



The spotlight is on UK Special Forces, whether the Government likes it or not

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Allegations that UK special forces were assisting Saudi-backed militias in Yemen led to a short-lived public and parliamentary backlash. However, the Government should not be too quick to forget this backlash or the lessons it offers.

In March, the Daily Mail reported that at least five British Special Boat Service (SBS) soldiers had been wounded in a gun battle in Yemen. The story alleged that there were “up to 30 British troops based in Sa’dah” and that they had been fighting alongside Saudi-funded militia, many of which purportedly relied on child soldiers. These stories directly contravened statements by the UK government made as recently as January, “that we are not a party to the conflict. We are not a party to the military conflict as part of the coalition”.

It remains unclear how much of these allegations were true, and now they appear to have been mostly forgotten by the UK media. However, it is worth dwelling on their lessons a little longer and, particularly, the serious questions they raise around the UK’s policy of blanket opacity over its use of special forces.

No comment policy

In the UK, all questions about special forces are met with a boilerplate response in the style of “it is the [Ministry of Defence’s] long-held policy is not to comment on our Special Forces”. With this policy in hand, the Government

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has routinely deflected questions on all aspects of special forces, including information about where they are being used, how they fit into wider UK foreign policy, and what roles they are playing on the ground.

It makes strategic sense, of course, that certain information about special forces is not released to the public, as they are – by definition – units that operate covertly. However, in an era dominated by smart phones and burgeoning access to the internet, a policy which completely prevents the Government from participating in debates over an increasingly large part of the UK's military activity abroad – debates that will happen with or without them – has proven to be out-dated, unsustainable and, most importantly, counter-productive.

The dogged adherence to this policy seems particularly illogical since the Government itself has made it clear that it greatly values control over narratives in contemporary conflicts. The UK's 2010 Strategic Defence and Security Review states that “the growth of communications technology will increase our enemies' ability to influence, not only all those on the battlefield, but also our own society directly. We must therefore win the battle for information, as well as the battle on the ground”. By refusing to engage in a constructive dialogue on UK military actions – even after a significant amount of information is available in the public domain – the Government is directly constraining its own ability to pursue this objective.

Even before this recent incident, the UK government has been reluctant to discuss its support of the Saudi-led campaign in Yemen with the media and the British public. This is despite the fact that the campaign has been steeped in controversy around the breaching of international law. Even parliamentary committees have argued that they do not have access to sufficient information

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on the topic, with the First Joint Report of the Business, Innovation and Skills and International Development Committees of Session 2016-17 concluding that “this is an area in which there is much confusion and greater clarity is needed”.

While the lack of engagement may have allowed the UK government to avoid difficult questions and debates around its role in a conflict that has caused the “worst humanitarian crisis in the world”, it has also undermined the UK’s ability to justify its relationship with Saudi Arabia, potentially stoking greater mistrust and concern.

Shaping the debate

Nowhere is this clearer than with the allegations by the Daily Mail.

Unsurprisingly, these have led to outrage on the opposition benches. Shadow Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary Emily Thornberry said of the recent report that, if true, “it would confirm that our forces are not just a party to this conflict but witnesses to war crimes”. Even senior Conservative MPs like former International Development Secretary, Andrew Mitchell, a respected voice on the Yemen conflict, has expressed frustrations at these “exceedingly serious, credible, and authoritative allegations”. He added that “were it not for the all-consuming nature of Brexit, I suspect the House would want to explore this as a matter of urgency”.

As the Government seeks to downplay these revelations and reassert its ‘no comment’ policy, it is worth revisiting the dangers of doing so. This recent incident, like many in the last few years, has clearly shown that such an approach is no longer tenable or even desirable. If nothing else, recent interventions have shown the importance of a frank and honest debate with

British public and Parliament to allow the UK to argue the case for its operations, instead of narrative to be hijacked, misinterpreted, or misunderstood by others.

Image credit: [Defence Images/Flickr](#).

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