hill. The article did not elaborate on what the money would be funding but emphasised that Menwith Hill “can capture communications as far away as the Middle East”.

Menwith Hill is therefore one of the most strategically significant of US overseas bases and is an example of British complicity in US wars, making it, and us, a target. It’s highly secretive nature also raises questions of accountability and British sovereignty. It is so important that we recognise and highlight its role as a tool of US imperialism.



