



The UK Can't Stay 'Mum' Over Russian Bombing of Special Forces Base in Syria

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Russia's recent bombing of a Syrian base used by UK and US Special Forces exposes the flaws with the UK's blanket "no comment" approach.

The Wall Street Journal (WSJ) has recently revealed that, in June, a Russian aircraft targeted a garrison in Southeastern Syria which was used by American and British Special Forces in their fight against ISIS. The attack missed 20 British Special Forces by just 24 hours and killed four US-backed rebels.

Much of the subsequent discussion has been on the [specifics of the attack](#) and its implications for [future intelligence sharing](#) with Russia; however, few have considered massive difference in the US and UK response. Given that the two allies shared use of the base, one may expect both countries to have shared a sense of outrage at the attack. However, their responses have been hugely different.

The US has very publicly criticised the actions of Russia. After a similar attack in July, "[US military and intelligence officials](#)" gave a number of details about the two strikes and argued that it was part of a continued attempt by Russia to pressure the Obama administration into agreeing closer cooperation over the skies of Syria. Many officials, albeit anonymously, also shared their concerns over implications of the strike for intelligence sharing agreements between the two countries.

In stark contrast, the UK has remained silent. In response the Ministry of Defence (MOD) simply stated: "[We do not comment on Special Forces](#)". In fact, even as this *WSJ* article marks the second article in two months documenting

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the presence of UK Special Forces in Syria the UK Government remains silent and refuses to acknowledge they are operating in the country.

The MOD's "long-held policy" of not commenting on Special Forces is well established and rarely questioned. This most recent revelation adds to a long list of other incidents where, against mounting evidence, the UK has continued to avoid acknowledging their presence. For example, in [March this year](#), when a story emerged that a British Special Forces Operative had fired on and destroyed an ISIS suicide truck, the response was: "The Ministry of Defence does not comment on Special Forces." Similarly, in [June 2016](#), when it was reported that British Special Forces are on the front line in Syria in the fight against ISIS, the MOD responded that: "It is our longstanding policy that we don't comment on Special Forces operation".

As the US's public criticisms of Russia reveal, this blanket "no comment" approach is not standard practice. A recent report by [Dr Jon Moran](#) found that a number of the UK's allies are far more accountable for their use of Special Forces. In the US, for instance, the deployment of Special Forces from the CIA now requires the notice of "the eight leaders of the relevant intelligence committees in Congress" and "JSOC is accountable via the JSOC commander to the Chiefs of Staff and the Secretary of State for Defense or the President". Unfortunately, the UK's no comment policy led Moran to argue that, amongst its allies, "[t]he British government is the most tightlipped of all".

[Remote Control](#)'s recent work also documents a number of instances that the US, Canada and Australia have discussed the deployment of Special Forces. For example in 2015 a US spokesperson announced the deployment of US Special Forces in Syria. He reported the number (50) and their purpose (to strengthen anti-ISIS forces) and defended the decision against accusations of

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mission creep. Similarly, in November 2015, Canadian Prime Minister [Justin Trudeau](#) and then-Australian Prime Minister [Tony Abbott](#) announced the deployment of Special Forces to Iraq. While none of the countries gave a lot of detail, they acknowledged the presence of Special Forces and allowed some room for discussion and debate around their deployment.

The UK's current policy is not only embarrassing when stories such as this surface but could have negative implications for the quality of UK intervention abroad. It is difficult to assess and advise UK policy abroad when we are unaware of the details of it. The reaction of US scholars, policy makers and journalists in the wake of the recent Russian strike is a case in point. The US's decision to announce the deployment and the purpose of Special Forces in Syria from the outset, and decision to announce this most recent strike, give these groups a chance to debate its implications for relations with Russia, the US's operations in Syria more generally and assess whether the US's stated goals are being met. In contrast, the UK lacks such a debate because most scholars, journalists and policymakers do not know the extent of UK involvement in the country and have not been informed of the mission's stated purpose. Without the level of discussion possible in countries such as the US, the UK lacks the same sounding board and its policies may suffer as a result.

Russia's recent strike points to the flaws in the UK's continued "no comment" policy. When Special Forces rarely stay secret in a country, and fewer of the UK's allies take the same blanket "no comment" approach, we should be asking why the UK continues to.

Feature photo / "Russian Airforce Sukhoi bombing a target in Syria" – Wikipedia, 2016

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