

Britain's Seven Covert Wars: RAF Drones, Embedded SAS Forces

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Britain is fighting at least seven covert wars in the Middle East and North Africa, outside of any democratic oversight or control. Whitehall has in effect gone underground, with neither parliament nor the public being allowed to debate, scrutinise or even know about these wars.

To cover themselves, Ministers are now often resorting to lying about what they are authorising. While Britain has identified Islamic State (among others) as the enemy abroad, it is clear that it sees the British public and parliament as the enemy at home.

Syria

Britain began [training](#) Syrian rebel forces from bases in Jordan in 2012. This was also when the SAS was reported to be '[slipping](#) into Syria on missions' against Islamic State. Now, British special forces are '[mounting](#) hit and run raids against IS deep inside eastern Syria dressed as insurgent fighters' and '[frequently cross](#) into Syria to assist the New Syrian Army' from their base in Jordan. British special forces also [provide](#) training, weapons and other equipment to the New Syrian Army.

British aircraft began covert strikes against IS targets in Syria in 2015, months before Parliament voted in favour of overt action in December 2015. These strikes were [conducted](#) by British pilots embedded with US and Canadian forces.

Britain has also been operating a secret drone warfare programme in Syria. Last year Reaper drones killed British IS fighters in Syria, again before parliament approved military action. As I have previously [argued](#), British covert action and support of the Syrian rebels is, along with horrific Syrian government/Russian violence, helping to prolong a terrible conflict.

Iraq



Hundreds of British troops are officially in Iraq to train local security forces. But they are also engaged in covert [combat operations](#) against IS. One recent report [suggests](#) that Britain has more than 200 special force soldiers in the country, operating out of a fortified base within a Kurdish Peshmerga camp south of Mosul.

British Reaper drones were first deployed over Iraq in 2014 and are now [flown](#) remotely by satellite from an RAF base in Lincolnshire. Britain has [conducted](#) over 200 drones strikes in Iraq since November 2014.

Libya

SAS forces have been secretly [deployed](#) to Libya since the beginning of this year, working with Jordanian special forces [embedded](#) in the British contingent. This follows a [mission](#) by MI6 and the RAF in January to gather intelligence on IS and draw up potential targets for air strikes. British commandos are now reportedly [fighting](#) and directing assaults on Libyan frontlines and running intelligence, surveillance and logistical support operations from a base in the western city of Misrata.

But a team of 15 British forces are also [reported](#) to be based in a French-led multinational military operations centre in Benghazi, eastern Libya, supporting renegade Libyan general Khalifa Haftar. In July 2016, *Middle East Eye* [reported](#) that this British involvement was helping to coordinate air strikes in support of Haftar, whose forces are opposed to the Tripoli-based government that Britain is supposed to be supporting.

Yemen

The government [says](#) it has no military personnel based in Yemen. Yet a report by [Vice News](#) in April, based on numerous interviews with officials, revealed that British special forces in Yemen, who were seconded to MI6, were training Yemeni troops fighting Al Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and also had forces infiltrated in AQAP. The same report also found that British military personnel were helping with drone strikes against AQAP. Britain was playing 'a crucial and sustained role with the CIA in finding and fixing targets, assessing the effect of strikes, and training Yemeni intelligence agencies to locate and identify targets for the US drone program'. In addition, the UK spybase at Menwith Hill in Yorkshire [facilitates](#) US drone strikes in Yemen.

Britain has been widely reported (outside the mainstream media) as supporting the brutal Saudi war in Yemen, which has caused thousands of civilian deaths, [most of them](#) due to

Saudi air strikes. Indeed, Britain is party to the war. The government [says](#) there are around 100 UK military personnel based in Saudi Arabia including a 'small number' at 'Saudi MOD and Operational Centres'. One such Centre, in Riyadh, coordinates the Saudi bombing campaign in Yemen and [includes](#) British military personnel who are in the command room as air strikes are carried out and who have access to the bombing targets.

The UK is of course arming the Saudi campaign: The British government [disclosed](#) on 13 October that the Saudis have used five types of British bombs and missiles in Yemen. On the same day, it [lied](#) to Parliament that Britain was 'not a party' to the war in Yemen.

A secret '[memorandum](#) of understanding' that Britain signed with Saudi Arabia in 2014 has not been made public since it 'would damage the UK's bilateral relationship' with the Kingdom, the government states. It is likely that this pact includes reference to the secret British [training](#) of Syrian rebels in Saudi Arabia, which has taken place since mid-2015. Operating from a desert base in the north of the country, British forces have been teaching Syrian forces infantry skills as part of a US-led training programme.

Afghanistan

In Afghanistan, the public was told that British forces withdrew at the end of 2014. However, British forces [stayed behind](#) to help create and train an Afghan special forces unit. Despite officially only having 'advisors' in Afghanistan, in August 2015 it was [reported](#) that British covert forces were fighting IS and Taliban fighters. The SAS and SBS, along with US special forces, were 'taking part in military operations almost every night' as the insurgents closed in on the capital Kabul.

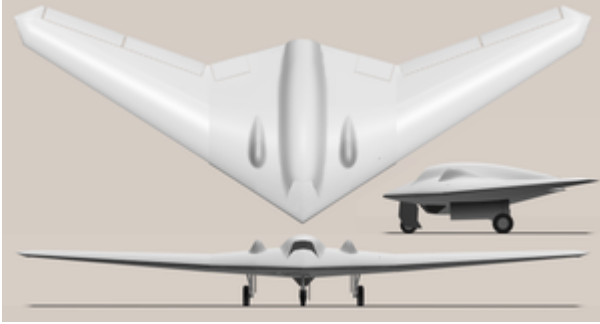
In 2014, the government stated that it had [ended](#) its drone air strikes programme in Afghanistan, which had begun in 2008 and covered much of the country. Yet last year it was reported that British special forces were calling in [air strikes](#) using US drones.

Pakistan and Somalia

Pakistan and Somalia are two other countries where Britain is conducting covert wars. Menwith Hill [facilitates](#) US drone strikes against jihadists in both countries, with Britain's GCHQ providing '[locational intelligence](#)' to US forces for use in these attacks.

The government has [said](#) that it has 27 military personnel in Somalia who are developing the national army and supporting the African Union Mission. Yet in 2012 it was reported that the SAS was covertly [fighting](#) against al-Shabab Islamist terrorists in Somalia, working with Kenyan forces in order to target leaders. This involved up to 60 SAS soldiers, close to a full squadron, including Forward Air Controllers who called in air strikes against al-Shabab targets by the Kenyan air force. In early 2016, it was further reported that Jordan's King Abdullah, whose troops operate with UK special forces, was [saying](#) that his troops were ready with Britain and Kenya to go 'over the border' to attack al-Shabaab.

Drones



The RAF's secret drone war, which involves a fleet of 10 Reaper drones, has been in [permanent operation](#) in Afghanistan since October 2007, but covertly began [operating](#) outside Afghanistan in 2014. The NGO Reprieve [notes](#) that Britain provides communications networks to the CIA 'without which the US would not be able to operate this programme'. It says that this is a particular matter of concern as the US covert drone programme is illegal.

The Gulf

Even this may not be the sum total of British covert operations in the region. The government [stated](#) in 2015 that it had 177 military personnel embedded in other countries' forces, with 30 personnel working with the US military. It is possible that these forces are also engaged in combat in the region. For example, the First Sea Lord, Admiral Sir Philip Jones, has [said](#) that in the Gulf, British pilots fly US F18s from the decks of US aircraft carriers. This means that 'US' air strikes might well be carried out by British pilots.

Britain has many other military and intelligence assets in the region. Files leaked by Edward Snowden [show](#) that Britain has a network of three GCHQ spy bases in Oman - codenamed 'Timpani', 'Guitar' and 'Clarinet' - which tap in to various undersea cables passing through the Strait of Hormuz into the Gulf. These bases [intercept](#) and process vast quantities of emails, telephone calls and web traffic on behalf of Western intelligence agencies, which information is then shared with the National Security Agency in the US.

The state of Qatar houses the anti-IS coalition's Combined Air Operations Centre at Al Udeid airbase. The government [says](#) it has seven military personnel 'permanently assigned to Qatar' and an additional number of 'temporary personnel' working at the airbase. These are likely to be covert forces; the government says that 'we do not discuss specific numbers for reasons of safeguarding operational security'.

Similarly, the government [says](#) it has six military personnel 'permanently assigned' to the United Arab Emirates and an additional number of 'temporary personnel' at the UAE's Al Minhad airbase. Britain also has military assets at Manama harbour, Bahrain, whose repressive armed forces are also being secretly [trained](#) by British commandos.

Kenya and Turkey

Kenya [hosts](#) Britain's Kahawa Garrison barracks and Laikipia Air Base, from where thousands of troops who carry out military exercises in Kenya's harsh terrain can be deployed on active operations in the Middle East. Turkey has also offered a base for British military training. In 2015, for example, Britain [deployed](#) several military trainers to Turkey as part of the US-led training programme in Syria, providing small arms, infantry tactics and medical training to rebel forces.

The web of deceit

When questioned about these covert activities, Ministers have two responses. One is to not comment on special forces' operations. The other is to lie, which has become so routine as to be official government policy. The reasoning is simple – the government believes the public simply has no right to know of these operations, let alone to influence them.

Defence Secretary Michael Fallon [told](#) parliament in July that the government is 'committed to the convention that before troops are committed to combat the House of Commons should have an opportunity to debate the matter'. This is plainly not true, as the extent of British covert operations show.

Similarly, it was first [reported](#) in May that British troops were secretly engaged in combat in Libya. This news came two days after Fallon [told](#) MPs that Britain was not planning 'any kind of combat role' to fight IS in Libya.

There are many other examples of this straightforward web of deceit. In July 2016, the government issued six separate corrections to previous ministerial statements in which they claimed that Saudi Arabia is not targeting civilians or committing war crimes in Yemen. However, little noticed was that these corrections also [claimed](#) that 'the UK is not a party' to the conflict in Yemen. This claim is defied by various news reports in the public domain.

British foreign policy is in extreme mode, whereby Ministers do not believe they should be accountable to the public. This is the very definition of dictatorship. Although in some of these wars, Britain is combatting terrorist forces that are little short of evil, it is no minor matter that several UK interventions have encouraged these very same forces and prolonged wars, all the while being regularly disastrous for the people of the region. Britain's absence of democracy needs serious and urgent challenging.

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