

# British Counter-insurgency Campaigns Since the End of the Second World War

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*With centuries of experience garnered from waging wars of colonial conquest, combating revolutionary movements and imperial policing, the British Army has been seen as an expert institution in the area of counter-insurgency operations. The high regard held for the theoretical constructions of British military officers such as Orde Wingate, Robert Thompson and Frank Kitson seemingly bear this out. But defining a counter-insurgency campaign as a 'success' or a 'victory' poses problems.*

*This is because most of the counter-insurgency operations conducted after the ending of the Second World War occurred against the backdrop of decolonisation.*

This meant that regardless of whether such operations were deemed to be successful or not, the countries within which the operation was conducted were embarked upon a path of political independence. And even where they were adjudged successful, the legacy of these campaigns, replete with disregard for the rule of law and violations of the human rights of civilian populations, have left a pall of moral darkness.

In a 2008 research paper published under the auspices of the U.S. Army War College, a serving British Army colonel, **I.A. Rigden** sought to classify British military counter-insurgency campaigns conducted after the Second World War into those which were 'successes' and 'failures' alongside those he calibrated as somewhere between success and failure.

Entitled *The British Approach to Counter-Insurgency: Myths, Realities and Strategic Challenges*, Rigden considered the following to be "successes": Malaya, Kenya, Brunei, Malaysia, Radfan (Part of Aden), Dhofar (Oman) and Northern Ireland. The campaigns in Greece between 1945 and 1946, Eritrea in 1949 and Togoland in 1957 he judged as "partial successes". The operation in Cyprus was a "draw", while the following were earmarked as "failures": Palestine (1945 to 1948), Egypt (1946 to 1956), as well as the three missions in Aden respectively in 1955, between 1956 and 1958, and from 1965 to 1967. Rigden reserved judgement on British involvement in the counter-insurgency efforts in both Afghanistan and Iraq which were ongoing at the time that his paper was published.

There are compelling reasons to conclude that 'Operation Telic', the mission undertaken by the British armed forces from the time of the invasion of Iraq in 2003 to the withdrawal of the last forces in 2011, should be ruled as a failure.

In the early stages of the mission after the overthrow of **Saddam Hussein's** government, British troops were depicted as calmly undertaking a policing mission in Basra. They patrolled the streets in an orderly manner and appeared to be winning the proverbial

“hearts and minds” of the local people. This stood in marked contrast to the strife-ridden experience of American troops in Baghdad. Basra is of course part of Shia Iraq which welcomed the removal of Saddam. So the British did not have to contend with a ferocious insurgency as did their American allies.

The veneer of a successful pacification began to crumble when in 2006, Shia militias started targeting British forces and casualties began to mount. These attacks drove British troops off the streets and into secluded compounds. Shia militias seized control of the streets.

By 2007, most of the initial 46,000 personnel which had been used during the invasion had been reduced to a token figure of around 5,000 troops who withdrew first from their occupation headquarters located at Saddam’s former palace before being largely confined to Basra Airport.

To Shia militias and the local population, the withdrawals and the whittling down of personnel signified an ignominious defeat. In fact, one high-ranking American official, the retired **General Jack Keane** went on record to state that the British Army’s decision to pull out of Basra amounted to a defeat. Other U.S. army officers went on to say the same thing.

The same conclusion ought to be drawn so far as the campaign in Afghanistan is concerned. Britain withdrew all combat forces from Afghanistan in 2014 while retaining a minuscule force of around 500 to train and advise Afghan security forces. The withdrawal of combat troops after 13 years of fighting the Taliban who today control more territory than at any point since the invasion may be cited as evidence of a failed mission.

The aura of failure persists given that there are no tangible achievements related for instance to the notion of ‘nation-building’ or in regards to the curtailment of the global trade in heroin. Global terrorism is today a phenomenon which has intermittently blighted the peaceful living circumstances of British cities.

The former British prime minister, **David Cameron** acknowledged the heavy price paid by Britain during its involvement in Afghanistan. His allusion to Britain’s part in checking the expansion of Prussian power, the defeat of Nazism and its role as a partner of the United States during the Cold War which ended with the dismantling of the Soviet system in Russia and eastern Europe could not cover up the underlying reality of failure.

But even defining what a success is can pose problems.

The idea of winning a counter-insurgency can be a contentious matter for protagonists. For the legacies of brutally managed operations replete with amoral tactics and strategies which invariably abrogated the notion of upholding the rule of law and consistently trampled underfoot the civil and human rights of innocent civilians continue to haunt places such as Kenya and Northern Ireland.

And those adjudged to be ‘failures’ may be considered as such because of the nature of the objectives of the campaign and the resources given to the military fighting the counter-insurgency, as well as wider considerations determined not in the theatre of battle, but in the cabinet boardrooms of politicians.

The question of whether a campaign may be considered as a success weighs heavily in the case of Northern Ireland where a thirty year ‘low-intensity’ war involving insurgent

republican guerrillas from the Roman Catholic community against the British military and loyalist proxies drawn from the Protestant community came to an end and led to a peace settlement.

Most British academics and members of the military regard the Northern Ireland campaign as a hard-won success while mainstream Irish nationalists regard it as a drawn stalemate. The argument in favour of a British victory stems from the fact that it was the Irish Republican Army which in 1994 called for an unconditional ceasefire. The declaration of a “complete cessation of military operations” was accompanied by an announcement of its willingness to enter into inclusive talks about the future of the province.

The IRA had been so thoroughly infiltrated by agents of British state and military intelligence that it is argued that its leadership came to the decision that it could no longer continue with its armed struggle. The litmus test for acknowledging a British victory would be that the ultimate goals of the Republican movement, namely those related to securing the withdrawal of the British Army, the termination of British sovereign status over Northern Ireland’s six counties, and reunification of the province with the Republic of Ireland did not come to pass.

At the same time, it should be noted that the demands made by the leaders of the civil rights movement as related to power-sharing between Catholic and Protestant communities and reform of policing were met by the eventual peace process. Further, the granting of immunity to paramilitary figures and an early release programme for certain prisoners meant that the punishment normally meted out by victors over a vanquished foe did not come to pass.

If the outcome of the Good Friday Agreement produced a state of affairs demanded three decades earlier by the Catholic-led civil rights movement, which may conceivably have been possible to have achieved if the British government had applied sufficient pressure on the Protestant community to accede to a power-sharing arrangement, then the subsequent radicalisation of Catholic youth, and the ensuing resuscitation of the Irish Republican Army might have been averted.

Talk of victory takes on a pyrrhic quality when consideration is given to the adherence by British Army officers to a counter-insurgency policy which from its inception had adopted the use of what effectively were death squads under the auspices of intelligence units such as the Military Reaction Force (MRF), the Special Reconnaissance Unit (SRU), Force Research Unit and 14 Intelligence Company.



The MRF (Source: [Belfast Child](#))

Many of the post-war counter-insurgencies were fought effectively as colonial wars in the dying days of empire. In Aden for instance, British troops were captured acting as brigands, murderers and in the words of Lieutenant Colonel Colin Mitchell as “nigger-bashing imperialists”. The techniques of counter-insurgency developed by officers who had served in these conflicts as the mentality developed in subjugating non-white colonials were arguably transferred intact to Northern Ireland, a province on an island considered by Irish republicans to be Britain’s “first and last colony.”

It is also appropriate to mention that many of the campaigns deemed to be “failures” were

themselves constricted by issues outside of the use of military force. The interplay of limited or even unattainable objectives alongside pressing geopolitical concerns have served to create situations where failure was the inevitable outcome of the mission.

This is an underlying feature of the era of waning British power when army officers were involved with managing the dismantling of an empire. In Palestine and Cyprus, the British Army found itself in the middle of antagonistic communities respectively of Arabs and Jews, and Greeks and Turks. Some of the conflicts such as that of Aden were to do with containment prior to withdrawal.

And political decisions have played a part in necessitating the aborting of a mission. In Iraq for instance, the decision to retain a small, token force in Basra meant that the army was put into a position of not being able to actively perform peacekeeping and anti-insurgency missions, and could do little else other than to fortify its location and defend itself.

The post-war economic circumstances of near bankruptcy and regime of austerity in Britain alongside the prevailing mood in the United States to bring about the creation of a homeland for the Jews in the wake of the Jewish holocaust in Europe doubtlessly affected the willingness of Britain to retain the mandate it had over Palestine. Jewish terror groups such as Irgun and Lehi hit hard at British interests. Led by future prime minister, **Menachem Begin**, Irgun's most spectacular operation was the bombing in 1946 of the King David Hotel in Jerusalem which served as the seat of the British administration. Lehi, which was better known as the 'Stern Gang', assassinated Lord Moyne, the resident British envoy to the Middle East in 1944.

At the time, the Hollywood screenwriter **Ben Hecht** praised the Zionist insurgents by saying

“Every time you blow up a British arsenal, or wreck a British jail, or send a British railroad train sky high, or rob a British bank or let go with your guns and bombs at the British betrayers and invaders of your homeland, the Jews of America make a little holiday in their hearts.”

While the administration of **Harry Truman**'s invoking of the Neutrality Act, and banning of fundraising for Zionist groups in the United States portrayed a neutral stance on the Jewish-Arab conflict, the international routes of supply which aided Jewish insurgent organisations remained open. The newly created Central Intelligence Agency may have been comprised of key agents who were Arabists, but information obtained by U.S. Navy intelligence intercepts of cable traffic with Jewish gun-runners was not shared with Britain or acted upon by the American authorities.

The British tired of its responsibilities in Palestine and after reaching the conclusion that its efforts in maintaining the peace between Jews and Arabs and combating Zionist terrorists were both costly and futile, decided to hand over its governing responsibilities to the United Nations.

The conduct of each of the anti-insurgency efforts whether classified as “successes” or “failures” have left a ghastly legacy of human rights abuses. For instance, the ‘shoot-on-sight’ policy operated by the British during the Mau Mau insurgency in Kenya was mirrored by the ‘shoot-to-kill’ policy which materialised in Northern Ireland.

There are innumerable parallels which can be drawn between the inhumane and even

depraved aspects of many of these campaigns, but one particularly striking legacy left by a British counter-insurgency effort concerns that of Palestine. This relates to the practices employed in combating Arab and Jewish insurgencies which included the policy of imposing collective punishment on communities from where insurgents hailed such as by destroying the homes of their families and the levying of punitive taxes. For example, a collective fine was imposed on the Jewish quarter of Jerusalem because its inhabitants failed to help police investigating an abortive attempt on the life of the British High Commissioner.

Today, the state of Israel exacts retribution against the communities and families of Palestinian guerrillas in an identical fashion. These and other draconian measures are rooted in the Defence (Emergency) Regulations passed by the British Mandate government in 1945 which in 1948 was incorporated into the law of the newly created state via section 11 of the Government and Law Arrangements Ordinance.



Palestine

The Defence Regulations had provided for the establishing of military tribunals to try civilians without granting the right of appeal, allow for the conducting of sweeping searches and seizures, prohibited the publication of books and newspapers, demolishing houses, detaining individuals for an indefinite period of time, sealing off particular territories, and imposing curfew.

These are measures that are routinely applied by the Israelis within the occupied territories.

It is also worthwhile reminding that the counter-insurgency efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan, the former initiated by a war based on a lie and the latter initiated supposedly to serve as a quick and decisive police action, both bear the hallmarks of colonial interventions. The overthrow of Saddam Iraq served to break the a Middle Eastern state which threatened to challenge Israel's undisputed regional hegemony, while the invasion of Afghanistan was the fulfillment of a plan designed well before the 9/11 attack to create U.S. bases close to oil rich Central Asia. From the point of view of Britain's strategic and economic interests, both were unnecessary adventures and arguably doomed to fail.

But as seen, even with those considered to be "successes", the costs both in terms of the destruction of human lives and sunken moral prestige were high.

It is worth reflecting on **William Faulkner's** words from *The Sound and the Fury* that

“victory is an illusion of philosophers and fools.”

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