



United Kingdom, the SAS in turmoil: legal investigations undermine the future of special forces

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Brigadier **Ed Butler CBE**, the decorated officer who led the **22 Special Air Service (SAS)** in the aftermath of September 11, has broken his silence in an interview with *The Times*, revealing the intimate and dramatic reality faced by His Majesty's troops. Amid unresolved trauma and the constant fear of **new investigations into historical operations** dating back to the era of the *Troubles* in Northern Ireland, a picture emerges of a veteran community weighed down by the burden of belated legal action.

Fear of the "knock at the door"

The former commander of the British elite unit admitted that he still lives with the **constant concern of retrospective legal action**: an anxiety shared, Butler says, by **hundreds of SAS veterans**, not only among those who served in Ulster, but also among those who fought decades later in theaters such as **Afghanistan and Syria**.

In 2012, **Butler himself was charged with murder** over his operational role in Northern Ireland. Although the case was later dropped, the emotional wounds remain deep:

*"We were dragged through a nine-month process that was physically and emotionally traumatic, **accused of murder and of being part of an alleged 'shoot-to-kill' policy**. We endured five days of hell in a Belfast courtroom. **It marked me deeply**, and it was an immense trauma not only for me, but for my entire family."*

Legislative reforms and the threat of "lawfare"

Further worsening the situation is the prospect that new government policies could **reopen historical cases**. The government argues that reviewing the investigations will provide answers and closure for the victims' families, but Butler's response is unequivocal: the measure has been described as **"horribly ill-considered"**, likely to **reopen old wounds**, deepen social divisions, and **inadvertently provide a propaganda boost** to radical republican groups.

A systemic impact on three fronts

The consequences of this phenomenon extend far beyond historical memory and directly affect the **strategic readiness of British defense**:

- **Veterans' mental health:** The ongoing psychological strain and fear of prosecution decades later have led several former personnel to seek **specialized psychiatric treatment and inpatient care**.
- **Strain on families:** Uncertainty and social stigma weigh on spouses and children, who are forced to share the burden of **perpetual legal insecurity**.
- **Operational effectiveness in the field:** **Soldiers currently serving are beginning to show hesitation in engagement scenarios**, fearing that any decision made in the urgency of battle could, years later, become the basis for a criminal charge.

Justice or political calculation?

The issue raised by the SAS veteran goes to the heart of military ethics: **those who served in uniform did so in response to orders and within the legal framework of the time**.

Continuing to prosecute them — while many former terrorists benefit from the provisions of the

Good Friday Agreement — risks turning the search for truth into a **political fiction at the expense of those who served the state.**

As Brigadier Butler warns, the fine line between legal oversight and **the systemic weakening of the armed forces** has been crossed: **without adequate protection for those operating on the front line, the human and institutional cost risks becoming unsustainable for the defense of the United Kingdom.**

News link: <https://www.thetimes.com/uk/defence/article/sas-soldiers-investigations-troubles-afghanistan-0rl3jwsdh>