

Iraq, Afghanistan, and Other Special Ops “Successes”. America’s Elite Forces Deploy to a Record 147 Countries in 2015

By [Nick Turse](#)

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They’re some of the best soldiers in the world: highly trained, well equipped, and experts in weapons, intelligence gathering, and battlefield medicine. They study foreign cultures and learn local languages. They’re smart, skillful, wear some very iconic headgear, and their 12-member teams are “capable of conducting the full spectrum of special operations, from building indigenous security forces to identifying and targeting threats to U.S. national interests.”

They’re also quite successful. At least they think so.

“In the last decade, Green Berets have deployed into 135 of the 195 recognized countries in the world. Successes in Afghanistan, Iraq, Trans-Sahel Africa, the Philippines, the Andean Ridge, the Caribbean, and Central America have resulted in an increasing demand for [Special Forces] around the globe,” [reads](#) a statement on the website of U.S. Army Special Forces Command.

The Army’s Green Berets are among the best known of America’s elite forces, but they’re hardly alone. Navy SEALs, Air Force Air Commandos, Army Rangers, Marine Corps Raiders, as well as civil affairs personnel, logisticians, administrators, analysts, and planners, among others, make up U.S. Special Operations forces (SOF). They are the men and women who carry out America’s most difficult and secret military missions. Since 9/11, U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM) has [grown](#) in every conceivable way from funding and personnel to global reach and deployments. In 2015, according to Special Operations Command spokesman Ken McGraw, U.S. Special Operations forces deployed to a record-shattering 147 countries — 75% of the nations on the planet, which represents a [jump](#) of 145% since the waning days of the Bush administration. On any day of the year, in fact, America’s most elite troops can be found in 70 to 90 nations.

There is, of course, a certain logic to imagining that the increasing global sweep of these deployments is a sign of success. After all, why would you expand your operations into ever-more nations if they weren’t successful? So I decided to pursue that record of “success” with a few experts on the subject.

I started by asking Sean Naylor, a man who knows America’s most elite troops as few do and the author of [Relentless Strike: The Secret History of Joint Special Operations Command](#), about the claims made by Army Special Forces Command. He responded with a hearty laugh. “I’m going to give whoever wrote that the benefit of the doubt that they were

referring to successes that Army Special Forces were at least perceived to have achieved in those countries rather than the overall U.S. military effort,” he says. As he points out, the first post-9/11 months may represent the zenith of success for those troops. The initial operations in the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 — carried out largely by U.S. Special Forces, the CIA, and the Afghan Northern Alliance, backed by U.S. airpower — were “probably the high point” in the history of unconventional warfare by Green Berets, according to Naylor. As for the years that followed? “There were all sorts of mistakes, one could argue, that were made after that.” He is, however, quick to point out that “the vast majority of the decisions [about operations and the war, in general] were not being made by Army Special Forces soldiers.”

For Linda Robinson, author of [One Hundred Victories: Special Ops and the Future of American Warfare](#), the high number of deployments is likely a mistake in itself. “Being in 70 countries... may not be the best use of SOF,” she told me. Robinson, a senior international policy analyst at the Rand Corporation, advocates for a “more thoughtful and focused approach to the employment of SOF,” citing enduring missions in Colombia and the Philippines as the most successful special ops training efforts in recent years. “It might be better to say ‘Let’s not sprinkle around the SOF guys like fairy dust.’ Let’s instead focus on where we think we can have a success... If you want more successes, maybe you need to start reining in how many places you’re trying to cover.”

Most of the special ops deployments in those 147 countries are the type Robinson expresses skepticism about — short-term training missions by “white” operators like Green Berets (as opposed to the “[black ops](#)” man-hunting missions by the elite of the elite that captivate [Hollywood](#) and [video gamers](#)). Between 2012 and 2014, for example, Special Operations forces [carried out](#) 500 Joint Combined Exchange Training (JCET) missions in as many as 67 countries, practicing everything from combat casualty care and marksmanship to small unit tactics and desert warfare alongside local forces. And JCETs only scratch the surface when it comes to special ops missions to train proxies and allies. Special Operations forces, in fact, conduct a variety of [training efforts](#) globally.

A recent [\\$500 million](#) program, run by [Green Berets](#), to train a Syrian force of more than 15,000 over several years, for instance, crashed and burned in a very public way, yielding just four or five fighters in the field before being [abandoned](#). This particular failure followed much larger, far more expensive attempts to train the [Afghan](#) and [Iraqi](#) security forces in which Special Operations troops played a smaller yet still critical role. The results of these efforts recently prompted *TomDispatch* regular and retired Army colonel Andrew Bacevich to [write](#) that Washington should now assume “when it comes to organizing, training, equipping, and motivating foreign armies, that the United States is essentially clueless.”

The Elite Warriors of the Warrior Elite

In addition to training, another core role of Special Operations forces is direct action — counterterror missions like low-profile [drone assassinations](#) and [kill/capture raids](#) by muscled-up, high-octane operators. The exploits of the men — and they are [mostly men](#) (and mostly [Caucasian ones](#) at that) — behind these operations are chronicled in Naylor’s epic history of Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC), the secret counterterrorism organization that includes the military’s most elite and shadowy units like the Navy’s SEAL Team 6 and the Army’s Delta Force. A compendium of more than a decade of derring-do from Afghanistan to Iraq, Somalia to Syria, *Relentless Strike* paints a portrait of a highly-trained, well-funded, hard-charging counterterror force with global reach. Naylor calls it the

“perfect hammer,” but notes the obvious risk that “successive administrations would continue to view too many national security problems as nails.”

When I ask Naylor about what JSOC has ultimately achieved for the country in the Obama years, I get the impression that he doesn't find my question particularly easy to answer. He points to [hostage rescues](#), like the high profile effort to save “[Captain Phillips](#)” of the [Maersk Alabama](#) after the cargo ship was hijacked by [Somali pirates](#), and asserts that such missions might “inhibit others from seizing Americans.” One wonders, of course, if similar high-profile [failed missions](#) since then, including the SEAL raid that ended in the deaths of hostages Luke Somers, an American photojournalist, and Pierre Korkie, a South African teacher, as well as the unsuccessful attempt to rescue the late aid worker Kayla Mueller, might then have just the opposite effect.

“Afghanistan, you've got another fairly devilish strategic problem there,” Naylor says and offers up a question of his own: “You have to ask what would have happened if al-Qaeda in Iraq had not been knocked back on its heels by Joint Special Operations Command between 2005 and 2010?” Naylor calls attention to JSOC's special abilities to menace terror groups, keeping them unsteady through relentless intelligence gathering, raiding, and man-hunting. “It leaves them less time to take the offensive, to plan missions, and to plot operations against the United States and its allies,” he explains. “Now that doesn't mean that the use of JSOC is a substitute for a strategy... It's a tool in a policymaker's toolkit.”

Indeed. If what JSOC can do is bump off and capture individuals and pressure such groups but not decisively roll up militant networks, despite years of [anti-terror whack-a-mole](#) efforts, it sounds like a recipe for spending endless lives and endless funds on [endless war](#). “It's not my place as a reporter to opine as to whether the present situations in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Yemen were ‘worth’ the cost in blood and treasure borne by U.S. Special Operations forces,” Naylor tells me in a follow-up email. “Given the effects that JSOC achieved in Iraq (Uday and Qusay Hussein killed, Saddam Hussein captured, [al-Qaeda in Iraq leader Abu Musab] Zarqawi killed, al-Qaeda in Iraq eviscerated), it's hard to say that JSOC did not have an impact on that nation's recent history.”

Impacts, of course, are one thing, successes another. Special Operations Command, in fact, hedges its bets by claiming that it can only be as successful as the global commands under which its troops operate in each area of the world, including European Command, Pacific Command, Africa Command, Southern Command, Northern Command, and Central Command or CENTCOM, the geographic combatant command that oversees operations in the Greater Middle East. “We support the Geographic Combatant Commanders (GCCs) — if they are successful, we are successful; if they fail, we fail,” says SOCOM's [website](#).

With this in mind, it's helpful to return to Naylor's question: What if al-Qaeda in Iraq, which flowered in the years after the U.S. invasion, had never been targeted by JSOC as part of a man-hunting operation going after its foreign fighters, financiers, and military leaders? Given that the even more brutal Islamic State (IS) grew out of that targeted terror group, that IS was [fueled in many ways](#), say [experts](#), both [by](#) U.S. [actions](#) and [inaction](#), that its leader's rise was [bolstered](#) by U.S. operations, that “U.S. training helped [mold](#)” another of its chiefs, and that a U.S. prison served as its “[boot camp](#),” and given that the Islamic State now holds a significant swath of Iraq, was JSOC's campaign against its [predecessor](#) a net positive or a negative? Were special ops efforts in Iraq (and therefore in CENTCOM's area of operations) — JSOC's post-9/11 showcase counterterror campaign — a success or a failure?

Naylor [notes](#) that JSOC's failure to completely destroy al-Qaeda in Iraq allowed IS to grow and eventually sweep "across northern Iraq in 2014, seizing town after town from which JSOC and other U.S. forces had evicted al-Qaeda in Iraq at great cost several years earlier." This, in turn, led to the rushing of [special ops advisers](#) back into the country to aid the fight against the Islamic State, as well as to that program to train anti-Islamic State Syrian fighters that foundered and then imploded. By this spring, JSOC operators were not only [back in Iraq](#) and also on the ground [in Syria](#), but they were soon conducting [drone campaigns](#) in both of those [tottering nations](#).

This special ops merry-go-round in Iraq is just the latest in a long series of fiascos, large and small, to bedevil America's elite troops. [Over the years, in that country, in Afghanistan, and elsewhere, special operators have regularly been involved in all manner of mishaps, embroiled in various scandals, and implicated in numerous atrocities.](#) Recently, for instance, members of the Special Operations forces have come under [scrutiny](#) for an [air strike](#) on a Médecins Sans Frontières hospital in Afghanistan that [killed](#) at least 22 patients and staff, for an [alliance](#) with "unsavory partners" in the Central African Republic, for the ineffective and abusive Afghan police they trained and [supervised](#), and for a [shady deal](#) to provide SEALs with untraceable silencers that turned out to be junk, according to prosecutors.

Winners and Losers

JSOC was born of failure, a phoenix rising from the ashes of Operation Eagle Claw, the humiliating attempt to rescue 53 American hostages from the U.S. Embassy in Iran in 1980 that ended, instead, in the deaths of eight U.S. personnel. Today, the elite force trades on an aura of success in the shadows. Its missions are the [stuff](#) of [modern myths](#).

In his advance praise for Naylor's book, one cable news analyst called JSOC's operators "the finest warriors who ever went into combat." Even accepting this — with apologies to the [Mongols](#), the [Varangian Guard](#), Persia's [Immortals](#), and the [Ten Thousand](#) of Xenophon's *Anabasis* — questions remain: Have these "warriors" actually been successful beyond [budget battles](#) and the [box office](#)? Is exceptional tactical prowess enough? Are battlefield triumphs and the ability to batter terror networks through relentless raiding the same as victory? Such questions bring to mind an exchange that Army colonel Harry Summers, who served in Vietnam, had with a North Vietnamese counterpart in 1975. "You know, you never defeated us on the battlefield," Summers told him. After pausing to ponder the comment, Colonel Tu replied, "That may be so. But it is also irrelevant."

So what of those Green Berets who deployed to 135 countries in the last decade? And what of the Special Operations forces sent to 147 countries in 2015? And what about those Geographic Combatant Commanders across the globe who have hosted all those special operators?

I put it to Vietnam veteran Andrew Bacevich, author of [Breach of Trust: How Americans Failed Their Soldiers and Their Country](#). "As far back as Vietnam," he tells me, "the United States military has tended to confuse inputs with outcomes. Effort, as measured by operations conducted, bomb tonnage dropped, or bodies counted, is taken as evidence of progress made. Today, tallying up the number of countries in which Special Operations forces are present repeats this error. There is no doubt that U.S. Special Operations forces are hard at it in lots of different places. It does not follow that they are thereby actually accomplishing anything meaningful."

Nick Turse is the managing editor of TomDispatch and a fellow at the [Nation Institute](#). A 2014 Izzy Award and [American Book Award](#) winner for his book Kill Anything That Moves, his pieces have appeared in the [New York Times](#), the [Intercept](#), the Los Angeles Times, the Nation, and regularly at [TomDispatch](#). His latest book is [Tomorrow's Battlefield: U.S. Proxy Wars and Secret Ops in Africa](#).

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