

ARE THE BRITS TRYING TO PROTECT BRITISH TELECOM?

In addition to her [latest stories](#) describing the generalized spying the NSA and GCHQ engage in, Laura Poitras today also [tells her side](#) of the David Miranda story. In it, she reveals the hard drives destroyed at the Guardian included details on Tempora.

Included on those drives were documents detailing GCHQ's massive domestic spying program called "Tempora."

This program deploys NSA's XKeyscore "DeepDive" internet buffer technology which slows down the internet to allow GCHQ to spy on global communications, including those of UK citizens. Tempora relies on the "corporate partnership" of UK telecoms, including British Telecommunications and Vodafone. Revealing the secret partnerships between spy agencies and telecoms entrusted with the private communications of citizens is journalism, not terrorism.

It seems she's trying to suggest that the Brits are trying to protect this program, specifically. Which would protect not just a spying technique (collecting data off the switches), but also the involvement of BT and Vodafone.

Remember, that weird [Independent story](#) from last week ([which Snowden made clear did not come from him](#)) also included details about BT and Vodafone's roles in this spying.

The Government also demanded that the paper not publish details of how UK telecoms firms, including BT and Vodafone, were secretly collaborating

with GCHQ to intercept the vast majority of all internet traffic entering the country. The paper had details of the highly controversial and secret programme for over a month. But it only published information on the scheme – which involved paying the companies to tap into fibre-optic cables entering Britain – after the allegations appeared in the German newspaper Süddeutsche Zeitung.

It makes sense. Even in the US, even in the materials released so far, both the Guardian and Washington Post have protected the role that AT&T and Verizon play in this process.

The Independent story also mentioned a secret British spying base in the Middle East that played a role in Tempora.

One of the areas of concern in Whitehall is that details of the Middle East spying base which could identify its location could enter the public domain.

The data-gathering operation is part of a £1bn internet project still being assembled by GCHQ. It is part of the surveillance and monitoring system, code-named “Tempora”, whose wider aim is the global interception of digital communications, such as emails and text messages.

[snip]

The Middle East station was set up under a warrant signed by the then Foreign Secretary David Miliband, authorising GCHQ to monitor and store for analysis data passing through the network of fibre-optic cables that link up the internet around the world.

That part of the story made me remember [Reprive's claims from earlier this year](#) that

British Telecom played a role in drone targeting in Djibouti.

BT's slogan used to be 'it's good to talk', but when it comes to contracts with the US military 'it's best to keep your mouth shut' might be more appropriate.

Earlier this year Reprieve obtained [evidence](#) that BT had been awarded a contract worth over \$23 million by the US Defense Information Systems Agency to provide communications infrastructure connecting US-run RAF Croughton in Northamptonshire with the secretive Camp Lemonnier in Djibouti.

BT were [unwilling to comment](#) on the nature of the contract, no doubt due to the likelihood that the equipment and support they are supplying is facilitating illegal drone strikes in Yemen and Somalia.

[snip]

When [contacted by Reprieve](#) about their involvement in Camp Lemonnier BT stated that it "doesn't disclose contractual matters" such as those we requested.

BT claims to be "a responsible business that complies with all its legal and statutory obligations", and that human rights are "[rooted in its values](#)". It is hard to see how facilitating and profiting from an illegal and immoral drone war fits in with that. The company needs to urgently clarify what it is doing under this contract, and what (if any) steps it takes before entering into deals with US defence agencies to make sure it is not complicit in gross violations of international law.

That accusation has [brought official scrutiny](#) on BT for its potential role in the US

assassination program.

Allegations that BT is involved in an assassination programme in the Middle Eastern country of Yemen may come as a surprise to anyone more familiar with the image it likes to portray in television adverts: a supplier of home broadband to fashionable young professionals.

But while BT customers flounce [carefree](#) round their Duran Duran downloads, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) has opened an investigation into allegations that it also does the communications behind US drone attacks that [have](#)slaughtered civilians.

BIS [officials](#) are expected to deal with this by making a pronouncement on BT's moral standing in September, following a [complaint](#) by legal charity Reprieve, which said the comms contractor's work for the US military breached guidelines on corporate social responsibility set down by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

It's even possible the intercept point in the Middle East is in Djibouti (though see this [intriguing suggestion from Cannonfire](#), which argues the Middle East collection point is in Israel).

The very last line of the Independent piece emphasizes something Poitras did with her reporting on the UN spying: this is about more than terrorism, but the government wants to pretend it's not.

Intelligence sources have denied the aim is a blanket gathering of all communications, insisting the operation is targeted at security, terror and organised crime.

Let's presume it is also about, say, spying on partners like the Saudis. The same kind of spying Poitras describes at the UN, but in the backyard of the princes that know of British Telecom's presence locally.

Not only do the US and UK need to protect their telecom partners to keep them cooperating willingly, but they need to hide their role because they make easy targets for retaliation overseas.