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British Special Forces operating inside Syria

By Harvey Thompson

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Photos published by the BBC last week were the first ever taken proving that British Special Forces are covertly involved in fighting in Syria. The photos showed a Special Air Service (SAS) unit patrolling near an army base belonging to so-called “rebel forces” close to the Syria-Iraq border.

The presence of ground-based British military personnel inside Syria constitutes a further significant breach of Syrian sovereignty, as no foreign forces, with the exception of those from Russia, have been authorized by the Syrian government to operate within its borders.

The BBC images indicate the full extent of the involvement of British and other forces, under the aegis of the United States, in a protracted civil war that has to date killed over 400,000 against the regime of President Bashar al-Assad. Washington’s ultimate targets are Assad’s allies, Iran and Russia.

The BBC’s report states, “The pictures, which date from June, follow an attack by the so-called Islamic State (IS) on the moderate rebel New Syrian Army base of Al Tanaf on the Syria-Iraq border. The British soldiers appear to be securing the base’s perimeter.” Al-Tanf had previously been under ISIS control.

The Ministry of Defence (MoD) issued its standard refusal to comment on the actions of UK Special Forces. But, as the *Guardian* reported, “An independent source confirmed they were UK special forces, which are operating against ISIS in Syria, Iraq and Libya.”

The photos show Special Forces seated on Thalab long-range patrol vehicles as they move around the perimeter of the rebel base. The Thalab (Fox) vehicles, a joint Anglo-Jordanian innovation, are militarised SUVs—with mounted weaponry—used for long distance reconnaissance and surveillance missions. The Thalab is often used for border patrols by Jordanian Special Forces.

The BBC tries to portray the Special Forces as a supposed reserved force. Quentin Somerville, BBC Middle East Correspondent, is careful to let reader know, “According to eyewitnesses, they [the Special Forces] were there in a *defensive* role.”

This is immediately contradicted by his following sentence, that “they are carrying an arsenal of equipment including sniper rifles, heavy machine guns and anti-tank missiles.”

In his audio report accompanying the photos, Somerville describes the Special Forces operatives pictured as a “small but lethal force” of 12 men, “who have come laden with weaponry to fight their way out of any trouble.”

Somerville’s piece includes an interview with an anonymous individual, who is described as a spokesman for what the BBC terms the “moderate rebel” New Syrian Army (NSA). The spokesman said, “We are receiving special forces training from our British and American partners. We’re also getting weapons and equipment from the Pentagon as well as complete air support.”

The spokesman refused to comment on the pictures of the British Special Forces.

The BBC gives few details on the NSA but notes, “The New Syrian Army, which draws most of its recruits from Deir Ezzor province, failed in a recent attempt to disrupt a key IS trading route across the Iraq-Syria border, but they have been able to fend off attacks at Al Tanaf.”

The report added that the NSA “were mocked in an IS propaganda video. ... And, embarrassingly for its Western partners, videos of training sessions with western special forces were also included in the IS broadcast.”

As the *World Socialist Web Site* made clear in its analysis on the recent battle for Aleppo, the 15-year-old “war on terror” requires a new Orwellian terminology. US-led forces are now in military alliance with various proxy groups that constituted for years the Al Qaeda network, previously cited as the main “terrorist” enemy of Washington.

The US and British governments have continually claimed—as Lieutenant General Sean MacFarland, the top US commander in Syria and Iraq, did recently—that their forces are only playing an “advise and assist” role at a distance and in specific locations. However, as the BBC photos reveal it is undeniable that US-led forces with British support are involved militarily on

the frontline. MacFarland confirmed that US-led forces had killed “25,000 enemy figures” in the past 11 months.

US Special Operations Forces have established a base in the Syrian Desert between the ISIS stronghold of Raqqa and the Iraqi border in support of Syrian “rebel forces.” British Special Forces are believed to be operating in the border areas between Raqqa in Syria and the towns and villages linking it to its northern Iraqi bastion, Mosul.

The ramping up of UK military intervention is seen as vital to imminent US plans to recapture Mosul from ISIS. The UK has around 300 conventional forces operating in Iraq, mainly in and around Baghdad. These too are supposedly restricted to training and advisory roles—operating from behind secured bases. Britain has also promised to provide up to 1,200 troops to an Italian-led international force to support the Libyan regime of Fayed Sarraj.

Britain’s Royal Air Force (RAF) has conducted almost 950 airstrikes from RAF Akrotiri in Cyprus since the UK restarted military action in Iraq in September 2014, as part of the US’s Operation Inherent Resolve to recapture territory held by ISIS. Around 1,150 military personnel are stationed in the region and more have been promised by Conservative Defence Minister Michael Fallon.

Last month, speaking of Syria at a Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) conference on airpower, Fallon said, “The RAF has not operated at this sustained operational tempo in a single theatre of conflict for a quarter of a century.”

Just this month, the MoD’s web site records that RAF operations, including military strikes in Iraq and Syria, took place on August 2, 3, 4, 7, 8, 9 and 10.

All of this was only possible as the result of last December’s vote in Parliament authorising British airstrikes in Syria. Central to this was Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn allowing pro-war Labour MPs a “free vote.” As a result, 66 Labourite warmongers voted with the Conservative government, allowing the Tories to claim a political consensus for airstrikes that began immediately.

Even so, Parliament voted to support an air campaign against ISIS in Syria, not the use of ground troops and Special Forces.

The UK’s Special Forces are a law unto themselves, with the *Guardian* noting, “Convention is that they are never mentioned on the floor of the British parliament.” They are only subject to nominal oversight through Parliament’s intelligence committee.

December’s vote reversed an August 2013 vote in which former Tory Prime Minister David Cameron unsuccessfully sought Parliament’s backing for military action aimed at deposing Assad. At that time, under conditions of huge opposition to war among the population, and divisions in the political and military establishment as to its efficacy, Labour, along with 30 Conservative Party rebels, were obliged to oppose British military intervention against Assad. The vote meant that planned joint military action by the US and Britain in Syria was halted.

Corbyn continues to state his personal opposition to military action in Syria and Libya, but his newly appointed shadow secretary of state for defence, Clive Lewis, has pointedly refused to rule out support for military operations in Libya.