

The Dangers of the UK's Blanket No Comment Policy for Special Forces

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Following claims that a Special Air Service (SAS) unit “is suspected of executing unarmed civilians in Afghanistan and fabricating reports to cover up potential war crimes,” there have been a number of calls for an investigation into the actions of British troops.

The Ministry of Defence (MOD) has not commented on the specific incidents involving British Special Forces. It has simply described the findings of the broader investigation by the Royal Military Police – named Operation Northmoor. As the media ran away with stories of ‘rogue’ SAS units, this lack of engagement sadly aligns with “the MOD’s long-held policy ... not to comment on Special Forces”.

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This attitude is hopelessly outdated, particularly as smartphones and the Internet make it increasingly difficult to keep secret missions completely secret. For example, in June 2016, several [reports](#) began to emerge about UK Special Forces operating on the Syrian frontline from al-Tanf; this included [photos](#), [comments from local forces](#), and even public confirmation from the U.S. – who publicly [criticized Russia for bombing an outpost](#) used by U.S. and UK Special Forces. Even in the face of this evidence, [the UK remained silent](#).

Nor is this an isolated case, as research from the [Remote Control Project](#) [shows](#), information continues to surface about UK operations abroad that reveal how extensive its use of Special Forces is – even though the Government continues not to comment.

This deniability may bring flexibility, which creates opportunities when it comes to dealing with fluid and complex security threats. But Remote Control Project research suggests that this is not a simple relationship whereby more secrecy automatically brings greater strategic advantages. Indeed, in an age when leaks of information are seemingly inevitable, [demand](#) for political accountability is high, and [leave](#) in politicians and the wider expert community is low, today's uneasy coexistence of official opacity and sporadic leaks of information to the media may be creating a host of unintended consequences.

The prevailing tendency towards secrecy is creating an accountability gap that challenges the UK's democratic controls over the use of force. Even as Governments have been increasingly under pressure to seek approval from Parliament for the deployment of troops, Special Forces have been considered an “[obvious exception](#).” This remains the case even as Special Forces come to represent a larger part of [UK military operations](#) abroad, and means that they

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are the only piece of the UK's defence, security, and intelligence apparatus to continue to fall outside of any parliamentary oversight.

In addition to being democratically precarious, it does not always appear to make strategic sense. In today's information age, opacity both restricts the government's ability to set its own narrative for British military action overseas, while potentially fuelling popular feelings of distrust in government war-making when information about the UK's secretive involvement in these conflicts invariably surfaces.

The UK is not alone in suffering from scandal, the U.S. faced a barrage of criticism following accusations of a failed raid in Yemen earlier this year and, more recently, in Australia the release of hundreds of pages of information on Special Forces activity in Afghanistan and a "tell all" by an Australian Special Forces soldier, has painted an image of Australian Special Forces culture as "insidious".

Yet, the UK is alone among key allies in refusing to comment on Special Forces activity – Canada, the U.S., and Australia have been willing to release unclassified information about the deployment of theirs – such as their number and their purpose. This has allowed them to push back more forcefully when faced with accusations of wrongdoing and stand up for their forces.

After the raid in Yemen in January, the U.S. Government steadfastly defended the mission in public and showed several lawmakers classified information in private. Recently in Australia, an Australian Federal Police spokesperson confirmed the matter had been referred to the Australian Defence Force for investigation; while a Defence spokesperson defended the country's Special Forces, arguing that the rules and norms are "designed to

ensure the actions of Australian forces are ethical and consistent with Defence's obligations under Australian and international law.”

One major scandal could result in huge restrictions being placed on the UK's wider engagement abroad, as could a steady drip of media information. With secretive yet growing military commitments to counter threats from groups like ISIS in Iraq, Syria, and Libya, or al Shabaab in Somalia, or al-Qaeda in Yemen, now is the time for the government to step up and level with the public about what it is doing. Not only because that is the right thing to do, but because it is necessary.

In an age where smartphones and the Internet mean no mission can ever stay completely secret, this will not be the last Special Forces scandal. The UK Government must engage more in these debates, as other nations have begun to, to protect the legitimacy of our operations and to ensure our armed forces have the freedom to carry out their duties.

About the Author

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