

## UK Hires US Firm to Continue Gaza Surveillance Missions

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The Ministry of Defence has enlisted a US-based firm to carry out surveillance flights over Gaza in an effort to help locate hostages held by Hamas, as the Royal Air Force struggles with a shortage of available aircraft.

According to *The Times*, citing defence sources, the arrangement with Sierra Nevada Corporation has been in place since late July. The contractor's aircraft was first identified over Gaza after a tracking error revealed it circling above Khan Yunis, marking a rare public confirmation that such missions were taking place inside the territory rather than in adjacent airspace.

British surveillance operations over Gaza began in December 2023 using RAF Shadow R1 planes stationed at RAF Akrotiri in Cyprus. These aircraft were flying near-daily reconnaissance missions aimed at gathering intelligence to aid hostage recovery efforts. However, with parts of the fleet tied up on other deployments or undergoing maintenance, the government turned to outsourcing to keep the missions running.

The privately operated US aircraft are carrying out the same tasks previously handled by RAF crews. While officials insist the intelligence gathered is strictly limited to hostage-related work, critics have called for greater transparency. Former Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn and Liberal Democrat defence spokesperson Helen Maguire have pressed ministers to clarify whether any of the information is being used for wider military purposes, a move that could raise questions under international law.

Analysts note that more than 600 surveillance flights have been conducted over Gaza since December 2023. The switch to contractor-run missions comes at a time of heightened scrutiny, particularly after the accidental broadcast of the aircraft's position over Khan Yunis drew public attention to the operation.

From a centre-right perspective, the decision to employ a US contractor reflects a pragmatic approach to ensuring critical intelligence-gathering

continues despite domestic capability constraints. Nevertheless, it also highlights the importance of sustaining the UK's own operational readiness and maintaining oversight of sensitive defence activities.