



Are there sufficient mechanisms to protect UK special forces?

Abigail Watson

30 November 2017

This article by Abigail Watson was first published on DefenceReport on November 30, 2017.

Recent reports suggest that UK special forces could have been left “understaffed” for years, and efforts to rectify this appear flawed. This adds to building questions about whether the current level of oversight is sufficient to protect our special forces.

In fact, reports indicate that UK special forces have been understaffed by about 100 troops for years. It appears that, like many other forces within the UK military, they have been racked by under-funding and problems with force retention. In an attempt to address this, special forces have been promised an extra £300 million to bring them “up to full strength” in their fight against ISIS. This is no doubt a welcome announcement for troops who have become increasingly central to the UK’s fight against terrorist groups in a number of countries across the world.

Worryingly, however, the current plan looks unlikely to address the problems, and a short-term fix may make things worse in the long-term. One source indicates that the extra funding would have to come from other units and, in fact, a week later, *The Telegraph* described “a cost-cutting proposal to axe 1,000 Royal Marines.” As the article rightly points out, these cuts could well lead to further staffing shortfalls within UK special forces, given that “just under half of Britain’s special forces are taken from the Royal Marines.”

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

Related

PS21 Event Podcast: What Does “Security” Mean in 2020?

WarPod Ep #21 | Dissecting the Overseas Operations Bill

These reports raise important questions about the suitability of current mechanisms of oversight of UK special forces. Currently, there is no open forum to discuss UK special forces funding or staffing: their budget is opaque; Parliamentary committees are not allowed to discuss special forces; the government has a blanket opacity policy that allows them to not comment on any matters relating to special forces; and legal action has often been pursued when information about special forces has been released.

Instead, there is internal oversight resting on relations between the Director of Special Forces (DSF) and the Ministry of Defence. In addition, DSF is open to inspection of its accounts by the National Audit Office. However, this has not happened in the last 20 years. It appears that internal oversight is not working.

It is with this in mind that Julian Lewis, the Chair of the House of Commons Defence Committee, asked in a recent evidence session with, then, UK Defence Secretary, Sir Michael Fallon, “would it not be sensible for Parliament to fill this apparent scrutiny gap over special forces activities?” As he rightly points out, parliament currently performs this function for the intelligence services – whose activities, like special forces, “are classified for understandable reasons” – but are overseen by the Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament.

This would bring the UK more in line with its allies. The US Congress, through the Senate and House Armed Services Committees, can oversee a number of aspects of special forces operations, including funding and details of operations through classified briefings. Some countries, such as Norway, even consult the whole of Parliament before the deployment of special forces.

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

Making Bad Economies: The Poverty of Mexican Drug Cartels

ORG's Vision

Remote Warfare: Lessons Learned from Contemporary Theatres

In others, where a formal arrangement does not exist, some of the UK's allies – including [Canada](#), [Australia](#), [New Zealand](#) and [France](#) – have become more willing to announce unclassified details of their operations. However, when pushed on this by Julian Lewis, [Fallon simply stated](#) that “the United States has a different policy to us, we do not comment ... on the activities of our special forces.”

The relative transparency over special forces has allowed greater debate amongst UK allies over whether special forces are being given the resources they need to do what is being asked of them. For example, in the US, [the CNA](#), [The New York Times](#) and [Washington Times](#) undertook interviews with former and current special operations forces – and their relatives – and found that the current tempo of operations is threatening troop retention, [military effectiveness](#) and the well-being of soldiers.

Similarly, the deputy commander of Canadian special forces, [publicly stated](#) Canadian special forces are on “on borrowed time”, adding: “We’ve been working our folks very hard.” In fact, when the [Canadian government](#) unveiled plans “to improve the mental health of military personnel and veterans last month, it included four initiatives specifically aimed at the special forces.” In Australia, too, the benefits of increased transparency are evident, the “unprecedented” access [Chris Masters](#) was given to Australian special forces in Australia has allowed him to better explain the pivotal role they played.

Such reports, debates and statements are not possible in the UK; yet, the UK is not immune from the pitfalls of its allies. In fact, while the US can deploy approximately 8,000 [special operations forces across 80-plus countries](#), the UK is trying to [operate in similar regions with just a few hundred personnel – and about 3000](#) with the Special Forces Support Group. Therefore, the risk of

UK special forces being stretched too thin is heightened. In fact, [James Goldrick](#), from the Lowry Institute argues that the UK military “is chronically under-resourced when compared with both operational commitments and planned acquisitions.” Thus, alongside these increased operations should be the safeguards to ensure we do not ask our special forces to do more than their resources will allow.

The UK’s special forces are an important part of the military, especially in its efforts to tackle terrorist groups. However, with their increased use, the UK Government must make sure there are additional mechanisms to ensure they receive sufficient support.

Feature photo / “Royal Marines on board USS Kearsarge” – Wikimedia Commons, 2017

Inset photo / “Soldiers from the 101st Airborne Division scan the ridgeline for enemy forces during Operation Anaconda, c. 2002.” – Wikimedia Commons, 2017

DefenceReport’s Analysis is a multi-format blog that is based on opinions, insights and dedicated research from DefRep editorial staff and writers. The analysis expressed here are the author’s own and are separate from DefRep reports, which are based on independent and objective reporting.

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](#)