

# A Very British Problem

The Evolution of Britain's Militarised Policing Industrial Complex

## Executive summary



# Abstract

Despite widespread myths that the British police are unarmed and govern through consent, paramilitary-style policing has a long and ugly history in the UK and across the British Empire. This report looks at the increasingly blurry line between the police and military and the role of the UK in militarised policing globally. Challenging the idea that war and policing are fundamentally different powers, it examines the evolution of Britain's policing industrial complex. It shows how a war mentality has infiltrated policing at various levels – from counter-terrorism to anti-protest policing to border control and the policing of gangs.

**Increasingly, the police are relying on high-tech, data-driven, and military-grade technology to surveil the British population**

## Key areas of concern

### Surveillance

Policing bodies have been equipped with powerful new surveillance technologies that vastly tip power in favour of the state. In many cases, these tools are aimed at 'preemptive policing', an approach that often justifies the indiscriminate use of technology and

expanded surveillance in the name of crime prevention. From phone extraction tools to live facial recognition technology and mobile fingerprint scanners, police agencies are rolling out invasive surveillance technologies in the absence of sufficient legislative or Parliamentary oversight. In many cases, these surveillance technologies amplify racist, sexist, and classist police practices.

### Paramilitary policing of protests

In recent years, the right to protest has been eroded and British police forces have been empowered to use excessive force against demonstrators. In some ways, this is nothing new. Paramilitary-style policing was the norm across Britain's vast colonial empire. In the 1980s, the police cracked down on strikes and urban rebellions throughout the country. Now, with the rise of mass protest movements like BLM (Black Lives Matter) and Extinction Rebellion (XR), the police have renewed these tactics, empowered by recent legislation such as the Policing, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022. Black activists have been disproportionately subject to excessive police force, as evidenced by recent BLM protests.

### Border control and counterterrorism

Hyper-militarisation is especially pronounced in the realm of counterterrorism and border control, both of which have been heavily funded since the 9/11 and 7/7 attacks. Armed counterterrorism units, immigration enforcement officers, and the UK Border Force draw directly from the military handbook. Counterterrorist efforts have also led to the greater weaponisation of the British police and

the adoption of more aggressive, paramilitary tactics. In addition, police officers are increasingly acting like border guards, working with the Home Office to carry out immigration control.

## The private tech sector

Tech companies increasingly see the police as a new market for their goods. National, international, and multinational tech companies have won a number of lucrative contracts with British policing and authorities in recent years. This includes the Israeli digital forensics firm Cellebrite, Japanese tech giant NEC, and the controversial US software company Palantir. Under policies of austerity and privatisation, police forces have been encouraged to turn to private companies, ostensibly to cut costs.

## Britain's global role in militarised policing

Britain is entangled in global policing networks, playing an outsize role in shaping policing trends worldwide. It exercises its influence by training foreign police and security forces, especially in the area of border control. The UK is also a key node within the international weapons trade. Britain is the second biggest arms exporter in the world, the fourth largest exporter of

security technology, and a major supplier of other police equipment, including anti-protest gear and telecommunications interception technology.

## Over-policing

Since the 1990s, a succession of Labour, coalition, and Conservative governments have extended the powers of the police. Two ways that this has manifested itself are in the increased use of stop-and-search and the growing use of tasers – both of which are disproportionately used against Black communities. Ruling parties and police agencies alike have helped to construct an ever-changing set of internal enemies, who have been variously defined as ‘anti-social’ youth, ‘gangs’, ‘illegal immigrants’, ‘terrorists’, and, more recently, ‘aggravated activists’.

**“Militarised policing is a longstanding British phenomenon with deep roots in the country's past. It's time for Brits to face up to our very British problems”**

**The full report will be released on 4 August 2022**

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