

# The UK's not so secret war in Syria

**Abigail Watson**

21 November 2016

**This article was first published on [OpenDemocracy](#) on November 21, 2016.**

The SAS is clearly playing a large, sustained role against ISIS in Syria, so why does the UK government still refuse to comment?

More details of Special Air Service (SAS) operations in Syria were revealed last week by a “senior defence source”. It has been disclosed that the SAS have been given a list of 200 British senior members of the so called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) to “kill or capture” before they return to the UK. The source was quoted saying: “a kill list has been drawn up containing the names of hundreds of very bad people. A lot of them are from the UK. The hunt is now on for British Islamists who have effectively gone off-grid.”

## Latest

[An Update on the Security Policy Change Programme](#)

[Chances for Peace in the Third Decade](#)

[A Story of ORG: Oliver Ramsbotham](#)

[A Story of ORG: Gabrielle Rifkind](#)

The threat presented by these individuals is large. Included on the list are 12 bomb makers “who studied electronics at British universities” and Sally Jones, who was named as one of the [most wanted terrorists by the UN](#). She plays a central role in recruiting for ISIS, using social media to spread the group’s propaganda and to threaten the US and UK. Worse, [it seems](#) that many of these militants have been ordered to “return home and carry out attacks” on British soil. [One source said](#) that the terrorists will be “hardened, highly radicalised fighters” and pose the greatest “urban terrorist threat” the country has ever faced.

[Apparently](#), the SAS’s operation “has already begun” and is part of a broader, “multinational special forces operation” where the UK’s “own part of the plan ... will be going after British nationals”. SAS operatives have, [according to the source](#), been told they can “use whatever means possible” to kill or capture targets. If these individuals are captured they will be handed over to Iraqi authorities to be tried, if found guilty they could be executed.

The UK Government has already got into legal hot water over the targeting of UK citizens linked to terrorist groups. One of the most controversial cases has been Reyaad Khan who was killed by a UK Reaper drone in Syria in August 2015, [provoking large domestic backlash](#) and [accusations](#) of “extrajudicial killings”. The Joint Committee on Human Rights [examined Government statements](#) following the strike, but found a worrying lack of clarity on the UK’s position on targeted killing. The Intelligence and Security Committee has since been tasked with examining the intelligence base for the strike – however, [it has been reported](#) that they have not been given enough information to do a proper investigation.

## Related

[PS21 Event Podcast: What Does “Security” Mean in 2020?](#)

[WarPod Ep #21 | Dissecting the Overseas Operations Bill](#)

[WarPod Ep #20 | Incorporating the Protection of Civilians into UK Policy](#)

[Questions for the Integrated Review #3: How Should the UK Measure Success?](#)

## Most read

[The Role of Youth in Peacebuilding: Challenges and Opportunities](#)

The UK Government has already got into legal hot water over the targeting of UK citizens linked to terrorist groups.

The scale of SAS operations in Syria and elsewhere is growing. The senior defense source who leaked the story stated that: “The race is now on to kill or capture those [British ISIS operators] who are left.” The 200-strong list represents a large minority of the approximate 700 British citizens still believed to be fighting for ISIS. The number of Special Forces operating in Syria will be increased to meet this challenge. It was revealed last year that 40 were supporting US forces – the source claims this number will now be doubled.

Despite this, the SAS's increasing role in Syria has aroused little parliamentary or public interest and few have asked why the UK is playing a long-term combat role on the ground in Syria with relative impunity. The fact that this role is being played by Special Forces goes some way to explain this. Unlike the intelligence services, Special Forces are not subject to parliamentary scrutiny. In addition, the Ministry of Defence's response to any revelations regarding British deployment of Special Forces – that “[w]e do not comment on issues of special forces involvement” – continues to be largely accepted by the public and the media.

However, this response is now out of step with the changing nature of Special Forces operations. UK Special Forces no longer deal solely in “quick in, quick out” missions – typified by the operation to save hostages trapped inside the Iranian embassy in London in 1980 – which require a high level of secrecy to ensure operations can be completed. As this most recent disclosure about UK operations in Syria show, Special Forces now operate in an increasingly sustained capacity in conflicts, shouldering responsibility for a larger chunk of

## Making Bad Economies: The Poverty of Mexican Drug Cartels

---

## ORG's Vision

---

## Remote Warfare: Lessons Learned from Contemporary Theatres

UK defence and security policy, and so the same level of secrecy is no longer appropriate.

The need for greater transparency over the actions of Special Forces has been understood by many of Britain's closest allies. For example, [Canada, the US and Australia have been willing to release unclassified information](#) about the deployment of theirs – such as their number and their purpose. In October 2015 President Obama announced that he had authorized the deployment of “fewer than 50” Special Forces to Syria “to strengthen anti-ISIS forces.”

Despite the enhanced role of UK Special Forces under the war on terror, the UK Government continues to avoid any debate over their deployment, [risking the effectiveness, legitimacy and accountability of its operations abroad](#). With the rise of [Parliamentary scrutiny over conventional military deployments](#), there may be a growing temptation for the government to deploy Special Forces because it is the easiest option politically – even if it is not the most appropriate militarily – and the lack of sufficient debate over these deployments heightens this risk.

Parliament must have a say over sustained military engagement abroad.

Moreover, in the era of the smart phone and social media, the government cannot control public access to information in the same way that its policies seem to suggest. There will be (and should be) lively debate about the legality, legitimacy, and effectiveness of UK actions abroad, whether the government chooses to participate or not.

Finally, while many aspects of these operations must still remain secret, our democratic system means parliament must have a say over sustained military

engagement abroad – as UK counterparts are increasingly doing.

This latest revelation is further proof that UK Special Forces are operating on a long-term basis in Syria. The UK Government's refusal to drop its blanket “no comment” policy raises important questions about the state of UK democracy – as well as the effectiveness and legitimacy of UK operations abroad.

**Abigail Watson is Research Officer at the Remote Control project.**

### Share this page



## Contact

Unit 503  
101 Clerkenwell Road London  
EC1R 5BX  
Charity no. 299436  
Company no. 2260840

Email us

020 3559 6745

## Follow us



Registered with  
**FUNDRAISING  
REGULATOR**

## Useful links

[Login](#)  
[Contact us](#)  
[Sitemap](#)  
[Accessibility](#)  
[Terms & Conditions](#)  
[Privacy policy](#)

