



SAS Injured in Syria: Shouldn't We Understand What Went Wrong?

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In early January, just a few weeks after US President Trump announced that the US-led coalition defeated IS, two British Special Forces soldiers were seriously injured and a Kurdish fighter from the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) was killed by a missile launched by IS fighters.¹ We know that these soldiers were injured, not because of details announced by the British government regarding the incident, but because the SDF reported it on Kurdish news.²

Sadly, such sporadic access to information is far from unusual when it comes to British Special Forces. While the UK's allies continue to reform and improve the transparency and accountability of their special forces units, the UK has maintained an outdated policy in which the Ministry of Defence:

“ Neither confirms nor denies claims about Special Forces activity.³ ”

This approach doesn't just render British modern warfare opaque to civil society, but has severe consequences for the ability of Parliament to hold decision makers accountable, and as a result, may hinder discussions on how to make improvements when things go wrong.

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This is not the first time the United Kingdom has released only limited information when Special Forces have been seriously (or even fatally) injured. When Sergeant Matt Tonroe, a SAS soldier supposedly embedded with American Special Operation Forces (SOF), was killed in Syria last March, the British government released only limited information about Tonroe himself, and provided no details of what went wrong on his final mission.^{4 5} In fact, it was only when the US confirmed that a US soldier had been killed alongside Tonroe that such information was revealed.⁶ The official statement said that the incident occurred during an operation to:

“ Advise, assist and accompany capacity with our partners, [who] were conducting a mission to kill or capture a known ISIS member when they were struck by an improvised explosive device. ”

It makes strategic sense that some information about special force operations is not released to the public, as they are, by definition, units that operate covertly. With the UK increasingly relies on special forces, they have become a dominant feature in British military engagements.⁷ In this context, it only makes sense to have a basic understanding of how they are representing the UK in conflicts, what they are engaging in, and how risks should be mitigated when things go wrong.

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The argument for releasing basic information about special forces is especially powerful when you contrast the UK's approach to that of its allies.

In the US, there are several mechanisms for ensuring that the legislative branch can hold the government accountable for the use of special forces. These were used in October 2017, when four US Special Operations Forces were killed in an ambush by IS-aligned fighters in Niger. To understand what went wrong, the US Defence Department conducted a large inquiry, and while the full 6000-page report remains classified, an eight page summary on mistakes made and steps taken to mitigate risks was published.^{8 9} Additionally, the US Senate was able to better understand what went wrong through closed hearings with commanders in charge of the Niger operation.¹⁰

Even France, which has traditionally been as reluctant to release information about special forces as the UK, has seen significant steps taken in the last decade to improve the accountability of their special forces.¹¹ In 2008, constitutional reforms introduced an obligation for the government to inform the parliament of any decision to deploy forces abroad lasting no later than three days after an intervention.¹² While *actions militaires non officielles* still occur, including deployments of French Special Forces, these changes are a step in the right direction. Additionally, the Commission of Foreign Affairs, Defence and Armed Forces can review and scrutinise decisions related to special forces and hold hearings with those responsible for the forces.¹³

In countries such as Denmark and Norway, the approval of parliamentary committees is required before special forces can be deployed, and as a result,

parliamentarians have access to much more information about what their forces are doing and why.¹⁴

The oversight mechanisms of such allies reflect a willingness to learn from experience and desire to improve future engagements, yet no equivalents exist in the context of the UK. If the UK does not adopt such accountability mechanisms, it risks being left behind, alone among Western allies in its outdated refusal to discuss its special forces.

Special Forces: The Best Tool Available?

A greater debate about the UK's use of special forces is also essential to ensure that they are the right force for the task asked of them. In 2013, a proposal to exempt UK involvement in peacekeeping operations from parliamentary vote was criticised for its potential to:

“ Tempt the government into sending the wrong sort of force in order to escape scrutiny. ”

The ability to deploy covert special forces on a rolling basis in place of conventional troops arguably carries the same risks, where the decision to utilise special forces is made because it is perceived to be the 'easy' choice, rather than because a careful assessment found that the deployment of special forces would be a strategically sound decision.¹⁵

Improving the Debate

In an era of declining military budgets and political will for military interventions abroad, special forces, and the shroud of secrecy that surrounds them, have become an appealing method for engaging in conflicts without significant scrutiny. However, the current low levels of debate and discussion about these operations undermine the ability to learn lessons from the past, potentially to the detriment of achieving strategic objectives abroad and safeguarding soldiers. If a discussion around special forces does not open, there is a clear risk that their deployment will risk contributing to the short-term-ism of Western engagements that have hugely detrimental long-term effects on places where the UK engages militarily, like Syria and Iraq.¹⁶

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Image credit: 1st Lt. Katrina Cheesman, 24th Special Operations Wing Public Affairs

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