

# Britain's special forces deployed in Ukraine and at least 19 countries

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Ever since the 2014 Maidan coup in Ukraine, the UK has played a leading role in escalating the US-NATO led war against Russia.

It has trained and equipped the Ukrainian army, deployed troops in Eastern Europe on permanent missions or large-scale combat exercises and staged repeated anti-Russian provocations, including sending a British warship into waters claimed by Russia.

The UK has secretly deployed special forces (UKSF) in Ukraine, even though it is not officially party to the war.

Although the House of Commons must vote for war, special forces, which include the Special Air Service (SAS), Special Boat Service, Special Reconnaissance Regiment (SRR), the Special Forces Support Group, 18 Signal Regiment, Joint Special Aviation Wing and No. 47 Squadron, can be deployed without parliamentary approval and with the government refusing to even list their operations.

*The Mirror* reported in April 2021 that a “small team of UK special forces” had been deployed to Ukraine in an apparent intelligence-gathering mission on the border with Russia. Two months later, the British Embassy in Kiev released a statement reporting that the UK Minister for Defence Procurement and Deputy Defence Minister of Ukraine had “observed joint training activity of Ukrainian, UK and US special forces,” implying that UKSF were involved in a training operation in Ukraine.

In April 2022, *Al Jazeera* reported that Russia had announced it was “looking into a Russian media report alleging that the SAS had been sent to the Lviv region in Western Ukraine” to “assist the Ukrainian special services in organising sabotage on the territory of Ukraine.” Just months later, the *Daily Star* reported that a group of ex-SAS troopers were in Ukraine and had “killed up to 20 Russian generals and 15 of the feared Wagner mercenaries,” the British also having helped to train some Ukrainian troops in ambush methods.

Earlier this year, leaked US military documents revealed that the UK had deployed 50 special forces personnel, including the SAS, to Ukraine, more than half of all the Western special forces in the country from February to March 2023.

Operations in Ukraine are only some of the UKSF's covert activities. According to research compiled by Action on Armed Violence (AOAV), a London-based NGO, based on leaked reports to the mainstream media, wire services and broadcasters or as the result of operations that have gone wrong, the UKSF has carried out operations in at least 19 countries between 2011 and 2021, including Ukraine, Syria, Afghanistan, Nigeria, the Philippines, Russia, Kenya, Libya, Somalia, Sudan and Yemen.

It can be assumed that these deployments form only a fraction of Britain's covert operations around the world. They, along with Britain's arms deals, international defence partnerships and projections of force are part of the UK government's broader preparations for war.

Not only are special forces activities kept secret, but then Prime Minister David Cameron even authorised their deployment in Syria after the House of Commons explicitly rejected sending troops to the country in August 2013. Three days before the vote, UKSF and Britain's spy agency MI6 were on the ground there, with European and Jordanian sources stating in 2013 that UKSF had been training rebel forces for a year.

In the case of Libya, special forces were only revealed as operating with rebel forces against Colonel Muammar Gaddafi in March 2011 when farmers in a remote village captured a team of UKSF and MI6 operatives. Since then, the UK has sent in SF, supposedly to combat ISIL and train Libyan forces alongside US, French and Italian personnel. In 2019, a SAS unit had to be evacuated out of Tripoli and Tobruk after armed clashes broke out.

While Britain's combat operations in Iraq and

Afghanistan officially ended in 2011 and 2014 respectively, the UKSF continued their operations.

In Iraq, while parliament approved airstrikes against ISIL in September 2014, the government gave an explicit commitment not to deploy ground troops that it evaded by deploying UKSF. Prime Minister David Cameron reportedly gave the UKSF “carte blanche” to launch raids against ISIL’s leaders in operations that continued for the rest of the decade. He had sent the first UKSF teams to northern Iraq weeks before the vote on an intelligence gathering mission. Since then, there has been a continuous stream of SAS and SBS operations, with the most recent in 2021. The *Daily Mail* reported a surge of 100 killings of ISIL leaders in the summer of 2020.

After 2014, UK special forces stayed behind in Afghanistan to fight Taliban and ISIL militants. Despite their mission only “to train, advise or assist” Afghan forces, there are numerous reports of their involvement in lethal night raids in Afghanistan and in Pakistan. Last March, the government was forced to open a public inquiry after BBC *Panorama* reported allegations that the SAS were responsible for 54 summary killings in Afghanistan in 2010 and 2011, when men were separated from their families and shot dead after being said to have produced a weapon.

There have been multiple reports of UKSF operatives fighting on the Syrian frontline in al-Tanf where there is a US base, Raqqa and near the Turkey/Syria border. Parliament had approved airstrikes explicitly against ISIL commanders but not the deployment of combat troops on the ground. In 2018, there was a rare reporting of a SAS fatality, apparently killed alongside a US commando in a friendly fire incident that Washington originally blamed on a roadside bomb. It is likely that UKSF remain in Syria.

The UKSF have also carried out missions in Yemen over the last eight years in support of Saudi forces fighting Houthi insurgents that took control of the capital Sana’a in 2014. By seconding them to MI6, under the control of the Foreign Office, the government was able to circumvent the European Convention on Human Rights and deny it was supporting the US in its covert missions in Yemen, with UKSF personnel reportedly conducting assassinations near Sana’a.

In May 2019, the government sent two SBS teams to the Persian Gulf, after Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates reported explosive sabotage attacks on commercial vessels passing through the Strait of Hormuz, to monitor Iranian naval activity around the island of

Qeshm, close to the country’s naval bases, under the pretext of protecting UK registered oil tankers.

Britain’s main theatre of operations is the Middle East, but it has also fielded SF troops throughout Africa, including in Mali and Algeria. Skirmishes have been reported in Somalia, close to Britain’s military base in Kenya.

UKSF soldiers also went to the Sochi Winter Olympics in Russia in 2016 for “counter-terrorism” purposes. In 2018, SAS reservists were deployed to Estonia as part of the NATO mission in the Baltic states “to deter Russian encroachment,” monitoring Russian military movement over the border.

These revelations come as Britain’s arms exports soared to a record £8.5 billion in 2022, more than double the £4.1 billion recorded in 2021. The two largest buyers, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, are among the world’s most repressive regimes.

Last month, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak travelled to Tokyo with a large trade delegation announcing a new defence partnership with Japan involving the doubling of joint military exercises, deploying the UK’s Carrier Strike Group in 2025, advancing the Global Combat Air Programme and extending Britain’s military reach deeper into the Indo-Pacific.

Last month, Chief of the Defence Staff Admiral Sir Tony Radakin went to India to strengthen military ties and to discuss “industrial collaboration in the aerospace sector.” In March, British and Swedish defence ministers agreed to deepen their collaboration and signed a defence procurement deal as Stockholm prepares to join NATO. Since last July, the Ministry of Defence has announced deals, assistance and missions to Finland, Germany, France, Estonia, Oman, Ukraine, Turkey, Greece, Qatar, Poland, the USA, Ghana and the Republic of Korea.



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