

# The UK's 83 Military Interventions Around the World Since 1945

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*Britain has deployed its armed forces for combat over 80 times in 47 countries since the end of the Second World War, in episodes ranging from brutal colonial wars and covert operations to efforts to prop up favoured governments or to deter civil unrest*

The British military has used or threatened to use military force much more in the postwar world than is conventionally remembered or believed. *Declassified* has documented 83 interventions by the UK armed forces since 1945, in 47 different countries.

The most striking of the British uses of force have been the overt invasions or armed attempts to overthrow governments such as in British Guiana (now Guyana) in 1953, Egypt in the 1950s, Iraq in 2003 and Libya in 2011.

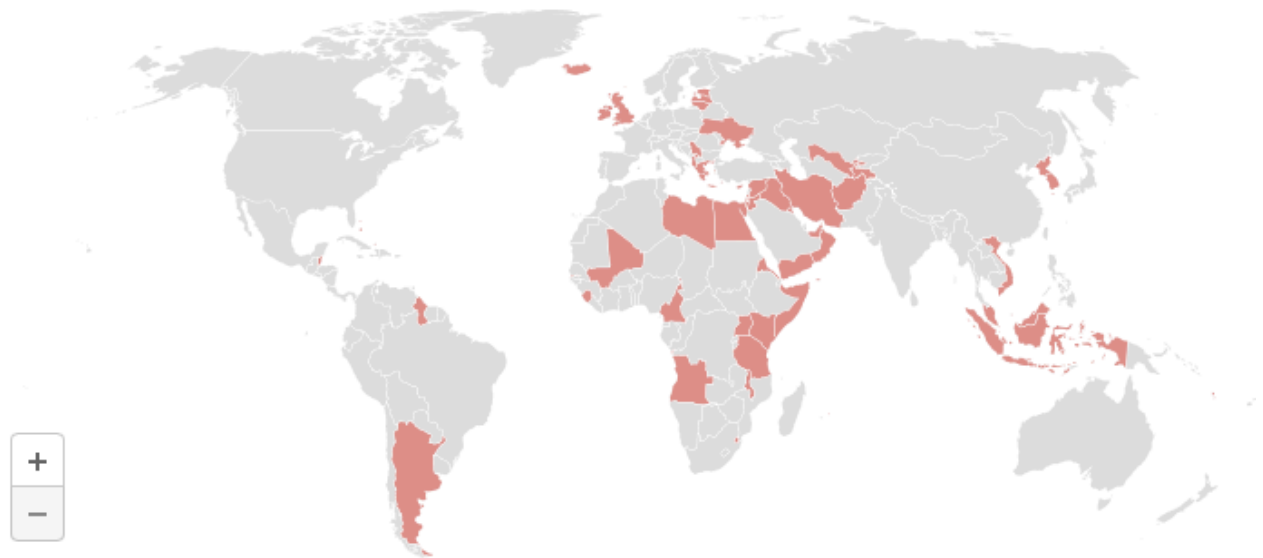
The brutal colonial counter-insurgency wars of the 1950s and 1960s – in Kenya, Malaya, Aden and Cyprus – involved the widespread use of torture and, often, pernicious operations to displace large numbers of people to control the local population.

In [Malaya](#) between 1948 and 1960, British forces herded hundreds of thousands of people into fortified camps, heavily bombed rural areas and resorted to extensive propaganda to win the conflict.

British [brutality](#) fighting 'Mau Mau' forces in Kenya demanding independence from the UK resulted in tens and perhaps hundreds of thousands of deaths, often from starvation in concentration camps.

UK military interventions since 1945

[Click on a country here to see the number of interventions.](#)



*\*Anguilla and Bermuda not visible*

Map: Declassified UK • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

## Colonial control

But this pattern of armed intervention – which was of course routine during the nineteenth century empire – was in the postwar period set immediately after Allied forces defeated Japan and Germany in 1945.

Britain's first interventions in the postwar world sought to suppress budding, popular movements fighting European imperialism. In 1945-46, British forces intervened in Vietnam and Indonesia to restore French and Dutch, respectively, colonial control. In Vietnam the British rearmed defeated Japanese imperial troops to fight pro-independence forces.

The deployment of force continued as routine over the decades, notably to prop up favoured regimes. Armed forces were dispatched to Oman (1957), Nyasaland (now Malawi, 1959), Brunei (1962), Anguilla (1969) and Jordan (1970) to bolster pro-British governments being threatened by independence or popular movements.

In 1964, British forces put down army mutinies in three countries in close succession in East Africa – Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania – to shore up pro-British governments just after they had become independent.

### UK MILITARY INTERVENTIONS SINCE 1945

Conflict	Britain's role
2022–present: Ukraine war	UK military aids combat operations, 'retired' special forces and other Britons fighting there, large supply of UK arms
2016-19: Covert operations in Libya	SAS and SBS forces advising on and fighting Islamic State
2015–present: Yemen war	British military training, advising, arming Saudi air force operations bombing Yemen, and secret ground deployment of UK forces
2014–present: War against Islamic State	RAF aircraft and drone strikes in Syria and Iraq and some special forces ground operations
2013-22: Intervention in Mali	Initial deployment of SAS followed by support to French-led counter-terrorism mission
2012 -present?: Covert war in Somalia	SAS force countering al-Shabab terrorists and drone strikes
2011–18: Covert war in Syria	Operations in support of opposition forces
2011: War in Libya	Air strikes and covert ground operations to overthrow Muammar Gaddafi regime
2003-09: Invasion and occupation of Iraq	UK forces played secondary role to US in military operations
2001–21: Invasion and occupation of Afghanistan	UK deployed ground forces, playing secondary role to US in military operations following 9/11
2000: Intervention in Sierra Leone	Deployment of ground forces to counter Revolutionary United Front militants
1998- 99: War against Yugoslavia (Kosovo)	Bombing of Yugoslav forces and covert support to the Kosovo Liberation Army
1998: Bombing of Iraq	Four-day campaign in December by US and UK to strike Iraqi regime targets
1994: Deployment to Kuwait	Military deployment to deter Iraqi threat to Kuwait
1991–2002: Bombing of Iraq	Sporadic air strikes on government targets in US/UK proclaimed no-fly zones in northern and southern Iraq
1990-91: Gulf war against Iraq	UK forces played secondary role to US in military operations to eject Iraq from Kuwait and defeat Saddam Hussein
1984–86: Covert operations in Soviet Union (Tajikistan/Uzbekistan)	Military operations to sabotage Soviet supply lines into Afghanistan

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## Covert wars

Covert military operations have been planned by Whitehall officials in numerous instances where their strategy would be unpopular at home or controversial abroad. British governments have if anything become [less and less transparent](#) about these covert operations over time.

The beginnings after the war were when UK forces sought to [stir up opposition](#) to emerging communist rule in Albania, Ukraine and the Baltic States in the late 1940s – operations which all failed to prevent these countries coming under communist control.

Covert wars continued in the 1950s in [Indonesia](#) – in an attempt to promote a rebellion against nationalist president Sukarno – and in the 1960s in [Yemen](#) – in a war to bog down the forces of Egypt's leader, Gamal Abdel Nasser, in which tens of thousands of people died.

In the 1980s, Margaret Thatcher's government executed Britain's largest postwar [covert operation](#) to date, in backing [mujahideen](#) warriors to counter the Soviet occupation of

Afghanistan.

The strategy involved not only supplying arms and training for combat inside Afghanistan, but also the sabotage of Moscow's supply lines inside the then Soviet republics of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

British covert operations have recently proliferated again in view of the unpopular wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. In 2011-13, Whitehall planners secretly launched at least four covert wars involving special forces on the ground in [Libya](#), [Syria](#), [Somalia](#) and [Mali](#).

## Overt intervention

Some of the UK's most brutal interventions have been with the US, notably the bombing of and occupation of Afghanistan after 2001, the UK's [supportive role](#) in Washington's near-destruction of Vietnam from the 1960s and the [forcible depopulation](#) of the Chagos Islands from 1968-73, to make way for a US military base in the Indian Ocean.

After Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990, the UK acted as the US' junior partner in a ferocious bombardment of Iraq the following year that destroyed much of the country's civilian infrastructure. Anglo-American bombing of Iraq continued for a decade after the Gulf War until the 2003 invasion.

On several occasions, the British military has been used to counter threats to favoured allies from neighbouring countries, such as the [deployment](#) to Kuwait in 1994 to deter a threat from Iraq's Saddam Hussein and the [dispatch](#) of troops to Aqaba in Jordan in 1949 to fend off a territorial threat from Israel.

The UK intervened at least four times in British Honduras (which became independent as Belize in 1981) – in 1948, 1957, 1962 and 1977 – to deter Guatemala from its claims over the territory. The Falklands war of 1982 – after Argentina invaded the islands – was far from being the first time a Latin America state had claimed territory it saw as a relic of the colonial period.

## Imposing order

Still more frequent when Britain was a formal colonial power was the despatch of forces to quell riots and protests – which occurred in countries as diverse as Singapore (1950), Bermuda (1968), New Hebrides (now Vanuatu, 1980), Hong Kong (1967), Mauritius (1965 and 1967) and the Maldives (1959) – and to break strikes – such as in the Bahamas (1958) and Swaziland (1963).

Britain's longest-running military deployment, lasting nearly three decades from 1969, was in Northern Ireland, where the armed forces and intelligence services' countering of the IRA also involved sectarian support for, and [collusion](#) with, loyalist paramilitary forces that contributed to hundreds of further deaths.

Only a handful of these interventions might be regarded as truly benign. The UK's deployment of forces to Sierra Leone in 2000 prevented the vicious Revolutionary United Front taking control of the capital, Freetown.

Britain's involvement in the Korean war in the early 1950s – one of the most destructive conflicts of the past century – upheld the non-communist south of the country, and allowed

a future South Korea to prosper.

But most of the UK military deployments have been to maintain colonial or postcolonial control of states and key resource interests, uphold British prestige or great power status, and demonstrate to the US – Whitehall's key ally – that London is, with Washington, still prepared to continue to rule the world by force.

## Not included

The list of interventions is far from exhaustive. It is unlikely to have found all the British military deployments for combat since 1945. Further, it does not include mercenary operations by British personnel, often backed by Whitehall, or purely intelligence operations to overthrow governments.

It also excludes military involvement in international peacekeeping missions, relief activities and actions to evacuate UK nationals from countries. Finally, it does not include training and advisory military operations which, often linked to British arms exports, are another key way Whitehall officials try to maintain their global influence.

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