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ISIS/Daesh: the military response in Iraq and Syria

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Cover page image copyright: Tornado GR4 Aircraft from 31 Squadron RAF Marham by UK Ministry of Defence

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Summary

A coalition of 68 countries are engaged in international efforts to counter ISIS (also known as Daesh, ISIL or so-called Islamic State). The military campaign in Iraq and Syria is just one aspect of that broader strategy which also includes measures to restrict the flow of foreign fighters, stop foreign financing, provide humanitarian assistance to Iraq and Syria and strategic communications (propaganda, public diplomacy and psychological operations) intended to counter ISIS' ideology.

It is the military campaign against ISIS which is the focus of this paper. It does not examine the ongoing civil war in Syria or the peace talks.

Objectives of the military campaign

The United States has led airstrikes against ISIS in Iraq since 8 August 2014. Operations were extended into Syria toward the end of September 2014.

With a view to building the capacity of local forces on the ground, offensive military action in Iraq and Syria has focused largely on air operations in support of those local forces, providing intelligence, reconnaissance, surveillance and attack capabilities.

The other element of the campaign has been the training of Iraqi and Kurdish security forces as a means of enabling them to take responsibility for operations against ISIS on the ground. Targeted Special Forces operations are providing advisory assistance to Iraqi and local forces on the ground. A US-led programme of support is also being provided to opposition forces in Syria.

Military action in Iraq is being conducted at the request of the Iraqi government, which coalition partners consider provides a firm legal basis for operations. Military operations in Syria are not at the request of the Assad government, and are being conducted in the absence of a UN Security Council resolution specifically *authorising* such action. However, coalition nations have expressed the view that such operations are legally justified on the basis of the collective self-defence of Iraq, and the individual self-defence of participating nations.

Over the last year the dynamics of the campaign have begun to shift as ISIS has increasingly lost territory, operations to re-take Mosul and Raqqa have begun, and regional players such as Turkey have made moves to secure their spheres of influence. The lines between the campaign to defeat ISIS and the Syrian civil conflict are also becoming increasingly blurred with Russia's support for the Assad regime complicating the strategic picture in Syria.

Situational report

As of 28 February 2017 Coalition aircraft have conducted a total of 18,666 airstrikes against ISIS targets in Iraq and Syria (Iraq – 11,245 and Syria – 7,421). Approximately 68% of airstrikes in Iraq and 95% of airstrikes in Syria have been conducted by US aircraft.

Iraq

The Pentagon estimates that ISIS has lost 60% of the territory it once controlled in Iraq and now occupies less than 10% of Iraqi territory in total.

After months of preparation the operation to liberate Mosul began on 17 October 2016. A coalition of 35,000 Iraqi security forces, Kurdish Peshmerga, Sunni Arab tribesmen and Shia paramilitary forces are participating in the operation, supported by Coalition intelligence and surveillance, airstrikes, and 100 US Special Operations personnel advising on the ground. Initially Turkey had also been pushing for a role in the campaign, a proposal which the Iraqi Prime Minister, Haider al-Abadi, firmly rejected.

After three and half months of fighting the Iraqi Government announced on 24 January 2017 that the city to the east of the River Tigris had been liberated from ISIS. Iraqi security forces now control all areas inside the eastern part of the city and the eastern bank of the river for the first time in two and a half years. As such attention has now increasingly shifted toward the west of the city.

Operations to liberate the western part of the city began on 19 February 2017. Iraqi forces, backed by the coalition, have liberated Mosul airport allowing troops access to the city from the southwest. However, the dense urban environment of the old city and the number of civilians in western Mosul is recognised as presenting a significant challenge to Iraqi security forces moving forward.

Syria

The Coalition has estimated that ISIS has lost more than 25% of the territory it once held in Syria.

Over the summer operations by Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), an alliance of opposition and local forces including the Syrian Arab Coalition and Kurdish forces in Syria, focused on liberating the town of Manbij, on Syria's northern border with Turkey. Assisted by Coalition forces Manbij was liberated in mid-August 2016 after two months of fighting.

Efforts to secure the region along Turkey's border have advanced significantly over the last few months after an offensive led by an alliance of Syrian rebel groups, and supported by Turkey, was launched in late August (Operation *Euphrates Shield*). Key towns have been liberated from ISIS including al-Rai and Jarabulus. Turkish involvement in the campaign to take Jarabulus represented Turkey's first full-scale incursion into Syria since the civil conflict began. While striking a blow against ISIS, Turkey's actions have also been motivated by a desire to secure its regional sphere of influence and stop the Kurds from advancing into areas in north eastern Syria, thereby unifying the eastern and western areas that they currently hold along the Turkish border.

Turkish -led forces have since continued to push south and recently liberated the town of al-Bab, after almost a month of fighting. Although not supported by coalition forces in its initial stages, the campaign to re-

take al-Bab was increasingly backed by coalition intelligence and surveillance, and more recently airstrikes. Syrian government forces have also been operating in the region and in mid-January Russian warplanes began conducting joint airstrikes with Turkey in the surrounding area. Following the liberation of al-Bab concerns have been raised that Turkey may now turn its attention to Manbij, and other areas in northern Syria under the control of Kurdish forces, in an effort to secure their sphere of influence.

With the Mosul offensive now underway attention has increasingly turned to the campaign to liberate Raqqa. On 6 November 2016 the SDF announced that the campaign to "isolate", and eventually liberate, Raqqa had begun. The SDF will be supported by coalition airstrikes. Turkey has continued to push for a role in the campaign to liberate Raqqa, although has called for Syrian Kurdish forces, specifically the YPG, to be excluded from any operation. Russia is not currently involved in the plans to liberate Raqqa.

The Trump administration's comprehensive strategy

Following his inauguration in January 2017 US President Donald Trump stated that "defeating ISIS and other radical Islamic terror groups will be our highest priority" and that "to defeat and destroy these groups, we will pursue aggressive joint and coalition military operations when necessary". To that end, on 28 January President Trump signed a Presidential Memorandum directing the US administration to develop, within 30 days, a comprehensive plan to defeat ISIS.

The Pentagon presented its plan to the US National Security Council's Principals Committee on 27 February 2017. The plan has been described as a "preliminary framework" that extends both beyond the military and beyond the immediate theatre of conflict in Iraq and Syria. No official details of the plan have been made public, to date. Speculation within the media has focused on the possibility of deploying US "boots on the ground" in Syria and the creation of "safe zones" for the protection of civilians.

Who are the main players in the military campaign?

Although there are 68 coalition countries engaged in international efforts to counter ISIS, only a handful of nations are directly involved in offensive air combat operations. The number of countries involved in the train and assist programme is more substantial, although still only represents less than half of the Coalition's members. In total 29 nations contribute 3,800 troops to the counter-ISIS operation.

Air campaign

The countries currently conducting air strikes in both Iraq and Syria are:

- United States
- France
- Australia
- Jordan
- United Kingdom
- Belgium

Denmark recently withdrew its combat aircraft.

The countries conducting air combat operations solely in Syria are:

- Turkey
- Saudi Arabia
- United Arab Emirates

Participation by Saudi Arabia and UAE is, however, considered to have been minimal.

A number of other coalition countries, notably Canada, Germany and Poland, are providing force enabling capabilities such as air-to-air refuelling and surveillance and reconnaissance assets in support of coalition air operations. NATO is also providing direct AWACS support to the coalition, in order to increase situational awareness. That support began at the end of October 2016 with one E-3 aircraft currently based in Turkey. NATO Leaders have sought to highlight, however, that such assistance "does not make NATO a member of this coalition".

Train, advise and assist mission

The United States, the UK and a number of other coalition countries have deployed military personnel on the ground in Iraq to train Iraqi and Kurdish security forces. These are not combat troops and are not deployed in an offensive role.

To date, over 70,000 Iraqi personnel have been trained, including Iraqi troops, Peshmerga, police and border forces and other tribal fighters. The number of Iraqi forces being trained has also increased three-fold since October 2016, with approximately 3,000 Iraqi forces being trained every month.

In addition to training, the US is also leading efforts to advise and assist the Iraqi Security Forces and Peshmerga at the command level.

Several coalition countries have also been providing Iraqi and Kurdish forces with logistical assistance and resources, including the provision of arms, ammunition and other military equipment. Financial assistance for the payment of Peshmerga salaries has also been provided.

The US is also leading a programme of training for moderate opposition forces in Syria. The focus of that programme is on "equipping and enabling" selected groups of vetted leaders and their units so that over time they can make a concerted push into territory still controlled by ISIL". The US is providing equipment packages and weapons, and providing air support as and when necessary. In October 2016 the UK announced that it would resume its training of Syrian opposition forces, outside of Syria, following a request for support from the US.

The US has also deployed Special Forces personnel in northern Syria and in Iraq in order to provide logistical and planning assistance to Iraqi, Kurdish and other local forces at the command level.

Turkey is also providing support and assistance to local opposition forces in northern Syria.

British military participation

Parliamentary approval

In September 2014 Parliament voted to support offensive military action in Iraq. However, that vote did not extend to offensive operations in Syria. In July 2015 the Secretary of State for Defence indicated that the Government could seek further approval from Parliament to extend air strikes into Syria provided that "there is a sufficient consensus behind it". A debate, and vote, on extending offensive military action against ISIS in Syria was subsequently held on 2 December 2015. Parliament voted in support of military action exclusively against ISIS in Syria by 397 to 223 votes.

Offensive military action in Iraq and Syria

On 30 September 2014 Tornado aircraft carried out their first airstrikes on ISIS targets in Iraq (Operation *Shader*).

RAF Tornado aircraft conducted the first offensive operation in Syria on 3 December 2015. RAF aircraft had, however, been conducting non-offensive surveillance operations over Syria since 21 October 2014.

The RAF is the primary service in this operation and has deployed a mixture of combat, surveillance, reconnaissance, and refuelling/transport aircraft. Aircraft currently deployed include:

- 8 Tornado GR4 fast jet aircraft
- 6 Typhoon combat aircraft (from 2 December 2015)
- Reaper Remotely Piloted Air Systems
- Airseeker surveillance aircraft
- Voyager air-to-air refuelling aircraft
- 2 C130 transport aircraft.
- E3-D sentry aircraft
- Sentinel surveillance aircraft.

RAF Akrotiri in Cyprus is serving as the main operating base for aircraft in the region.

In August 2016 the MOD announced that the Type 45 destroyer HMS *Daring* would deploy to the Gulf in order to provide air defence support to US Carrier Groups deployed in the region.

At present, approximately 850 UK personnel are currently supporting Operation *Shader* in Iraq and Syria. With the addition of the UK's training contingent in Iraq (500 personnel) the UK's total footprint across the region in support of this operation is approximately 1,350 personnel. Those personnel on the ground are not combat troops.

The UK has been the second largest contributor to the air campaign in Iraq and Syria. UK aircraft have flown over 3,000 missions as part of Operation *Shader*, and as of mid-February 2017 had conducted over 1,200 airstrikes against ISIS targets in Iraq and Syria. The RAF is conducting operations at a tempo not seen since the first Gulf War.

The Government has consistently maintained that no civilian casualties in Iraq or Syria, ***to date***, have resulted from UK air strikes.

Training

Since October 2014 the UK has been providing training to Kurdish Peshmerga forces and military advice to the Iraqi security forces. Specifically, the UK is co-ordinating the coalition's counter-IED training programme. At the end of June 2016 the MOD confirmed that it would expand its training assistance, with the deployment of an additional 50 military trainers to the Al Asad airbase in Western Iraq to provide counter-IED, infantry skills and medical training. More recently the MOD confirmed that UK personnel would expand its training to other locations in Iraq.

The total UK training contingent based in Iraq comprises 500 personnel.

To date, the UK has trained nearly 40,000 Iraqi security forces personnel, including 7,300 Kurdish Peshmerga, in Besmaya, Taji and al-Asad. Many of those trained personnel are currently conducting operations in Mosul.

On 25 October 2016 the Defence Secretary announced that the UK would resume training of vetted moderate Syrian opposition groups following a request by the US for support of its train and equip programme. 20 UK personnel are expected to deploy to a number of locations in the region, outside of Syria. Training will focus on basic infantry tactics; command and control; medical training and explosive hazard awareness training.

Gifting of equipment to the Peshmerga

The UK has also supplied over 50 tonnes of non-lethal support, 40 heavy machine guns, nearly half a million rounds of ammunition and £600,000 worth of military equipment to the Kurdish Peshmerga since August 2014. In May 2016 the Defence Secretary announced that a further £1.4 million of ammunition would be gifted.

Costs of the mission

In March 2015 the MOD confirmed that the net additional costs of the military air operation would be met from the Treasury Special Reserve; while the costs of training and equipping the Iraqi and Kurdish security forces, and the provision of key enablers, would be met from the MOD's Deployed Military Activity Pool (DMAP).

In answer to a Parliamentary Question in February 2017 the MOD set the operational costs of the counter-ISIS mission, up to the end of March 2016, at £238.8 million (£21.9 million for 2014-15 and £216.9 million in 2015-16).

DMAP costs for 2014-15 were £23.5 million and £23.7 million for 2015-16. However, not all of those costs are directly attributable to the counter-ISIS campaign.

Up to October 2016, and as part of those overall costs, approximately £63 million has been spent on Brimstone and Hellfire missiles.

Russian involvement in the campaign against Daesh/ISIS

In September 2015 Russia began forward-deploying troops and other military assets to Humaymim air base in Latakia province on the Mediterranean coast. Estimates of the number of deployed Russian military capabilities varied but what was generally accepted was that Russia had established a powerful strike group in Syria consisting of fast jet combat aircraft, utility and attack helicopters and a small number of T-90 tanks, armoured personnel carriers, artillery units and howitzers.

On 30 September 2015 Russia launched its first airstrikes in Syria, the first time that Russian forces had undertaken a military operation beyond the boundaries of the former Soviet Union since the end of the Cold War. Russia presented the campaign as a counter-terrorist action to protect religious minorities and to protect the secular government. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said that it was targeting ISIS "and other terrorist groups" in Syria at the invitation of the legitimate Syrian government.

Throughout its entire campaign Russia has been continually criticised for targeting opposition groups, as opposed to ISIS, including moderate opposition forces supported by the US. Russian airstrikes are also estimated to have caused significant civilian casualties, with Russia being accused of deliberately targeting civilian infrastructure such as hospitals.

In mid-February 2016 the International Syria Support Group reached agreement on a ceasefire that would apply to all parties engaged in hostilities against another party, aside from those directed at ISIS or the al-Nusra front, or Jabhat Fatah al-Sham, as it has been known since dropping its al-Qaeda affiliation in July 2016. Just over two weeks later, and after a five-month air campaign, President Putin announced a somewhat surprise drawdown of "the main part" of Russian combat forces in Syria, stating that the Russian campaign "had been completed".

However, Russia has retained a significant military presence in Syria, including combat aircraft, attack helicopters and air defence systems.

Ongoing support for the Syrian regime

Following the February ceasefire agreement, many analysts concurred that there had been a shift in Russian military activity, which appeared to be increasingly focused on ISIS and other groups such as Jabhat Fatah al-Sham. This was a position confirmed by the Pentagon on 18 May 2016 when it stated that "in the last several weeks, a majority of their strikes have been more ISIL focused".

However, that shift in attention appeared to have been relatively short-lived as Russian operations in support of Syrian government forces subsequently came to dominate the strategic picture in Syria, in particular in the besieged city of Aleppo which became the focus of a

major assault by Syrian government forces, backed by militias, Iranian ground forces and Russian air power.

The result has been an increased blurring of the lines between the campaign to defeat ISIS in Syria and Russia's involvement in the broader civil conflict and its support for the Assad regime.

Focus after the fall of Aleppo

By mid-December 2016 Syrian forces, backed by Russia, had succeeded in re-taking eastern Aleppo from rebel opposition forces. A subsequent Turkish/Russian-brokered ceasefire agreement, followed by Russian-led peace talks in Astana in January 2017 has been regarded by many as indicative of Russia's desire to take on the role of power broker in the region.

As such, the possibility of a drawdown of Russian forces has been widely mooted. With the exception of the withdrawal of Russia's aircraft carrier in the region, there has, however, been little evidence, to date, of a drawdown; more a change of focus. In recent weeks a battalion of Russian military police has deployed to Aleppo in order to enhance security; while Russian involvement in counter-ISIS operations has increased. Russian warplanes have been conducting airstrikes against ISIS forces in Palmyra, around the eastern Government enclave of Dayr al-Zawr and in conjunction with Turkey in and around the town of al-Bab near the Turkish border.

At present Russia's actions, in concert with Syrian government forces, are focused on ISIS targets in eastern Syria and the region north of Aleppo. The question remains, however, as to whether it will increasingly turn its focus towards Raqqa. Coalition plans for the isolation and liberation of Raqqa currently do not envisage Russian participation. However, Russian aircraft are reported to have targeted ISIS positions in Raqqa in recent weeks; while Russian Defence Minister Sergey Shoigu, has reportedly indicated Russia's willingness to engage in joint operations with the US in the region.

1. Background

A coalition of 68 countries are engaged in international efforts to counter ISIS (also known as Daesh, ISIL or so-called Islamic State).[1] The military campaign in Iraq and Syria is just one aspect of that broader strategy which also includes measures to restrict the flow of foreign fighters, stop foreign financing, provide humanitarian assistance to Iraq and Syria and strategic communications (propaganda, public diplomacy and psychological operations) intended to counter ISIS' ideology.[2]

As Defence Secretary, Michael Fallon, pointed out in the House on 20 July 2015:

> Our strategy is… comprehensive and broader than simply military action. It deals with the ideology and territory that is ISIL's centre of gravity, and which it is committed to expanding. The military element is, however, essential. The coalition has so far helped halt and hold ISIL after its rapid advance across Iraq last summer. Coalition airpower, including sophisticated UK aircraft, flies daily missions to strike ISIL targets and to gather intelligence. The air campaign is helping to turn the tide and will support ground forces ultimately to defeat ISIL.[3]

It is the military campaign against ISIS which is the focus of this paper. It does not examine the ongoing civil war in Syria or the requisite peace process, which is the subject of other Commons Library briefing papers.

Box 1: Background reading

A series of Commons Library briefing papers, since June 2014, have examined the origins and rise of ISIS, the international reaction to their emergence on the world stage, the initial humanitarian assistance operation and the subsequent military response to events as they have unfolded. More recent papers have also examined the Syrian civil conflict and efforts to achieve peace:

- *Syrian refugees and the UK response,* CBP6805,10 January 2017
- *Aleppo humanitarian situation,* CBP7832, 12 December 2016
- *Iraq and Syria update*, CBP7727, 11 October 2016
- *Religious persecution in the Middle East*, CBP7658, 15 July 2016
- *Declaring Daesh massacres 'genocide'*, CBP7561, 15 April 2016
- *Seeking a negotiated solution in Syria*, CBP7392, 4 February 2016
- *Iraq and Syria: Developments in 2015*, CBP7261, 27 November 2015
- *Legal basis for UK military action in Syria*, CBP7404, 1 December 2015
- *France and Article 42(7) of the Treaty on the European Union*, CBP7390, 18 November 2015
- *UK drone attack in Syria: legal questions*, CBP7332, 20 October 2015
- *ISIS/Daesh: one year on*, July 2015
- *ISIS and the sectarian conflict in the Middle East,* RP15/16, March 2015
- *Iraq, Syria and ISIS – recent developments*, CBP06977, 25 September 2014
- *Military and humanitarian assistance to Iraq*, CBP06960, 8 September 2014

1 Ministry of Defence press release, 15 December 2016
2 See US Department of State: the global coalition to counter ISIL. The British government has suggested that there are 63 countries currently in the global coalition.
3 HC Deb 20 July 2015, c1233

- *Worsening humanitarian crisis in Syria and Iraq*, CBP06926, 8 July 2014
- *Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant and the takeover of Mosul*, CBP06915, 20 June 2014
- *Military options in Iraq*, CBP06917, 16 June 2014

2. Objectives of the military campaign

Summary

The United States has led airstrikes against ISIS in Iraq since 8 August 2014. Operations were extended into Syria toward the end of September 2014.

With a view to building the capacity of local forces on the ground, offensive military action in Iraq and Syria has focused largely on air operations in support of those local forces, providing intelligence, reconnaissance, surveillance and attack capabilities.

The other element of the campaign has been the training of Iraqi and Kurdish security forces as a means of enabling them to take responsibility for operations against ISIS on the ground. Targeted Special Forces operations are providing advisory assistance to Iraqi and local forces on the ground. A US-led programme of support is also being provided to opposition forces in Syria.

Military action in Iraq is being conducted at the request of the Iraqi government, which coalition partners consider provides a firm legal basis for operations. Military operations in Syria are not at the request of the Assad government, and are being conducted in the absence of a UN Security Council resolution specifically *authorising* such action. However, coalition nations have expressed the view that such operations are legally justified on the basis of the collective self-defence of Iraq, and the individual self-defence of participating nations.

Over the last year the dynamics of the campaign have begun to shift as ISIS has increasingly lost territory, operations to re-take Mosul and Raqqa have begun, and regional players such as Turkey have made moves to secure their spheres of influence. The lines between the campaign to defeat ISIS and the Syrian civil conflict are also becoming increasingly blurred with Russia's support for the Assad regime complicating the strategic picture in Syria.

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Iraq

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4 US Department of Defense, 22 February 2017

the first time in two and a half years. As such attention has now increasingly shifted toward the west of the city.

Operations to liberate the western part of the city began on 19 February 2017. Iraqi forces, backed by the coalition, have liberated Mosul airport allowing troops access to the city from the southwest. However, the dense urban environment of the old city and the number of civilians in western Mosul is recognised as presenting a significant challenge to Iraqi security forces moving forward.

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Efforts to secure the region along Turkey's border have advanced significantly over the last few months after an offensive led by an alliance of Syrian rebel groups, and supported by Turkey, was launched in late August (Operation *Euphrates Shield*). Key towns have been liberated from ISIS including al-Rai and Jarabulus. Turkish involvement in the campaign to take Jarabulus represented Turkey's first full-scale incursion into Syria since the civil conflict began. While striking a blow against ISIS, Turkey's actions have also been motivated by a desire to secure its regional sphere of influence and stop the Kurds from advancing into areas in north eastern Syria, thereby unifying the eastern and western areas that they currently hold along the Turkish border.

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The Trump administration's comprehensive strategy

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As former US Defense Secretary, Ash Carter, noted at the July 2016 meeting of the counter-ISIL coalition:

> Our campaign's strategic approach is to identify and enable capable and motivated local forces who can deliver ISIL a lasting defeat with our strong, mighty support. Only local forces can deliver and sustain such a defeat. US and coalition forces can enable them with our vast military power, but it is local forces who must hold and govern territory after it has been retaken from ISIL and restore a decent life to the people who live there.[5]

Military action in Iraq is being conducted at the request of the Iraqi government, which coalition partners consider provides a firm legal basis for operations. Military operations in Syria are not at the request of the Assad government,[6] and are being conducted in the absence of a UN Security Council resolution specifically *authorising* such action. However, coalition nations have expressed the view that such operations are legally justified on the basis of the collective self-defence of Iraq, and the individual self-defence of participating nations.[7]

Coalition leaders outlined at the very outset of the campaign that it would be one of "be patience and persistence, not shock and awe."[8] In October 2015 the then Foreign Secretary, Philip Hammond, suggested that a three-year timeframe was the current expectation of military commanders. He commented:

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5 US Defense Secretary, *Opening remarks at counter-ISIL foreign and defense minister meeting*, 21 July 2016

6 Although President Assad had said that he was willing to cooperate with the US in the fight against terrorism in Syria, ('Syria's President Speaks: A Conversation With Bashar al-Assad', *Foreign Affairs,* March-April 2015)

7 Library Briefing Paper CBP7404, *Legal basis for UK military action in Syria*, 1 December 2015 examines these issues in greater detail.

8 HC Deb 26 September 2014 c1264 and "U.S. says won't unleash 'shock and awe' air campaign in Syria", *Reuters,* 16 September 2014

> We always said, at the beginning of the intervention last summer that it would probably take three years to defeat ISIL militarily. I spoke to General John Allen, the US President's special envoy on this subject, just a few weeks ago. His view is that that remains correct, and we still have another two years to go to a military solution in Iraq.[9]

Over the last year the dynamics of the campaign have begun to shift as ISIS has increasingly lost territory, operations to re-take Mosul and Raqqa have begun, and regional players such as Turkey have made moves to secure their spheres of influence. The lines between the campaign to defeat ISIS and the Syrian civil conflict are also becoming increasingly blurred with Russia's support for the Assad regime complicating the strategic picture in Syria.[10]

2.1 Situational report

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According to US Department of Defense assessments, ISIS targets either damaged or destroyed totalled 31,900 as of 26 September 2016. Those assets included 164 tanks, 388 armoured vehicles, 7,948 buildings, 2,050 staging areas, 8,638 fighting positions, 2,638 elements of oil infrastructure and 10,074 other targets.[12]

Recent Pentagon assessments have suggested that ISIS are:

> still capable of fiercely defending the ground they've taken […] They're not making anything easy. They're fighting hard to retain the vestiges of their physical caliphate […] They're also capable of launching dangerous attacks in Iraq and Syria and in this region, as have recently seen in Palmyra […]
>
> We also know that they are plotting attacks on the West and we know that central to external operations plotting is the city of Raqqa…[13]

That assessment also suggested that between 12,000 and 15,000 ISIS fighters remained across Iraq and Syria.[14]

US Central Command provides updates on operations. Estimates released by the Department of Defense on 31 January 2017 state that the US has spent $11.4 billion, or an average of $12.7 million per day, on operations related to ISIS since August 2014. Over that period airstrikes have accounted for between 40% and 50% of those costs,

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9 HC Deb 20 October 2015, c812
10 This is examined in greater detail in Library briefing CBP 7727, *Iraq and Syria update*, 11 October 2016
11 US Department of Defense, 22 February 2017
12 US Department of Defense, accessed 26 September 2016. Updates no longer appear to be available on the Pentagon website.
13 US Department of Defense Press Briefing, 14 December 2016
14 ibid

excluding munitions, which have accounted for a further 22% - 24% of costs.[15]

Iraq

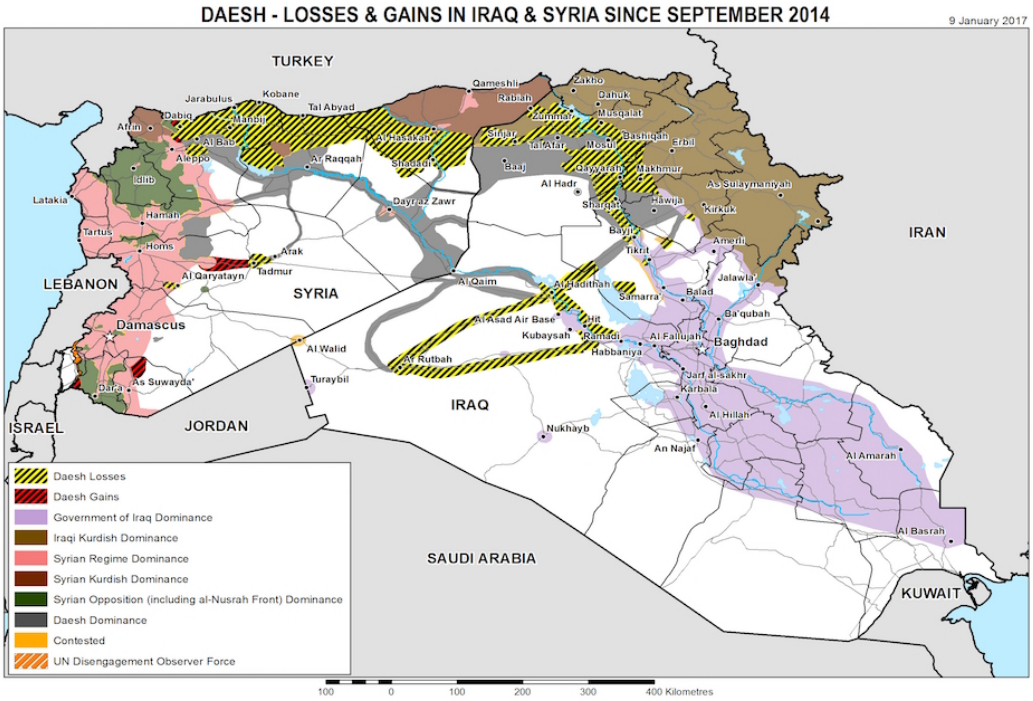
In November 2015 the British Government suggested that 30% of the territory that ISIS gained in Iraq after its advance in the summer of 2014, had been regained.[16] In a speech on 14 December 2015 then US President Barack Obama suggested that that figure was nearer to 40%, a figure he reiterated in a statement on the campaign at the end of February 2016 following the liberation of the Iraqi city of Ramadi.[17]

According to the Pentagon, that figure stood at nearly 50% at the end of June 2016,[18] following the liberation by Iraqi forces of the key city of Hit, in the Euphrates River Valley in April 2016; the town of Rutba in western Iraq in mid-May 2016;[19] and Fallujah at the end of June 2016, after a five-week long campaign.

Over summer 2016 further gains were made with the liberation of Qayyarah airbase at the beginning of July 2016 and subsequently the town of Qayyarah, to the south of Mosul, on the Western bank of the river Tigris in August 2016. The town was regarded as a strategic stepping stone for further operations in the region and played a key role in shaping operations around Mosul, involving both Iraqi Security Forces, to the south, and the Kurdish Peshmerga, to the north of Mosul.

In a press briefing on 1 February 2017 the Pentagon suggested that "the coalition has liberated about 60 percent of ISIL-held territory in Iraq".[20] It now occupies less than 10% of Iraqi territory in total.[21]

15 US Department of Defense, *Cost of operations update*, June 2015- January 2017
16 FCO press release, 13 November 2015
17 *Remarks by the President on progress against ISIL*, 26 February 2016
18 US Air Force Central Command, *Air Power Summary*, 30 June 2016
19 Although a remote town, Rutba was regarded as an important staging post for ISIS, being located south of a key ISIS-controlled border crossing into Syria which was being used to move militants and supplies into Iraq. It also lies on the main route between Baghdad and Jordan.
20 US Department of Defense press briefing, 1 February 2017
21 MOD Press Release, 23 September 2016



Source: Ministry of Defence

The liberation of Mosul

After months of preparation the operation to liberate Mosul began on 17 October 2016. A coalition of 35,000 Iraqi security forces, Kurdish Peshmerga, Sunni Arab tribesmen and Shia paramilitary forces are participating in the operation, supported by Coalition intelligence and surveillance and airstrikes and 100 US Special Operations personnel advising on the ground.

Initially Turkey had also been pushing for a role in the campaign,[22] a proposal which the Iraqi Prime Minister, Haider al-Abadi, firmly rejected. On a visit to Baghdad in October 2016 the then US Defence Secretary, Ash Carter, sought to reaffirm "the vital importance of every country operating with full respect for Iraqi sovereignty",[23] a comment thought by many to be directed at Turkey.[24]

From the outset the operation was expected to take several weeks, if not months. As Pentagon Spokesman Peter Cook, succinctly put it at the time: "this is going according to the Iraqi plan – but…it's early, and the enemy gets a vote here. We will see whether [IS] stands and fights".[25] The Pentagon had estimated that between 3,000 and 5,000 ISIS fighters were in Mosul at the onset of operations.

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22 Turkey has been maintaining a military base at Bashiqa, to the north-east of Mosul, since December 2015 and has been training local forces, largely comprised of Sunni Arabs, Turkmen and Kurds.

23 Remarks by Secretary Carter following his meeting with Iraqi Prime Minister Abadi in Baghdad, 22 October 2016

24 See "Will Turkish ambitions complicate fight for Mosul?", *BBC News Online,* 24 October 2016

25 As reported by the BBC, 18 October 2016

In response to concerns over the involvement of Shia militiamen in the campaign, the Iraqi Prime Minister had also stated the need for a multi-sectarian approach, but confirmed that only Iraqi security forces would be allowed to enter Mosul when the campaign reached that point.[26] A point reiterated by Defence Secretary, Michael Fallon:

> the hon. Lady asked me about some quite well-founded concerns that different groups—the Popular Mobilisation Forces, the peshmerga and so on—will go into areas of Mosul where they might not be particularly welcome. That has been very carefully evaluated by both the Iraqi and Kurdish leadership. Red lines have been drawn and everybody involved is very keen that those lines should not be crossed.[27]

Outlining the UK's role in Mosul operations Michael Fallon, also said:

> Daesh are on the back foot. The beginning of the encirclement of Mosul today is a big moment in our efforts to rid Iraq of Daesh. Mosul is a large and complex city and operations there will be tough but with Coalition support Iraqi forces will prevail. Alongside our Coalition partners, the UK will continue to play a leading role in the air and on the ground, including through our strike missions, specialised surveillance, humanitarian support and the mentoring and training of Iraqi forces.[28]

After three and half months of fighting the Iraqi Government announced on 24 January 2017 that the city to the east of the River Tigris had been liberated from ISIS.[29] Iraqi security forces now control all areas inside the eastern part of the city and the eastern bank of the river for the first time in two and a half years. As such attention has now increasingly shifted toward the west of the city.

Operations to liberate the western part of the city began on 19 February 2017. Iraqi forces, backed by the coalition, have liberated Mosul airport allowing troops access to the city from the southwest. However, the dense urban environment of the old city and the number of civilians in western Mosul[30] is recognised as presenting a significant challenge to Iraqi security forces moving forward.

Syria

The Coalition has estimated that ISIS has lost more than 25% of the territory it once held in Syria.[31]

Over the summer of 2016 operations by Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), an alliance of opposition and local forces including the Syrian Arab Coalition and Kurdish forces in Syria, focused on liberating the town of Manbij, on Syria's northern border with Turkey.[32] Assisted by Coalition

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26 This point was reiterated most recently in a Department of Defense press briefing on 28 October and again on 31 October 2016.
27 HC Deb 18 October 2016, c678
28 MOD, *Defence in the Media*, 24 October 2016
29 US Department of Defense, *Iraq announces liberation of Eastern Mosul,* 24 January 2017
30 The UN estimates that there are 750,000 civilians remaining in west Mosul (Department of Defense press briefing, 17 January 2017)
31 Joint Press Conference with Secretary Carter and Secretary Fallon, 15 December 2016
32 Manbij is regarded as a strategically important location for ISIS as it is the main hub through which foreign fighters enter Syria, and in turn Iraq, and is a key line of

forces[33] Manbij was liberated in mid-August 2016 after two months of fighting.

Efforts to secure the region along Turkey's border were advanced significantly after an offensive led by an alliance of Syrian rebel groups (the Free Syrian Army), and supported by Turkey, was launched in late August (Operation *Euphrates Shield*). Described as "the most concerted ground advance of the past two years",[34] and supported by air cover from Turkish fighters, key towns have been liberated from ISIS including al-Rai and Jarabulus. Turkish involvement in the campaign to take Jarabulus represented Turkey's first full-scale incursion into Syria since the civil conflict began.[35]

While striking a blow against ISIS, Turkey's actions have also been motivated by a desire to secure its regional sphere of influence and stop the Kurds from advancing into areas in north eastern Syria, thereby unifying the eastern and western areas that they currently hold along the Turkish border. Martin Chulov, writing in *The Guardian* in September 2016 considered:

> By crossing the border Turkey has changed the face of the war against ISIS. A bit player for much of the campaign, it now has a lead stake on how the rest of the military offensive is fought and, more essentially, who does the fighting.[36]

After the success of Operation *Euphrates Shield,* in September 2016 President Erdogan announced Turkey's intention to push further south to the town of al-Bab, some 20km south of the Turkish border, in territory held by ISIS. In mid-October Turkish backed Syrian opposition forces, supported by coalition air strikes, liberated the town of Dabiq, a town considered to have great symbolic relevance to ISIS.[37]

Turkish -led forces have since continued to push south and recently liberated the town of al-Bab, after almost a month of fighting. Although not supported by coalition forces in its initial stages, the campaign to re-take al-Bab was increasingly backed by coalition intelligence and surveillance, and more recently airstrikes.

Syrian government forces had also been approaching al-Bab from the south, and since 18 January Russian warplanes had been conducting joint airstrikes with Turkey in the region. Many commentators attributed increasing Russian involvement in counter-ISIS offensives in al-Bab and

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communication between Raqqa and the outside world (Department of Defense press briefing, 30 June 2016)

33 As of 22 July 2016 coalition forces had conducted more than 500 airstrikes in support of this operation (Department of Defense press briefing, 22 July 2016)

34 "Losing ground, fighters and morale – is it all over for ISIS?", *The Guardian,* 7 September 2016

35 Some reports suggest that the President Erdogan was freed to take action by the failure of the coup attempt against him in July 2016. Officers who had been delaying an operation in Syria were removed from their posts. An improvement in relations with Russia was also a prerequisite due to Russian air force activity in Syria.

36 "Losing ground, fighters and morale – is it all over for ISIS?", *The Guardian*, 7 September 2016

37 Dabiq features in Islamic apocalyptic prophecies as the site of an end-of-times showdown between Muslims and their "Roman" enemies. The town has featured heavily in ISIS propaganda since 2014 and was also the name of its English-language magazine.

elsewhere to the fall of Aleppo to government forces in December 2016 after months of intensive fighting; which has subsequently allowed for a change of focus.

Following the liberation of al-Bab concerns have since been raised that Turkey may now turn its attention to Manbij, and other areas in northern Syria under the control of Kurdish forces, in order to secure its sphere of influence.[38] In response the US has called upon Turkish and other forces in Syria to focus its efforts on the campaign against ISIS. In a press briefing on 1 March, US Commander General Townsend commented:

> With the liberation of al-Bab, Turkey has now secured its border from ISIS.
>
> The coalition is encouraged by the progress against ISIS in al-Bab by the Turkish military and their opposition forces. We encourage all forces to remain focused on the counter-ISIS fight and concentrate their efforts on defeating ISIS and not towards other objectives that may cause the coalition to divert energy and resources away from Raqqa.
>
> The U.S., Turkey and coalition partners are working together to support stabilization and local civilian governance in Manbij. The coalition's committed to the security of Turkey and will continue to work in close coordination with partner forces and allies to deliver a lasting defeat to ISIS, which remains the greatest terrorist threat to the region and the world.[39]

Towards Raqqa

With the Mosul offensive well underway, attention has increasingly turned to the campaign to liberate Raqqa.

On 6 November 2016 the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) announced that the campaign to "isolate", and eventually liberate, Raqqa had begun. Operations are being led by the SDF, including the Syrian Arab Coalition and Syrian Kurdish forces; and are supported by coalition intelligence and reconnaissance and airstrikes. In mid-February the Pentagon confirmed that among SDF forces isolating Raqqa the Arab element has grown to 50% of the force, reflecting the desire to make it "more ethnically diverse and more reflective of the population area that it's moving into".[40]

Efforts to isolate the area to the north east and northwest of the city are ongoing, and in some areas is complete. A third axis, to the east, was opened up on 7 February 2017. On the issue of timelines, the US Spokesman suggested that "what we would expect is that within the next few weeks, the city will be nearly completely isolated and then there will be a decision point to move in".

Turkey has continued to push for a role in the campaign to liberate Raqqa, although has called for Syrian Kurdish forces, specifically the

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38 "Turkey asks US to force Kurd fighters to quit Syrian town", *Bloomberg,* 2 February 2017

39 Department of Defense press briefing, 1 March 2017

40 "Counter-ISIL forces prepare to drive terrorists from Raqqa", DoD News, 10 February 2017

YPG, to be excluded from any operation. In response the US made clear in October 2016:

> We'll welcome any contributing nation that wants to make themselves part of the coalition to go fight Daesh in Syria. But that… can't just come with a whole bunch of strings. They [have] got to be willing to go do what the coalition needs to be done […]
>
> I would imagine Syria probably isn't thrilled with any of us there doing that. But it's necessary to do.[41]

More recently the US Spokesman, Colonel Dorrian, confirmed that the role of Turkey "has yet to be determined. This is a subject of ongoing diplomatic discussions between the coalition and our ally Turkey, so if – if they would like to be involved in Raqqa, we'll – we'll certainly try to work a place for them. But right now, that has yet to be determined".[42]

Russia is not currently a participant in the plans to liberate Raqqa.[43]

2.2 The Trump administration's comprehensive strategy

Following his inauguration in January 2017 US President Donald Trump stated that "defeating ISIS and other radical Islamic terror groups will be our highest priority" and that "to defeat and destroy these groups, we will pursue aggressive joint and coalition military operations when necessary".[44] To that end, on 28 January President Trump signed a Presidential Memorandum directing the US administration to develop, within 30 days, a comprehensive plan to defeat ISIS.

The Pentagon presented its plan to the US National Security Council's Principals Committee on 27 February 2017. The plan has been described as a "preliminary framework" that extends both beyond the military and beyond the immediate theatre of conflict in Iraq and Syria. In comments to the media Pentagon Spokesman, Captain Jeff Davis,

> This is not just a military plan. It draws upon all elements of national power -- diplomatic, financial, cyber, intelligence [and] public diplomacy, and it's been drafted in close coordination with our interagency partners […]
>
> This plan is truly transregional. This is not just about Iraq and Syria, it is about defeating ISIS around the globe and other transregional violent extremist organizations, such as al-Qaida.[45]

Beyond those comments, however, few official details of the options set down in that plan have been made publicly available. Media speculation has suggested that options on the table include the deployment of US brigade combat teams (comprising several thousand personnel) on the ground in Syria to support the SDF in re-taking Raqqa; assigning US Special Forces personnel direct combat roles in addition to their advise

41 Department of Defense press briefing, 26 October 2016
42 US Department of Defense press briefing, 1 February 2017
43 Joint Press Conference by Secretary Carter and minister Le Drian in Paris, 25 October 2016
44 White House, *America First Foreign Policy*, January 2017
45 Department of Defense News, 27 February 2017

and assist mission; arming Syrian Kurdish fighters; and the establishment of 'safe zones' in Syria in order to protect civilians and stem the flow of refugees from the region.[46] Greater co-ordination with Russia has also been mooted.

Yet, on the possibility of "boots on the ground" and the creation of "safe zones", as the International Institute for Strategic Studies has noted:

> The Pentagon and the Joint Chiefs of Staff have long disfavoured safe zones as impractical and unstable […] To be adequately enforced and defended – especially against such as enemy – they require no-fly zones above and around them. No-fly zones are very expensive, would ideally call for the destruction of Syrian anti-aircraft defences – which are substantial – and the deployment of substantial contingent of US ground troops, and would involve the ongoing exposure of US aircraft to adversaries, including Russia.
>
> Each [option] poses serious risks of escalation and open-ended military commitment that Trump's national security team may not be inclined to court, especially given its recent demonstrations of moderation and restraint and in the absence of the immoderate influence of [former National Security Adviser] Flynn.[47]

General Townsend, US Commander of Operation Inherent Resolve, also commented on 1 March 2017:

> I talked about our strategy of by, with and through our local partners and that's still the right way to go. It's working and our local partners are fully invested, they're leading the fight and we're just here helping them. So would I be concerned if we brought in a large number of U.S. or coalition troops without coordinating that with our local partners? I would.
>
> I won't comment on the likelihood -- I -- I don't foresee us bringing in large numbers of coalition troops, mainly because what we're doing is in fact working. But in that event that we bring in any additional troops, we'll work that with our local partners both here in Iraq and Syria to make sure that they understand the reasons why we're doing that and to get their buy-in of that.
>
> So, as far as greater -- greater U.S. involvement in Syria look like, I've submitted some recommendations to -- through my chain of command to the new administration. The new administration is weighing those recommendations and options.[48]

However, he did go on to state his belief that "Should the SDF lead the assault on Raqqa, will they need additional weapons and equipment? I believe that they will". He went on to elaborate:

> I think our -- I think we're still in decision-making stages as to whether or not we will assault Raqqa with the SDF and what equipment they might need. But I would just say this; I've watched for four -- more than four months now, I've watched the Iraqi combined arms -- modern combined arms army attacking Mosul.

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46 See "The future of US Syria policy", *Strategic Comments,* 17 February 2017
47 Ibid
48 US Department of Defense press briefing, 1 March 2017

> The Iraqis have all the modern types of body armor, armored vehicles, tanks, artillery, fighter jets, helicopters, and they're having a hard time taking -- it's a challenging fight taking Mosul. So I think if I, you know, transpose that to Raqqa, the Syrian Democratic Forces are an irregular light infantry force mounted mostly in pickup trucks. So, they have very few heavy weapons.
>
> So, if I compare these two forces and I envision the Syrian Democratic Forces assaulting Raqqa, a not unsubstantial city, I think that they'll probably need additional combat power. But those decisions have yet to be taken.[49]

[49] US Department of Defense press briefing, 1 March 2017

3. Who are the main players in the military campaign?

Summary

Although there are 68 coalition countries engaged in international efforts to counter ISIS, only a handful of nations are directly involved in offensive air combat operations. The number of countries involved in the train and assist programme is more substantial, although still only represents less than half of the Coalition's members. In total 29 nations contribute 3,800 troops to the counter-ISIS operation.

Airstrikes

The countries currently conducting air strikes in both Iraq and Syria are:

- United States
- France
- Australia
- Jordan
- United Kingdom
- Belgium

Denmark recently withdrew its combat aircraft.

The countries conducting air combat operations solely in Syria are:

- Turkey
- Saudi Arabia
- United Arab Emirates

Participation by Saudi Arabia and UAE is, however, considered to have been minimal.

A number of other coalition countries, notably Canada, Germany and Poland, are providing force enabling capabilities such as air-to-air refuelling and surveillance and reconnaissance assets in support of coalition air operations. NATO is also providing direct AWACS support to the coalition, in order to increase situational awareness. That support began at the end of October 2016 with one E-3 aircraft currently based in Turkey. NATO Leaders have sought to highlight, however, that such assistance "does not make NATO a member of this coalition".

Train, advise and assist mission

The United States, the UK and a number of other coalition countries have deployed military personnel on the ground in Iraq to train Iraqi and Kurdish security forces. These are not combat troops and are not deployed in an offensive role.

To date, over 70,000 Iraqi personnel have been trained, including Iraqi troops, Peshmerga, police and border forces and other tribal fighters. The number of Iraqi forces being trained has also increased three-fold since October 2016, with approximately 3,000 Iraqi forces being trained every month.

In addition to training, the US is also leading efforts to advise and assist the Iraqi Security Forces and Peshmerga at the command level.

Several coalition countries have also been providing Iraqi and Kurdish forces with logistical assistance and resources, including the provision of arms, ammunition and other military equipment. Financial assistance for the payment of Peshmerga salaries has also been provided.

The US is also leading a programme of training for moderate opposition forces in Syria. The focus of that programme is on "equipping and enabling" selected groups of vetted leaders and their units so that over time they can make a concerted push into territory still controlled by ISIL". The US is providing equipment packages and weapons, and providing air support as and when necessary. In October 2016 the UK announced that it would resume its training of Syrian opposition forces, outside of Syria, following a request for support from the US.

The US has also deployed Special Forces personnel in northern Syria and in Iraq in order to provide logistical and planning assistance to Iraqi, Kurdish and other local forces at the command level.

Turkey is also providing support and assistance to local opposition forces in northern Syria.

Although there are 68 coalition countries engaged in international efforts to counter ISIS, only a handful of nations are directly involved in offensive air combat operations. The number of countries involved in the train and assist programme is more substantial, although still only represents less than half of the Coalition's members. In total 29 nations contribute approximately 3,800 troops to the counter-ISIS operation.[50]

3.1 Air campaign

Coalition partners conducting airstrikes in Iraq and Syria

The countries currently conducting air strikes in both Iraq and Syria are:

- United States
- France
- Australia
- Jordan
- United Kingdom
- Belgium

Canada had been conducting offensive air operations in Iraq and in Syria, since 2 November 2014[51] and 8 April 2015 respectively. Canada ceased its participation in airstrikes, in both countries, on 15 February 2016. It has, however, retained its air-to-air refuelling and surveillance and reconnaissance assets in theatre in support of coalition air operations.[52]

The Netherlands had also been conducting offensive air operations in Iraq since 7 October 2014 and in Syria since 29 January 2016. Dutch aircraft were withdrawn from theatre on 28 June 2016. The Dutch mission has since been taken over by Belgium. A force protection unit of

[50] Department of Defense press briefing, 30 November 2016
[51] Canadian combat aircraft conducted their first sorties in Iraq on 30 October 2014 although no munitions were released.
[52] Missions reports are available on the Canadian Ministry of Defence's website

35 Dutch personnel has remained in theatre to protect the Belgian contingent.

Denmark withdrew its contingent of F-16 aircraft, for the second time, in December 2016.

United States

US Air Force and Navy aircraft have been conducting air strikes in Iraq since 8 August 2014. Operations were expanded into Syria towards the end of September 2014.

US aircraft participating in those sorties have included F-15, F-16, F/A-18, F-22[53] fighter aircraft, B-1[54] and B-52 bombers, and MQ-1 Predator drones.[55] Tomahawk missiles deployed aboard US naval vessels deployed in the Red Sea and North Arabian Gulf were also utilised in the initial stage of offensive operations in Syria. Intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance missions have continued using a mixture of manned and unmanned systems.

The US has also had a carrier strike group deployed in the Gulf and/or in the Mediterranean, almost continually, in support of the counter-ISIS campaign. In December 2016 the Dwight D. Eisenhower carrier strike group returned to the US after a seven month deployment, leaving a gap in US carrier presence in the Middle East.[56] The George H.W. Bush carrier strike group has since entered theatre and, at the time of writing, is currently conducting combat operations in support of the ISIS campaign from the eastern Mediterranean.

In mid-November 2015 the US also deployed a number of naval combat aircraft (AV-8B Harriers), as part of an Amphibious Ready Group (ARG), to the region. The USS Making Island assumed this responsibility at the end of 2016 and is currently deployed in the Mediterranean.

At the beginning of October 2015 the US also deployed aircraft and personnel to Diyarbakir air base in Turkey to provide combat search and rescue capabilities in support of both US and coalition forces operating in Iraq and Syria. US aircraft, including F-15 and A-10 combat aircraft have also been deployed to Incirlik air base in Turkey. Those aircraft are conducting both counter-ISIS operations and combat air patrols in Turkish airspace. In April 2016 US European Command announced that a number of EA-6B Prowler electronic warfare aircraft had also been temporarily deployed to Turkey to support Operation Inherent Resolve.[57]

France

France was the first country to join the US in air conducting airstrikes against ISIS targets in Iraq. France initially deployed six fighter jets, an

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53 The F-22 conducted its first ever combat flight during attacks on ISIS forces in Syria on 22 September 2014.

54 At present the B-1 bomber contingent has been rotated out of the order of battle in order to receive an upgrade. It is currently unclear when they will return.

55 The B-52 stratofortress bomber was deployed into theatre in April 2016.

56 A gap in the US' carrier presence in the Persian Gulf region also occurred toward the end of 2015, for a few months.

57 Those aircraft are expected to remain in theatre until September 2016 (*American Forces Press Service*, 14 April 2016)

Atlantique 2 maritime patrol aircraft and a refueling plane at its base in the United Arab Emirates as part of Operation *Chammal*. Operations began on 19 September 2014.[58] The complement of French fast jet aircraft subsequently increased, to include a mixture of Rafale and Mirage 2000 aircraft based in UAE and Jordan.

Initially reluctant to extend air operations into Syria, on 7 September 2015 the French President, Francois Hollande, announced that French aircraft would begin reconnaissance flights over Syria, with a view to informing a decision on launching air strikes at a later date.[59] The first French airstrikes in Syria were conducted on 27 September 2015. At the end of November 2016 the French Parliament voted overwhelmingly to extend airstrikes in Syria.

France currently has deployed:[60]

- 12 permanently deployed Rafale combat aircraft (based in UAE).[61]
- 1 Atlantique 2 maritime patrol aircraft.

The air component can also be enhanced, at short notice, by further Rafale aircraft based in France, one KC135 tanker aircraft and one AWACS E3F.[62] France has approximately 1,200 personnel deployed across the region in support of air operations.

The French Navy also has a frigate deployed in the Mediterranean as part of counter-ISIS operations. The Charles de Gaulle carrier group, and its complement of Rafale fast jet aircraft, was withdrawn from theatre in mid-December 2016. Its recent deployment was the third time, since February 2015 that the French aircraft carrier has been deployed to the Gulf as part of the military campaign against ISIS.[63]

Australia

The Australian Government approved airstrikes in Iraq and the deployment of Special Forces to 'advise and assist' Iraqi security forces on 3 October 2014 (Operation Okra). Australia had already pre-deployed six F/A-18 Super Hornet fighter aircraft, KC-30A Multi Role Tanker Transport and airborne early warning aircraft (E-7A Wedgetail) to the region. Australian aircraft commenced armed air combat operations on 5 October and carried out their first airstrike on 8 October 2014 against an ISIS facility in Iraq.[64]

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58 French Ministry of Defense, Operation Chammal

59 "Syria war: France to prepare for IS air strikes", *BBC News Online,* 7 September 2015

60 *Force disposition: Operation Chammal*, February 2017

61 8 French Mirage aircraft which had been deployed in Jordan were withdrawn from theatre in (although the Rafale complement of aircraft was increased at the same time from 6 to 12).

62 French Ministry of Defense, *Dossier de Presse Chammmal*, July 2016 (in French) and French Ministry of Defence, *Carte Chammal*, March 2016

63 February-April 2015 (the presence of the carrier was intended to reduce the time taken to reach ISIS targets in Iraq by those fast jet aircraft based in UAE); November 2015-March 2016 (Announced in response to the terrorist attacks in Paris. At the time the carrier group's deployment tripled France's strike capacity in the campaign) and September 2016- present.

64 Australian Department of Defence

Following a request from the US government the Australian announced in September 2015 that it would extend its operations into Syria. The first airstrikes by Australian aircraft in the region took place on 14 September 2015.[65]

Australia has a total of 480 military personnel deployed in the region in support of military operations: 400 assigned to the Air Task Group and 80 Special Forces.

Jordan

Jordan participated in the initial airstrikes against ISIS targets in Syria at the end of September 2014.

Subsequent participation was minimal. In February 2015, however, and after a Jordanian pilot was captured by ISIS and burned alive, Jordan significantly increased its role in the air campaign over Syria. It also extended its participation to operations in Iraq.

Some commentators questioned the sustainability of Jordan's participation given the size (39 aircraft)[66] and increasing age of its fast jet fleet. Indeed, during 2016 there had been little coverage of Jordan having conducted any airstrikes. In early February 2017, however, Jordanian aircraft targeted several ISIS positions in southern Syria to coincide with the two-year anniversary of the killing of one of its pilots by ISIS.[67]

UK

The UK has been conducting airstrikes in Iraq since the end of September 2014, and in October 2014 the Ministry of Defence authorised the conduct of UK surveillance missions over Syria.

A further parliamentary vote on extending offensive military action into Syria was held on 2 December 2015. Subsequent parliamentary approval saw RAF Tornado aircraft conduct the first offensive combat mission in Syria on 3 December 2015.

The UK's military contribution is detailed separately in Section 4 of this note: British military participation.

Belgium

On 26 September 2014 Belgium's Parliament approved the deployment of six F-16 fighter aircraft, 120 personnel and a number of C-130 transport aircraft to operations in Iraq. Belgian aircraft were based in Jordan and conducted their first airstrikes on 6 October 2014.[68] Those aircraft were subsequently withdrawn on 2 July 2015.[69]

On 13 May 2016 the Belgian government announced that its air forces would re-deploy to the counter-ISIS operation. Like Denmark, the

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65 "Australia launches first airstrikes inside Syria", *BBC News Online,* 16 September 2015
66 IISS, *Military Balance 2015*
67 "Jordan hits ISIL targets in southern Syria", *Al Jazeera,* 5 February 2017
68 "Belgium F-16 launches first strike in Iraq", *AFP,* 6 October 2014
69 Dutch Ministry of Defence, 3 July 2015

government also announced that its aircraft would expand their involvement to operations over Syria, as well as Iraq.[70]

Six Belgian F-16s have subsequently taken over the air combat mission previously undertaken by the Netherlands. Those Dutch aircraft were withdrawn from theatre at the end of June 2016. A force protection unit of 35 Dutch personnel has remained in theatre to protect the Belgian contingent.[71] The Belgian contingent is expected to remain in theatre until 1 July 2017.[72]

Denmark – not currently deployed

Danish participation in the air campaign has been sporadic.

On 26 September 2014 the Danish government announced the deployment of seven F-16 combat aircraft, a C-130J transport aircraft, 12 soldiers and 40 support staff to Iraq to support the effort against ISIS for a 12 month period. Troops were based in Kuwait.[73] Danish aircraft conducted their first sorties on 16 October but did not expend any munitions. The first airstrikes by Danish aircraft were conducted on 20 October 2014.

On 2 October 2015 Danish combat aircraft were withdrawn for a period of planned maintenance,[74] although Denmark continued to provide a 'capacity building' contribution in Iraq with up to 120 soldiers, in addition to 20 staff officers deployed with Coalition headquarters. In November 2015 the Danish Parliament also approved the deployment of a mobile ground-based radar, in order to address coalition shortfalls in surveillance and control of Iraqi and Syrian airspace.[75]

Denmark's F-16 contingent were subsequently re-deployed in theatre, along with a C130 transport aircraft and 400 troops, including 60 Special Forces personnel, in May 2016. Operations were also extended to Syria.

That F-16 contingent was expected to be reviewed after a period of 6 months and, as expected, was subsequently withdrawn in early December 2016. The C130 transport aircraft was also withdrawn. In its place the Danish government announced that it would deploy an additional 20 personnel to the training effort (see below).[76]

Coalition partners conducting airstrikes solely in Syria

The first US- led airstrikes in Syria were assisted by aircraft from five Arab countries: Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, with Qatar in a supporting role. [77]

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70 *Statement by US Secretary of Defense Ash Carter on Belgium's Expanded Role in the Counter-ISIL Air Campaign,* 13 May 2016

71 Dutch Ministry of Defense

72 Belgian Ministry of Defence

73 The Danish Parliament approved the deployment on 2 October 2014

74 Despite this Denmark still appeared on the US Department of Defense list as a contributing nation.

75 . Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark, 24 September 2015

76 "Denmark to pull fighter jets out of Syria and Iraq", *The Local,* 2 December 2016

77 Qatar participated in initial offensive operations but has since ceased its involvement.

Initial details on the exact nature of their participation were minimal, with many analysts describing it as 'largely symbolic'. Among the partner nations Saudi and UAE F-16 fast jet aircraft were understood to have undertaken the majority of strike missions in the first few days of operations.[78]

However, participation in airstrikes since then by Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and UAE is considered to have been minimal. In a statement to the House Armed Services Committee on 1 December 2015 the US Defense Secretary suggested that "Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states joined the air campaign in the early days, but have since been pre-occupied by the conflict in Yemen".[79]

In August 2015 Turkey joined the air campaign conducting operations in Syria.

United Arab Emirates

In December 2014 UAE suspended its participation in the coalition after expressing concerns over the coalition's combat search and rescue capabilities following the downing and capture of a Jordanian pilot. However, following his execution by ISIS in February 2015 UAE announced its intention to re-deploy a squadron of F-16 aircraft to Jordan to assist coalition efforts.

While UAE conducted a number of airstrikes in February 2015 its participation since then has been minimal, despite a commitment to re-join the air campaign in February 2016 which came about as a result of US pressure.[80]

UAE is also playing host to a number of coalition aircraft, most notably French Rafale aircraft based at Al Minhad.

Saudi Arabia

Following a period of minimal participation in the anti-ISIS coalition, in February 2016 Saudi Arabia confirmed that it would re-join the air campaign in Syria.

Saudi aircraft participated in airstrikes over the weekend of 13/14 February[81] and on 25 February four Saudi Arabian F-15 aircraft arrived at Incirlik air force base in Turkey. However, Saudi Arabia's level of participation since then has been questioned. At a hearing of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on 28 June 2016 US Special Presidential Envoy, Brett McGurk, reportedly stated that "the Saudis are very focused on Yemen, and we hope that as the peace process gets underway and it winds down, we will see an increased focus on [the air campaign]".[82]

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78 "US, Arab allies take out IS oil refineries", *Jane's Defence weekly*, 26 September 2014

79 *Statement on the US military strategy in the middle east before the House Armed Services Committee*, 1 December 2015

80 US Department of Defense statement, 12 February 2016

81 Pentagon press conference, 16 February 2016

82 "US sees no place for Saudi ground troops in ISIS fight", *Defense News,* 28 June 2016

Turkey

On 24 August 2015 the US and Turkey signed an accord allowing US aircraft to launch air strikes against ISIS from Incirlik air force base.[83] On 29 August 2015 Turkey formally joined the coalition in conducting air strikes against ISIS targets in Syria. Turkey had played an active role prior to this in military planning and assisting other coalition partners by granting overflight rights to coalition partners and allowing the use of Turkish facilities for counter-ISIS operations.[84]

As outlined above, more recently Turkey has played a more direct role in counter-ISIS operations in Syria. Under the codename, Operation *Euphrates Shield*, Turkish military forces have deployed in support of Syrian opposition forces (Free Syrian Army) seeking to liberate towns and villages in northern Syria along the Turkish border. Turkish military personnel, supported by tanks and backed by artillery targeting ISIS positions, have deployed on the ground alongside local forces, while Turkish military aircraft have provided air cover to the operation. More recently Turkish forces have pushed south to re-take the town of al-Bab, supported by Turkish and Russian airstrikes. They continue to push for a role in the campaign to liberate Raqqa.

Turkey's intervention has not been solely regarded in terms of the counter-ISIS campaign however. Turkey's actions have also been widely regarded by commentators as a direct result of the civil conflict in Syria and its desire to prevent the Kurds from advancing into areas in north eastern Syria, thereby unifying the eastern and western areas that they currently hold along the Turkish border. Lieutenant General Townsend, US Commander, Combined Joint Task Force Operation Inherent Resolve, commented in December 2016:

> I do believe that's one of the Turks reasons for going as deep as al-Bab, as they desire to keep Kurdish groups separated. Those to the east of al-Bab in the Manbij area and then those to the west in the Afrin area. I think they see it as in their interest to keep those groups apart.[85]

Turkey has called more recently for Kurdish forces, specifically the YPG, to be excluded from the Raqqa campaign; while pushing for its own inclusion in the operation.

Other military contributions

In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks in Paris on 13 November 2015 the French Government called on its allies and partners in the broader coalition against ISIS to do more to support the military campaign. Specifically France invoked Article 42(7) of the Treaty on the European Union which obliges participating EU Member States to provide "aid and assistance" by all means in their power. At that meeting of EU Defence Ministers all States expressed their unanimous support for French efforts to defeat ISIS and several countries indicated their willingness to do more.

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83 US air force assets had been conducting unarmed surveillance operations from Incirlik prior to this date.

84 Personal correspondence with the Turkish Embassy in London.

85 US Department of Defense press briefing, 14 December 2016

Canada

As outlined above, Canada ceased its participation in airstrikes on 15 February 2016. It has, however, retained its air-to-air refuelling and surveillance and reconnaissance assets in theatre in support of coalition air operations, in addition to increasing the size of its train and assist mission (see below).[86] It has also provided additional support to planning, targeting and intelligence and will provide medical support to coalition members. In May 2016 Canada also deployed three Griffon helicopters to provide in-theatre tactical transport and announced the opening of an all-source intelligence centre to inform operational planning.

With the tripling of its train and assist mission the recent deployment of additional assets will bring the total Canadian contingent to approximately 830 personnel. The mandate for the Canadian mission is in place until 31 March 2017.

Germany

On 4 December 2015, the German Parliament approved plans[87] to deploy 6 Tornado reconnaissance aircraft, a naval frigate which would deploy as part of the *Charles de Gaulle* carrier group, refuelling aircraft and up to 1,200 military personnel. However, those aircraft and personnel are not engaging in offensive operations and are instead providing logistical and intelligence support to other countries.[88] Germany also outlined its intention to increase its training contingent in Iraq (see below). The deployment was mandated for a period of 12 months.

In March 2016 the German frigate, deployed as part of the French carrier group, returned home after the *Charles de Gaulle* was withdrawn from theatre. However, the German frigate returned to theatre in September 2016 for a period of two months, following the re-deployment of the *Charles de Gaulle*.[89]

An additional 650 German military personnel have also deployed as part of the UN's mission in Mali, in order to relieve pressure on French forces in the region.

In October 2016 the German government approved plans to extend, and broaden, the mandate of the German military contingent. German participation has now been approved until 31 December 2017; while additional forces have also been deployed to Konya air base in southern Turkey in order to support the NATO AWACS mission (see below). The Bundestag approved the plans on 10 November 2016.

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86 Missions reports are available on the Canadian Ministry of Defence's website

87 By 445 to 146 votes.

88 "Germany joins fight against ISIL after parliament approves military action in Syria", The Telegraph, 4 December 2015

89 The French carrier strike group was one again withdrawn from theatre in December 2016. The German frigate accompanying that strike group was withdrawn in mid-November 2016.

Poland

On 20 June 2016 the Polish government confirmed that an air contingent of four F-16 aircraft, and associated personnel, would deploy to Kuwait for reconnaissance missions over Iraq and Syria. A further 60 Special Forces personnel have also been deployed to Iraq.

Italy

The Italian government also pledged support for France in the fight against ISIS but it was unclear whether that would involve any military commitment or whether it would continue to be focused on police training. On 26 November 2015 Italian Prime Minister, Matteo Renzi, suggested that addressing ISIS in Libya was Italy's priority.[90] In early December 2015 the Italian government announced that it would increase its training contingent in Iraq (see below).

Norway

At the end of 2015 the US made a formal request to Norway to step up its military contribution, beyond the military training that it is conducting in Iraq.

On 2 May 2016 the Norwegian government announced that it would deploy a medical team to northern Iraq to bolster coalition efforts in the region. It also announced the deployment of several Special Forces personnel to assist in the training of the Syrian opposition (see below).

NATO

In February 2016 the NATO Secretary General announced that the alliance had agreed, in principle, to use NATO AWACS capabilities to backfill national capabilities, thereby freeing up assets for those nations to commit to the ISIS campaign.[91]

At the Warsaw summit in July 2016 the Alliance went one step further by announcing its intention to provide direct NATO AWACS support to the coalition, in order to increase situational awareness. That support began at the end of October 2016 with one E-3 aircraft currently based in Turkey.

NATO Leaders have sought to highlight, however, that such assistance "does not make NATO a member of this coalition".[92]

New Zealand

In June 2016 New Zealand announced that a Hercules C-130 would be deployed as part of the Australian task force, along with 40 supporting personnel for a period of 6 months. That aircraft and its accompanying personnel were subsequently withdrawn from theatre at the end of 2016 upon completion of its mission.[93]

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90 "Libya a priority in ISIS fight", *The Local,* 26 November 2015
91 NATO press conference, 11 February 2016
92 NATO Warsaw Summit Communiqué, 9 July 2016, para.96
93 New Zealand Defence Force, press release, 15 December 2016

3.2 Train, advise and assist mission

Iraq

In November 2014 a number of coalition countries announced a package of training and support for Iraqi security, and local, forces in order to assist them in countering ISIS forces and re-taking territory that had fallen under ISIS control. The training programme is being led by the United States and involves a number of other countries, including the UK.

Coalition countries have also been providing significant logistical assistance and resources to both the Iraqi Security Forces and the Peshmerga in terms of arms, ammunition and other military equipment.[94] Financial assistance has also been provided. In June 2016, for example, the US announced a fund of $450 million to help pay the salaries of Peshmerga fighters.[95]

In total, 12 Iraqi brigades are expected to be trained: nine from the Iraqi security forces and three from the Kurdish Peshmerga. Military training is currently taking place at four training sites at Al-Asad, Irbil, Besmaya and Taji. Training of Iraqi army recruits began at the end of December 2014 and, to date, over 70,000 Iraqi personnel have been trained, including Iraqi troops, Peshmerga, police and border forces and other tribal fighters.[96] The number of Iraqi forces being trained has also increased three-fold since October 2016, with approximately 3,000 Iraqi forces now being trained every month.[97]

In addition to training, the US is also leading efforts to advise and assist the Iraqi Security Forces and Peshmerga at the command level.

In February 2016 the Pentagon sought to emphasise the importance of the train and assist mission. In a statement Operation Inherent Resolve Spokesman, Colonel Steve Warren, commented:

> Everybody likes to focus on airstrikes… but don't forget a pillar of this operation is to train local ground forces. That is a key and critical part.
>
> We are not going to bomb our way out of this problem. It's never going to happen… we can't lose sight of the fact that we have to train this Iraqi security force. This Iraqi army needs to be trained, it's one of our primary lines of effort…[98]

Contributing nations

The main contributing nations to the training effort in Iraq are:

United States

On 7 November 2014 the Department of Defense confirmed the deployment of 1,500 additional military personnel to Iraq, in a non-combat role. Their objective was to expand the US "advise and assist" mission already in place in Iraq (comprising approximately 1,400 US

94 The UK's assistance to the Peshmerga is outline in section 5.6
95 Department of Defense Press Briefing, 10 June 2016
96 Department of Defense Press Briefing, 8 February 2017
97 Ministry of Defence press release, 12 February 2017
98 Pentagon press conference, 10 February 2016

military personnel) and to initiate a more comprehensive training package for Iraqi forces.

On 10 June 2015 the US announced the deployment of a further 450 US military personnel to train, advise and assist Iraqi security forces at Taqaddum military base in eastern Anbar province. The intention was to focus on improving and refining military functions such as logistics, intelligence gathering, force protection and operational planning, thereby complementing the four existing training sites.[99]

At the beginning of July 2016 the US announced that an additional 560 troops would deploy specifically to the recently captured airbase at Qayyarah; while the deployment of an additional 600 US military personnel was announced on 28 September. These extra forces were intended to "provide specific capabilities including logistics and maintenance support; train, advise and assist teams for Iraqi Security Forces and Kurdish Pehsmerga for the upcoming Mosul operation and expanded intelligence resources".[100]

Following this deployment, the US has approximately 4,510 personnel on the ground in Iraq in an advisory and training capacity.

In December 2015 the US administration also announced that an Expeditionary Targeting Force of approximately 100 Special Forces personnel would deploy on the ground in Iraq. Entirely separate from the training mission, those personnel were expected to assist Iraqi and Kurdish partners, including by launching raids against ISIS targets in Syria, gathering intelligence, rescuing hostages and capturing high-value ISIS leaders.

UK

See British military participation below.

Denmark

Provided 120 military trainers as part of the additional support packages announced at the beginning of November 2014.[101] Since February 2016 six **Latvian** military trainers have also been deployed with the Danish training contingent.

In December 2016 the Danish government announced that a further 20 personnel, focused on engineering and construction, would also deploy to Iraq bringing the Danish training contingent to approximately 140 military personnel.

Italy

An Italian contingent of approximately 280 military personnel has been helping train Kurdish forces near Irbil. In March 2015 the government also announced that a small team of security specialists would begin training Iraqi police forces, with a focus on those towns and cities that had been recaptured from ISIS. In early December 2015 the Italian

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99 Department of Defense, "Iraq troop increase part of broader Coalition strategy", 12 June 2015

100 Department of Defense news release, 28 September 2016

101 Department of Defense briefing, 7 November 2014

government announced that it would increase its training contingent to almost 750 personnel. The Italian Carabinieri have been leading police training efforts on behalf of the coalition.

Australia

In March 2015 the government announced the deployment of 300 personnel as part of a joint training mission with **New Zealand.** 143 personnel are deployed as part of the New Zealand contingent. Troops are based at the Taji military complex northwest of Baghdad. The mission became fully operational in May 2015 and is expected to last until November 2018. Recently the training mission was extended to include training for the Iraqi police force.

France

Has provided military equipment to Kurdish fighters and has a training component of 100 personnel deployed in Baghdad. Approximately 3,600 Iraqi personnel have been trained by French instructors so far.[102]

Canada

Since October 2014 Canada has deployed 69 Special Forces' personnel to train Kurdish Peshmerga fighters in northern Iraq.

In February 2016 the Canadian government outlined its intention to triple the size of its advise and assist mission in northern Iraq, following the withdrawal of its combat aircraft from the counter-ISIS campaign. As part of these efforts Canada has also deployed a number of medical personnel to train Iraqi medics. It is also providing equipment such as small arms, ammunition and optics to assist in the training of Iraqi security forces.[103] A Government motion outlining the change in focus for the mission was passed by the House of Commons in March 2016.

Spain

Has 300 military personnel deployed as part of the training effort in Iraq. The Spanish government has made clear that it will not commit ground forces and it will not take part in any operations in Syria.

Norway

Approximately 50 military personnel are training Kurdish forces in the north of the country. A small number of instructors are also reported to have been deployed to Baghdad in an advisory capacity.

The Netherlands

Has 150 officials deployed in Iraq to train Iraqi and Kurdish soldiers. Part of that contingent is dedicated to training smaller groups for specific operations and where necessary, training is given close to the front line. Dutch military personnel are not involved in combat operations.[104]

Belgium

Has 30 military personnel deployed as part of the training effort.

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102 French Ministry of Defense, *Dossier de Presse Chammmal*, July 2016 (in French)
103 Pentagon press release, 10 February 2016
104 Dutch Ministry of Defence, accessed 27 July 2016

Germany

Since 2014 Germany has been providing arms to Kurdish fighters, along with 40 soldiers to train them.[105] In December 2015, the German government announced that the number of military trainers and advisers in Iraq would be increased to 150 as part of its broader military commitments to the counter-ISIS campaign (see above).

Finland

Since July 2015 Finland has had a small contingent of 47 personnel deployed in northern Iraq training Kurdish fighters.

Sweden

In June 2015 the Swedish government committed to deploying up to 120 military personnel to train Kurdish forces in northern Iraq.

Hungary

In September 2015 the Hungarian government confirmed that 110 Hungarian forces already in the Kurdistan region would also take part in training Kurdish fighters.

Slovenia

In February 2016 the Slovenian government offered military equipment and training to Kurdish Peshmerga forces. 15 military personnel deployed to Irbil in the latter half of 2016.

NATO

NATO has been training Iraqi officers in Jordan and Turkey since 2014, as part of NATO's Defence Capacity Building Package for Iraq. Iraqi officers receive training in key areas including countering IEDs, military medicine and civil-military planning. Over 350 officers are expected to complete the NATO course over the next six months.[106]

Following a request from the Iraqi government, at the NATO summit in Warsaw in July 2016 Alliance leaders announced that counter-IED, medical and security training would be expanded into Iraq itself. That new training and capacity building mission was launched on 5 February 2017. 30 enlisted soldiers are participating in the first five-week course which will run alongside NATO-led courses in Iraq on civil-military cooperation.[107]

Turkey

Since December 2015 Turkey has maintained a 1,000 strong military base at Bashiqa, to the north-east of Mosul, and has been training local tribal forces, largely comprised of Sunni Arabs, Turkmen and Kurdish Peshmerga. Once trained, those forces have been operating under the control of the Iraqi government. Specifically they are operating as a

105 "Steinmeier: 'no question' of airstrikes against IS", *DW,* 22 September 2014
106 NATO press release, 2 April 2016
107 NATO press release, 5 February 2017

"hold force" within the 16th Iraqi Army Division to the north of Mosul.[108]

Syria

Train and equip programme

In 2014 a $500 million US-led programme was put in place to train moderate Syrian opposition forces.[109]

The programme aimed to train and equip thousands (approximately 3-5,000 per year) of screened members of the opposition over a 3-year period at a number of regional training centres outside of Syria. Trained forces would initially focus on defending Syrian communities, specifically against ISIS, but would subsequently go on the offensive against ISIS. The intention was that, in the longer term, they would also help to promote the conditions for a political settlement to the conflict in Syria.[110] Specifically the training programme would focus on a "range of critical combat skills including marksmanship, casualty care, land navigation, communications, leadership, the law of armed conflict and human rights principles".[111]

For operational security and force protection reasons the Pentagon refused to provide specific details on the location of training, and the size and length of courses. However, US officials revealed that the first training course began in Jordan on 7 May 2015.[112] A second training course was launched in Turkey at the end of May.[113] Future training courses were also expected to be launched in Saudi and Qatar.

At the time the US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Martin Dempsey, cautioned that recruiting, vetting and training enough fighters to form a new moderate Syrian opposition force was "going to be a challenge and may take longer than we think".

Indeed, as of the beginning of July 2015, the programme was reported to have only processed 60 people.[114] By mid-September General Lloyd Austin, Head of US Central Command, acknowledged that only "four or five" Syrian fighters remained from the US train and equip programme.[115] It was widely reported that a large number of initial Syrian recruits had had to be disqualified during the vetting process either for health or age reasons, or because of suspected links to extremist groups.[116] According to US media reports many of the initial

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108 US Department of Defense press briefing, 11 January 2017
109 This training programme is separate from a previous US-led training programme based in Jordan in 2013. See "West training Syrian rebels in Jordan", *The Guardian,* 8 March 2013
110 Iraq update and training the Syrian moderate opposition: written statement HCWS501, 26 March 2015
111 US Central Command press release, 7 May 2015
112 "US begins training Syrian rebels in Jordan to become anti-ISIS force", *New York Times,* 7 May 2015
113 "US training of Syria rebel fighters expands to Turkey: source", *Reuters,* 28 May 2015
114 "US admits it has trained only 60 Syrians to fight ISIL", *Al Jazeera,* 8 July 2015
115 "US Syiran rebel training fields only '4 or 5' fighters", *Jane's Defence Weekly,* 23 September 2015
116 "US faces challenges in building up Syrian training program", *The Washington Post,* 3 June 2015

graduates of the programme had also been attacked and had turned over their equipment to the Nusra Front, an al-Qaeda affiliated group.[117]

The UK contributed 75 military personnel to the initial training programme (see British military participation below).

Change of US Strategy

Given the extent of the difficulties faced by the "train and equip" programme, the Department of Defense announced on 9 October 2015 that it would pursue a new strategy with respect to supporting opposition forces in Syria. Instead of recruiting for a training programme based in neighbouring countries, the focus is now on "equipping and enabling" selected groups of vetted leaders and their units so that over time they can make a concerted push into territory still controlled by ISIL". The US is providing equipment packages and weapons, and providing air support as and when necessary. Information on the identity of recipient groups has so far been limited, although the Syrian Arab coalition has been named as one such recipient.[118]

The intention is to make it easier to provide military supplies or airstrikes in support of specific opposition groups as they take the fight to ISIS. However, in order to address concerns over the flow of US weapons into Syria, and the potential for them to end up in the hands of extremist groups, the Pentagon has stated that weaponry will be "more basic".[119] It has also confirmed that it will:

> continue to evaluate this program and… make refinements and adjustments over time as appropriate. As we have said from the beginning, the fight against ISIL will take time. Working with local partners to win back territory taken by ISIL will continue to be a long and arduous process.[120]

At the end of September 2016 the Pentagon commented:

> The SDF, which is our partner organization of vetted forces in Syria have been stalwart allies and – stalwart partners and have done a very good job in taking the fight to Daesh, we continue to work with them and we intend to keep doing so.[121]

In May 2016 Norway announced that it would deploy a number of Special Forces personnel to Jordan to train vetted Syrian Arab Sunni fighters.

The UK also recently announced that it would resume its training of Syrian opposition forces, outside of Syria, following a request for support from the US (see section 4 below).

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117 See "US revamping rebel force fighting ISIS in Syria", *New York Times,* 6 September 2015; "After setbacks, US military looks for ways to recalibrate new Syrian force", *the Washington Post,* 12 August 2015

118 Statement on the US military strategy in the Middle East and the counter-ISIL campaign, to the Senate Armed Services Committee, 27 October 2015

119 "DoD lowers vetting standards for Syrian rebel training program", *The Military Times,* 9 October 2015

120 US Department of Defense, Statement on Syria, 9 October 2015

121 Department of Defense Press Briefing, 23 September 2016

By mid-December 2016 the US confirmed that over 3,000 Syrian partner forces had been trained.[122]

US support to local forces on the ground

On 30 October 2015 the US administration announced that "less than 50" US Special Forces' personnel would deploy to Kurdish-controlled territory in northern Syria in order to provide logistical and planning assistance to Kurdish and other local forces in their fight against ISIS. The deployment was described as part of the longer term strategy of building the capacity of local forces on the ground and the US Government sought to emphasise that these personnel would not have a combat role.

Responding to the announcement the Speaker of the US House of Representatives, Paul Ryan said that he hoped this latest deployment would be the start of a strategy for US involvement in the Syrian conflict. House Armed Services Committee Chairman Mac Thornberry, acknowledged that "A more serious effort against ISIS in Syria is long overdue," although he also questioned whether this deployment went far enough; a view shared by Senator John McCain.[123] Critics regarded it, however, as the "first boots on the ground" and a significant escalation of US military involvement in Syria.

Since then the US presence in Syria has increased. At the end of April 2016 President Obama announced that a further 250 Special Forces personnel would deploy to Syria to support local opposition forces in the fight against ISIS. The intention of the deployment, Mr Obama suggested, was to provide training and that troops would not "lead the fight".[124] That deployment brought the total number of US personnel on the ground in Syria to 300. In a press briefing at the end of May 2016 the Pentagon Press Secretary, Peter Cook, acknowledged:

> We do have special operations forces in Syria… they are an advise and assist mission with forces that are carrying out the fight against ISIL; trying to lend their support to them; use their skills set and their capabilities to enhance the effectiveness of those forces. They are not at the front line. They are […] in an advisory role to those forces. And they are going to continue to do that.[125]

In December 2016 then US Defense Secretary, Ash Carter, announced a further uplift of US forces in Syria. In order to assist in the groundwork for an eventual assault on Raqqa he announced the deployment of additional 200 US military personnel, including commandos and bomb squad specialists. One of their primary tasks will be to train additional Syrian partners.[126]

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122 US Department of Defense Press Briefing, 14 December 2016
123 "Lawmakers rap Obama on Syria escalation", *Defense News,* 30 October 2015
124 "Syria conflict: Obama to deploy 250 more special forces troops", *BBC News Online,* 25 April 2016
125 Department of Defense Press Briefing, 26 May 2016
126 US Department of Defense press briefing, 14 December 2016

UK Special Forces have also been photographed on the ground in Syria in early August 2016.[127] However, the MOD has refused to comment, in line with policy on Special Forces operations.

Turkish support of local Syrian forces

As outlined above, Turkey launched a military intervention into northern Syria in late August 2016 (Operation *Euphrates Shield*) in support of local opposition forces. The offensive, Turkey's first full-scale incursion into Syria since the civil conflict began, has been successful in securing Turkey's border region, with key towns, including Dabiq, liberated by Turkish-backed Syrian opposition forces. More recently Turkish-led forces, assisted by coalition and (seperately) Russian airstrikes, have pushed south to liberate the town of al-Bab, some 20km south of the Turkish border.

However, while the immediate military focus has been defeating ISIS, many commentators have expressed the view that Turkey's actions have also been motivated by its desire to secure its regional sphere of influence and stop the Kurds from advancing into areas in north eastern Syria, thereby unifying the eastern and western areas that they currently hold along the Turkish border.

Turkey's push south has prompted the US to call for a focus on solidifying and consolidating the recent gains made along the Turkey-Syria border, and for military cooperation in the area to be maintained.[128] Turkey is now pushing for a role in the campaign to liberate Raqqa.

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127 "UK special forces pictured on the ground in Syria", *BBC News Online*, 8 August 2016

128 Readout of Secretary Carter's Trilateral Meeting with Turkish Minister of National Defense Fikri Işık and French Minister of Defense Jean-Yves Le Drian, 26 October 2016

4. British military participation

Summary

Parliamentary approval

In September 2014 Parliament voted to support offensive military action in Iraq. However, that vote did not extend to offensive operations in Syria. In July 2015 the Secretary of State for Defence indicated that the Government could seek further approval from Parliament to extend air strikes into Syria provided that "there is a sufficient consensus behind it". A debate, and vote, on extending offensive military action against ISIS in Syria was subsequently held on 2 December 2015. Parliament voted in support of military action exclusively against ISIS in Syria by 397 to 223 votes.

Offensive military action in Iraq and Syria

On 30 September 2014 Tornado aircraft carried out their first airstrikes on ISIS targets in Iraq (Operation *Shader*).

RAF Tornado aircraft conducted the first offensive operation in Syria on 3 December 2015. RAF aircraft had, however, been conducting non-offensive surveillance operations over Syria since 21 October 2014.

The RAF is the primary service in this operation and has deployed a mixture of combat, surveillance, reconnaissance, and refuelling/transport aircraft. Aircraft currently deployed include:

- 8 Tornado GR4 fast jet aircraft
- 6 Typhoon combat aircraft (from 2 December 2015)
- Reaper Remotely Piloted Air Systems
- Airseeker surveillance aircraft
- Voyager air-to-air refuelling aircraft
- 2 C130 transport aircraft.
- E3-D sentry aircraft
- Sentinel surveillance aircraft.

RAF Akrotiri in Cyprus is serving as the main operating base for aircraft in the region.

In August 2016 the MOD announced that the Type 45 destroyer HMS *Daring* would deploy to the Gulf in order to provide air defence support to US Carrier Groups deployed in the region.

At present, approximately 850 UK personnel are currently supporting Operation *Shader* in Iraq and Syria. With the addition of the UK's training contingent in Iraq (500 personnel) the UK's total footprint across the region in support of this operation is approximately 1,350 personnel. Those personnel on the ground are not combat troops.

The UK has been the second largest contributor to the air campaign in Iraq and Syria. UK aircraft have flown over 3,000 missions as part of Operation *Shader*, and as of mid-February 2017 had conducted over 1,200 airstrikes against ISIS targets in Iraq and Syria. The RAF is conducting operations at a tempo not seen since the first Gulf War.

The Government has consistently maintained that no civilian casualties in Iraq or Syria, ***to date***, have resulted from UK air strikes.

Training

Since October 2014 the UK has been providing training to Kurdish Peshmerga forces and military advice to the Iraqi security forces. Specifically, the UK is co-ordinating the coalition's counter-IED training programme. At the end of June 2016 the MOD confirmed that it would expand its training assistance, with the deployment of an additional 50 military trainers to the Al Asad airbase in Western Iraq to provide counter-IED, infantry skills and medical training. More recently the MOD confirmed that UK personnel would expand its training to other locations in Iraq.

The total UK training contingent based in Iraq comprises 500 personnel.

To date, the UK has trained nearly 40,000 Iraqi security forces personnel, including 7,300 Kurdish Peshmerga, in Besmaya, Taji and al-Asad. Many of those trained personnel are currently conducting operations in Mosul.

On 25 October 2016 the Defence Secretary announced that the UK would resume training of vetted moderate Syrian opposition groups following a request by the US for support of its train and equip programme. 20 UK personnel are expected to deploy to a number of locations in the region, outside of Syria. Training will focus on basic infantry tactics; command and control; medical training and explosive hazard awareness training.

Gifting of equipment to the Peshmerga

The UK has also supplied over 50 tonnes of non-lethal support, 40 heavy machine guns, nearly half a million rounds of ammunition and £600,000 worth of military equipment to the Kurdish Peshmerga since August 2014. In May 2016 the Defence Secretary announced that a further £1.4 million of ammunition would be gifted.

Costs of the mission

In March 2015 the MOD confirmed that the net additional costs of the military air operation would be met from the Treasury Special Reserve; while the costs of training and equipping the Iraqi and Kurdish security forces, and the provision of key enablers, would be met from the MOD's Deployed Military Activity Pool (DMAP).

In answer to a Parliamentary Question in February 2017 the MOD set the operational costs of the counter-ISIS mission, up to the end of March 2016, at £238.8 million (£21.9 million for 2014-15 and £216.9 million in 2015-16).

DMAP costs for 2014-15 were £23.5 million and £23.7 million for 2015-16. However, not all of those costs are directly attributable to the counter-ISIS campaign.

Up to October 2016, and as part of those overall costs, approximately £63 million has been spent on Brimstone and Hellfire missiles.

4.1 Parliamentary approval

Iraq

Parliament voted in favour participating in air strikes against ISIS targets in Iraq in September 2014. The motion recognised the request from the Government of Iraq for military support, noted the broad coalition contributing to military support including countries throughout the

Middle East, noted the legal basis for action in Iraq and endorsed UK air strikes against ISIS in Iraq.

The motion explicitly ruled out deploying UK troops in ground combat operations and did not endorse UK air strikes in Syria, which the Government indicated would be subject to a separate vote in Parliament, should it become necessary.[129] The House of Commons voted 524 to 43 in favour of the Government's motion.

Syria

Following the ISIS-linked terrorist attacks in Tunisia at the end of June 2015, which killed 30 British nationals the then Prime Minister, speaking on the *Today* programme, called for "a full spectrum response" to ISIS in both Iraq and Syria.[130]

During a debate in the House on 2 July 2015 the Defence Secretary subsequently indicated that the Government could seek further approval from Parliament to extend air strikes into Syria provided that "there is a sufficient consensus behind it".[131]

In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks in Paris on 13 November 2015 pressure for greater UK and international action in defeating ISIS increased. On 20 November, the UN Security Council passed a resolution calling for states to take 'all necessary measures' against ISIS.[132] The resolution, a compromise between differing positions from Security Council members, was ambiguous, in that it was not taken under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, the mandatory action provision, and, although it used the UN code for military action ('all necessary measures') it did not use the word 'authorise'.[133]

On 26 November, the then Prime Minister made a statement to the House of Commons in which he set out the government's arguments for extending military action to Syria. He specifically addressed the arguments raised in the Foreign Affairs Committee report on this issue.[134] A memorandum to the Foreign Affairs Committee was also released.[135]

Parliament subsequently voted in favour of airstrikes against ISIS targets in Syria on 2 December 2015. The eleven-point motion explicitly ruled out the deployment of UK troops in ground combat operations, pledged to provide quarterly progress reports to Parliament, and approve military action, specifically airstrikes, exclusively against ISIS in Syria.

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129 House of Commons Order of Business, 26 September 2014
130 *Today* programme, 29 June 2015
131 HC Deb 2 July 2015, c1672
132 Security Council resolution 2249 (2015), 20 November 2015
133 For more on the legal implications of the November resolution, see the Commons Briefing Paper 7404, *Legal basis for UK military action in Syria*, 1 December 2015
134 HC Deb 26 November 2015, cc1489-1537
135 Memorandum to the Foreign Affairs Select Committee: Prime Minister's Response to the Foreign Affairs Select Committee's Second Report of Session 2015-16: The Extension of Offensive British Military Operations to Syria, November 2015

The House of Commons voted 397 to 223 in favour of the Government's motion.[136]

4.2 Offensive military action in Iraq and Syria

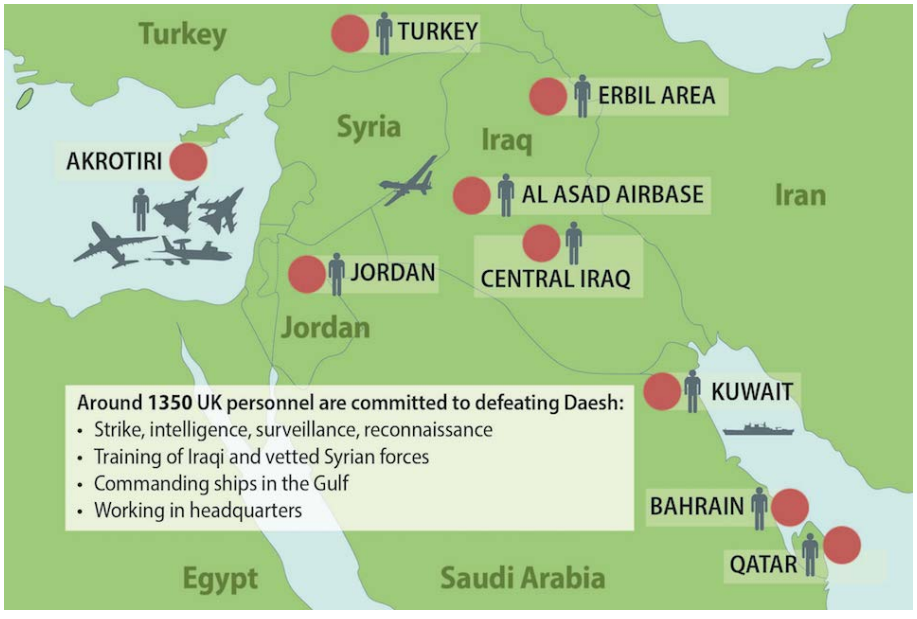
Parliament's vote on 26 September 2014 triggered the deployment of Tornado aircraft on armed reconnaissance operations and on 30 September 2014 Tornado aircraft carried out their first airstrikes on ISIS targets in Iraq (Operation *Shader*).

Following the parliamentary vote on Syria RAF Tornado aircraft also conducted the first offensive operation in Syria on 3 December 2015. RAF aircraft had, however, been conducting non-offensive surveillance operations over Syria since 21 October 2014.[137]

Assets, personnel and basing

At present, approximately 850 UK personnel are currently supporting Operation *Shader* in Iraq and Syria. As outlined below, a further 500 personnel are also deployed in a training capacity in Iraq. The total UK contingent across the region, therefore, is approximately 1,350 personnel.[138] In answer to a Parliamentary Question on 2 February 2017 the MOD confirmed that "the UK has no current plans to increase the number of troops deployed in Iraq. However, we keep this under review to ensure we have the right number of troops deployed with the appropriate permissions to support the training of Iraqi forces".[139]

Location of UK forces



Source: Ministry of Defence, February 2017

[136] An amendment tabled by John Baron that would prevent military action in Syria was rejected by 390 votes to 211. Labour MPs were given a free vote on the issue.
[137] HC Deb 21 October 2014, c63WS
[138] HC Deb 3 November 2016, c1078
[139] PQHL4891, *Iraq: military intervention*, 2 February 2017

Royal Air Force

The RAF is the primary service in this operation and has deployed a mixture of combat, surveillance, reconnaissance, and refuelling/transport aircraft. Aircraft currently deployed include:

- 8 Tornado GR4 fast jet aircraft[140]
- 6 Typhoon combat aircraft (from 2 December 2015)
- Reaper Remotely Piloted Air Systems[141]
- Airseeker surveillance aircraft[142]
- Voyager air-to-air refuelling aircraft
- 2 C130 transport aircraft.[143]
- Sentinel surveillance aircraft.[144]
- 2 E3-D sentry aircraft.[145]

Tornado GR4 aircraft are capable of being armed with Brimstone missiles (Dual Mode Seeker and Legacy variants), Paveway II, III and IV, enhanced Paveway II, Stormshadow and ASRAAM missiles. Further information on their specific capabilities is available at: RAF: Tornado GR4. As a result of Iraqi air operations, the withdrawal from service of one of the three currently available Tornado squadrons has now been delayed until March 2017.[146]

Typhoon FGR4 aircraft are capable of being armed with Enhanced Paveway II, Paveway IV, ASRAAM and AMRAAM missiles. Further information on these specific capabilities is available at RAF: Typhoon FGR4. In the longer term the intention is to integrate the DMS brimstone missile, Storm Shadow and Meteor air-to-air missile.

In a blog for The Spectator in mid-November 2015 the Defence Secretary, Michael Fallon, outlined the contribution that the RAF is

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140 Six Tornado aircraft were initially deployed to RAF Akrotiri on 12 August 2014 and began flying reconnaissance missions over Iraq. In October 2014 the Prime Minister announced that the Tornado contingent would be supplemented by two further aircraft, bringing the total number of Tornado aircraft committed to the Iraq operation to eight. A further two Tornado aircraft were deployed in December 2015, bringing the total Tornado contingent to 10. Those two additional Tornado aircraft subsequently returned to the UK in March 2016 (MOD, Defence in the Media, 6 March 2016).

141 In October 2014 two Reaper RPAS were re-deployed from Afghanistan to the Middle East in order to provide both surveillance support and situational awareness, and add to the strike capability provided by Tornado aircraft. This was the first operational use of the UK Reaper capability outside of support to operations in Afghanistan. Reaper conducted its first airstrike against ISIS targets on 9 November 2014. For operational security reasons the MOD has refused to disclose the final number of Reaper RPAS operating in the Middle East.

142 Also known as Rivet Joint, the aircraft entered service in early 2014. The aircraft began surveillance operations over Iraq on 9 August 2014

143 Two C130 aircraft have also remained on standby for the delivery of humanitarian assistance, should it once again become necessary.

144 In March 2015 the MOD confirmed that two Sentinel aircraft would also be deployed to the Iraqi theatre in order to provide additional intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance support (HCWS501, 26 March 2015).

145 The RAF's E3-D fleet had been temporarily grounded in November 2016 following the discovery of an electrical fault. The MOD confirmed in January 2017 that 2 of those aircraft were now operational (PQHL4503, *AWACS*, 17 January 2017)

146 A letter to Angus Robertson MP, dated 2 October 2014, explains this decision in more detail.

making to the military campaign. He suggested that the UK's precision strike capabilities and ability to conduct 'dynamic targeting' brings a "qualitative edge" to the campaign.[147]

In the debate on 2 December 2015 then Prime Minister, David Cameron, also stated:

> I believe that we can make a real difference. I told the House last week about our dynamic targeting, our Brimstone missiles, the Raptor pod on our Tornados and the intelligence-gathering work of our Reaper drones. I will not repeat all that today, but there is another way of putting this, which is equally powerful. There is a lot of strike capacity in the coalition, but when it comes to precision-strike capability whether covering Iraq or Syria, let me say this: last week, the whole international coalition had some 26 aircraft available, eight of which were British tornadoes. Typically, the UK actually represents between a quarter and a third of the international coalition's precision bombing capability. We also have about a quarter of the unmanned strike capability flying in the region. Therefore, we have a significant proportion of high-precision strike capability, which is why this decision is so important.[148]

RAF Akrotiri in Cyprus is the RAF's main operating base for Operation *Shader*. If necessary, the RAF also has Al-Minhad airbase in the United Arab Emirates which is the home base of 906 Expeditionary Air Wing. It primarily provides support to air transport links between the UK and operations in Afghanistan, and logistic support to deployed forces, but also supports RAF aircraft conducting joint exercises in the region. Coalition personnel, including the RAF, also have access to al-Udeid air base in Qatar.

On 23 November 2015 the Government confirmed that the use of RAF Akrotiri had also been offered to France during the periods of deployment of the Charles de Gaulle carrier group to the Mediterranean. The airbase would not be used to launch offensive operations by French aircraft but would be available in support of operations an emergency diversion airfield if required.[149]

Royal Navy

In August 2016 the MOD announced that the Type 45 destroyer HMS *Daring* would deploy to the Gulf in order to provide air defence support to US Carrier Groups deployed in the region.

In addition the vessel is expected to contribute situational awareness information to the coalition's Combined Air operations Centre at Al Udeid; while also patrolling shipping lanes in the Gulf. The deployment will be for 9 months and is similar in nature to the role carried out by HMS *Defender* earlier this year.[150]

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147 Michael Fallon, "Britain is bringing quality, not quantity, to the fight against Islamic State", *The Spectator Blog,* 16 November 2015

148 HC Deb 2 December 2015, c329

149 MOD press release, 23 November 2015

150 HMS *Defender* provided air defence support to the French aircraft carrier *Charles de Gaulle* whilst she was deployed in the Mediterranean between November 2015 and March 2016 (MOD press release, 18 November 2015).

The Type 45 will also protect HMS *Ocean* which deployed in September 2016 as part of the UK's inaugural Joint Expeditionary Force (Maritime) Task Force. The task force is deploying to the Mediterranean and the Middle East as part of counter-ISIS operations until March 2017. [151]

Sortie Rates

UK aircraft have flown over 3,000 missions as part of Operation *Shader*,[152] and as of mid-February 2017 had conducted over 1,200 airstrikes against ISIS targets in Iraq and Syria.[153]

The UK has been the second largest contributor to the air campaign in Iraq,[154] and is mounting airstrikes at an operational tempo not seen since the first Gulf War.[155]

The Government does not routinely publish figures on sorties rates or the number of airstrikes conducted by RAF aircraft. However, it does provide updates and commentary on RAF operations, including the location of operations: Updates: Airstrikes in Iraq and Syria and provides regular updates to Parliament.[156]

On occasion the MOD has also published more detailed figures either in response to parliamentary questions on this subject, or in response to a Freedom of Information request. For example:

- PQ49740, *Iraq: military intervention*, 27 October 2016
- PQ45023, *Middle East: military intervention*, 13 September 2016
- FOI2016/05126, 14 June 2016
- PQ38846, *Syria: military*, 6 June 2016
- FOI2016/03828, 29 April 2016
- FOI2016/00034, 1 February 2016

The MOD also made a statement on sortie rates in July 2015, largely in response to the change in the methodology of calculating strike numbers:

- HC Deb 16 July 2015, c32-33WS

An explanation of the methodology used to calculate sortie/strike numbers was also provided in answer to an FOI on 2 September 2015.

Civilian casualties

The Government's position on avoiding civilian casualties in relating to current operations in Iraq and Syria was set out in answer to two parliamentary questions in November 2014 and February 2016 respectively:

Mark Francois, November 2014:

> The UK seeks to avoid civilian casualties while undertaking airstrikes against ISIL targets. All airstrikes are conducted in accordance with International Humanitarian Law, following the principles of distinction, humanity, proportionality and military

151 MOD press release, 29 August 2016
152 PQ45868, *Kurds: military aid*, 20 September 2016
153 MOD press release, 16 February 2017
154 MOD press release, 16 February 2017
155 MOD, *Defence in the Media Blog*, 16 January 2017
156 The most recent statement was on 3 November 2016, c1077

> necessity. The UK's clearly defined Rules of Engagement are formulated on this basis.
>
> The same strict Rules of Engagement that govern the use of manned military aircraft also apply to remotely piloted aircraft systems. Careful selection and approval of targets before a strike, together with the use of precision guided weapons, minimises collateral damage and the potential for civilian casualties. This contrasts sharply with ISIL's brutal disregard for human life.[157]

Former Armed Forces Minister, Penny Mordaunt, February 2016:

> Regardless of the type of target being considered, the UK performs an assessment prior to every UK strike to assess the likelihood of any civilian casualties. This examines the impact of the strike on the surrounding area and whether there are likely to be any civilians present.
>
> The UK military takes every possible step to avoid civilian casualties.[158]

The Ministry of Defence has also outlined the steps it takes to minimise the risk of civilian casualties on its blog: *Preventing civilian casualties and coordinating strike action – what you need to know*.

The Government has consistently maintained that no civilian casualties in Iraq or Syria, ***to date***, have resulted from UK air strikes.[159]

Investigating civilian deaths

The MOD conducts an assessment after every airstrike, of the damaged caused which includes checks to see whether there are likely to have been any civilian casualties.[160]

In the event that civilian has been or appears to have been killed by UK forces a full investigation is undertaken. If required, a special investigations team is deployed to conduct a quick and thorough assessment of the situation. It said these reports are not routinely published for reasons of operational security.[161]

Regarding operations against Daesh in Iraq and Syria, former Armed Forces Minister Penny Mordaunt has said:

> The Ministry of Defence takes any allegations of civilian casualties very seriously. We do an assessment after every British strike of the damage that has been caused, and check very carefully whether there are likely to have been civilian casualties. As has always been the case, we consider all available credible evidence to support such assessments.
>
> There is no such evidence to date that RAF airstrikes have caused any civilian casualties.[162]

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157 PQ213743, 6 November 2014
158 PQ24876, 5 February 2016
159 Reiterated most recently in answer to a PQ on 21 February 2017 (PQ908817) and on the Floor of the House on 7 November 2016, c1238
160 Ministry of Defence, FOI request 2016/03806, 29 April 2016
161 Defence Committee, Remote Control: Remotely Piloted Air Systems – current and future use: Government response, 22 July 2014, HC 611 2013-14, para 163
162 PQ 24666, 28 January 2016

When asked in March 2016 whether the MOD had established a civilian casualties tracking cell to investigate reports of alleged incidents involving RAF aircraft in Syria and Iraq, Penny Mordaunt replied:

> As you know, I am committed to review all claims of civilian casualties, which we take very seriously. The Ministry of Defence has robust processes in place to review reports of alleged incidents. An assessment is carried out after every British strike; we determine the scale of the damage that has been caused and review very carefully whether there are likely to have been civilian casualties. Investigations are launched where appropriate.[163]

The Government has ruled out releasing details of each weapons release so they can be correlated against any reports of civilian casualties because such detail could "compromise our operational capabilities".[164]

4.3 Training

Iraq

Since October 2014 the UK has been providing training to Kurdish Peshmerga forces and military advice to the Iraqi security forces. Specifically, the UK is co-ordinating the coalition's counter-IED training programme.

In a written statement on 13 October 2014 the Ministry of Defence confirmed that it had sent what it described as a "training team" to northern Iraq to instruct Peshmerga soldiers on the operation of 40 UK-gifted heavy machine guns. Other training teams would also be sent to provide soldiering skills, medical and counter-explosive devise knowledge.[165] In a separate statement, the MOD said they were a "small specialist team of non-combat Army trainers."[166]

On 5 November 2014 the MOD announced that additional military assistance would be provided to Iraqi forces. Advisory personnel would be deployed to Iraqi headquarters; while additional training would be provided to Peshmerga fighters, to include infantry skills such as sharp-shooting and first aid. Further equipment would also be provided.[167]

That training contingent was supplemented in June 2015 by an additional 125 army personnel. The majority of those additional forces (100 personnel) would focus on counter-IED training across the four main training sites in Iraq. Up until this point UK military training assistance had been focused solely on Kurdish forces in the north of the country.[168] The remaining 25 personnel would provide training in other critical skills including medical training, equipment maintenance, manoeuvre support for bridging and crossing trenches, and information operations.

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163 PQ 31187, 21 March 2016
164 HL4659, 21 December 2015
165 HC Deb 13 October 2014 c10WS
166 "MOD confirms that British troops are in Iraq", *BFBS,* 13 October 2014
167 "UK to provide further support to forces fighting ISIL", *MOD Press Release*, 5 November 2014
168 HC Deb 8 June 2015, c890

On 12 March 2016 the Government announced that a further 30 troops would be deployed to Taji and Besmayah in order to provide training in areas such as logistics and bridge building, as well additional specialist medical staff.

Following a meeting of counterparts in the Global Coalition against Daesh at the beginning of May 2016, the Defence Secretary Michael Fallon confirmed that the UK would consider providing further training and advisory assistance to the Iraqi security forces. On 30 June, the MOD subsequently announced that an additional 50 military trainers would deploy to the al-Asad airbase in Western Iraq to provide counter-IED, infantry skills and combat first aid training. A further 90 personnel would deploy to assist with guarding the airbase and an additional 30 personnel would form a HQ staff to help command the mission. An engineering squadron would also deploy for a six-month period to build the necessary infrastructure required.[169] The extra trainers are working closely with US and Danish forces leading the training programme at Al Asad.[170]

On 30 January 2017 the MOD confirmed that, in addition to Besmayah, Taji and al-Asad, UK personnel would begin delivering training at other secured and protected locations in Iraq. This decision was taken in response to the requirement to make the training effort more flexible as Iraqi forces have become increasingly capable and deployed across the country.[171]

Following a meeting of NATO Ministers in mid-February 2017, the MOD also confirmed that a UK military officer will deploy from July this year to help lead NATO's newly established training and capacity building mission in Iraq (see above).

The total UK training contingent based in Iraq currently comprises approximately 500 personnel.[172]

To date, the UK has trained nearly 40,000 Iraqi security forces personnel, including 7,300 Kurdish Peshmerga, in Besmaya, Taji and al-Asad.[173] Many of those trained personnel are currently conducting operations in Mosul.

Syrian opposition forces

Initial support

Although initially the UK did not participate in airstrikes in Syria, the government did acknowledge that defeating ISIS in Syria was an important part of the overall strategy, and reiterated the belief that "defeating ISIL ultimately lies with local forces".[174]

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169 In December 2016 the MOD confirmed the extension of their deployment for a further 6 months (Joint Press Conference with Secretary Carter and Secretary Fallon, 15 December 2016)

170 *Operation Shader – Update*, Written Statement HCWS50, 30 June 2016

171 HC Deb 30 January 2017, c656

172 HC Deb 3 November 2016, c1078

173 MOD press release, 12 February 2017 and PQ62865, Iraq: military intervention, 8 February 2017

174 Ministry of Defence press release, 26 March 2015

On that basis, in October 2014 the Foreign Secretary indicated that work was underway, with coalition partners, to examine how the UK could support the US-led programme to train the moderate Syrian opposition, in order to "create effective ground forces in Syria, as well as Iraq, so they can take the fight to ISIL".[175]

Following on from that work, in a written statement on 26 March 2015 the Defence Secretary, Michael Fallon, confirmed that the UK would contribute approximately 75 military trainers and headquarters staff. Those training personnel would provide instruction in the use of small arms, infantry tactics and medical skills. Headquarters staff would coordinate and develop the programme.

As outlined above, the US announced on 9 October 2015 that the focus of the US' programme of support for Syrian opposition groups would now change to one of "equipping and enabling" selected groups. In response to that change the MOD stated:

> The UK remains committed to a range of wider programmes to support the moderate opposition. We are providing a range of civilian support to help save lives, bolster civil society, counter extremism, promote human rights and accountability, and lay the foundations for a more peaceful and democratic future. To this end, we have committed £55m this year.[176]

Re-deployment of the training contingent

On 25 October 2016 the Defence Secretary announced that the UK would resume training of vetted moderate Syrian opposition groups following a request by the US for support of its train and equip programme.

20 UK personnel have deployed to a number of locations in the region, outside of Syria. Training will focus on basic infantry tactics; command and control; medical training and explosive hazard awareness training.[177]

4.4 Gifting of Equipment to the Peshmerga[178]

In August 2014 a meeting of the EU Foreign Affairs Council welcomed member states' efforts to send military assistance to the Kurdish Regional Government:

> The Council also welcomes the decision by individual Member States to respond positively to the call by the Kurdish regional authorities to provide urgently military material. Such responses will be done according to the capabilities and national laws of the Member States, and with the consent of the Iraqi national authorities.[179]

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175 HC Deb 16 October 2014, c470 and Ministry of Defence press release, 26 March 2015
176 MOD, Defence in the media, 10 October 2015
177 MOD press release, 25 October 2016
178 Questions over the legal status of the Peshmerga and hence the legality of supplying them with arms and other equipment is examined in Library briefing paper SN06963, *UK arms transfers to the Peshmerga in Iraqi Kurdistan*, August 2014
179 Council conclusions on Iraq, Foreign Affairs Council meeting, 15 August 2014

In answer to a Parliamentary Question in September 2016, the FCO neatly summarised the assistance that the British Government has provided to the Kurdish Peshmerga since August 2014:

> The UK is steadfastly supporting the Kurdish Peshmerga as they fight, alongside other Iraqi forces, to defeat Daesh in Iraq. The UK has trained more than 6,000 Kurdish Peshmerga in infantry fighting skills, gifted 1,000 Vallon counter-IED detectors, provided more than 50 tonnes of non-lethal support, 40 heavy machine guns, nearly half a million rounds of ammunition and £600,000 worth of military equipment. We have also delivered over 300 tonnes of weapons and ammunition on behalf of other Coalition nations. In addition, the Kurdish Peshmerga benefit from RAF intelligence, reconnaissance and surveillance capability and airstrikes - Tornado, Typhoon and Reaper have flown more than 3,000 missions in Iraq, carrying out over 1,000 successful strikes against Daesh targets, and in support of Iraqi forces.[180]

Amid reports in the first half of 2016 that Kurdish fighters have run out of ammunition and hadn't been paid for several months,[181] the support provided to the Kurdish Regional Government was reviewed by the members of the Global Coalition at their meeting in Stuttgart in May 2016.

At that meeting Michael Fallon subsequently announced the UK's plans to provide Peshmerga fighters with a further £1.4 million worth of ammunition. This latest package consists of sniper rounds and ammunition for the heavy machine guns which the UK previously gifted in 2014.[182]

In response to concerns over the end-use of equipment gifted to the Peshmerga, the MOD has stated:

> The only Iraqi forces to whom the UK has gifted weapons and ammunition are the Kurdish Peshmerga. We have not gifted weapons to any other armed forces, including the People's Mobilisation Units. The UK continues to support Iraqi, including Kurdish, security forces in their fight against Daesh. Arms and ammunition gifted to the Kurdish Regional Government were provided with the full support of the government of Iraq.
>
> The UK carefully assesses all gifts of equipment against the EU Consolidated Criteria on a case by case basis. This requires us to consider the risk of equipment being used for internal repression, whether it could provoke or prolong internal or regional conflict, and whether equipment could end up in the hands of undesirable users. We will not permit an export if we judge that the risks exceed the threshold set out in the criteria. We are content with the controls the Kurdish Regional Government has in place for distribution and use of UK-supplied weaponry.[183]

4.5 Sustainability of the UK mission

Since the beginning of air operations concerns have frequently been raised about the sustainability of the UK's contribution given that the

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180 PQ45868, *Kurds: military aid,* 20 September 2016

181 This was raised by several witnesses during their oral evidence to the Defence Committee inquiry on UK military operations in Syria and Iraq.

182 MOD press release, 4 May 2016

183 PQHL4664, *Iraq: arms trade*, 30 January 2017

emphasis on air strikes places the onus of this operation on the Royal Air Force, which is operating at a tempo not seen in the last 25 years.

One former head of the RAF had said the RAF is at "rock bottom" after years of cuts and sustaining this operation would be "quite a stretch." Air Chief Marshall Sir Michael Graydon added "the lack of combat air craft is a major weakness in our make-up. This has been raised time and time again and basically ignored. We really are at rock bottom." The *Daily Telegraph* also quoted Air Commodore Andrew Lambert in September 2014:

> I think it's doable, but we are really scraping the bottom of the barrel. There's nothing more there, so let's hope Ukraine doesn't bubble up into something nasty. Weapons stocks are parlous and when you chuck this all together, it's a pretty poor position. We have too few aircraft, too few pilots and too much tasking.[184]

General Lord Richards, the former Chief of the Defence Staff, also expressed concern about the impacts of cuts to the RAF, asking "I'm not sure how long we can sustain this."[185]

A sign of the Government's concern was considered evident in the announcement by the Prime Minister that one of the three front-line Tornado GR4 squadrons would not be disbanded, as planned, in March 2015, but would be extended until April 2016. The further extension of that squadron in service until March 2017 prompted *The Financial Times* to suggest that "the extension of the squadron of Tornado ground attack aircraft conducting air strikes against ISIL underlines that the Royal Air Force is stretched after years of defence savings".[186]

Amid debate on the extension of air operations into Syria in early July 2015, *The Financial Times* suggested that, even if approval were given, the Government would not deploy additional combat aircraft to the operation. It suggested that "the RAF would struggle to muster much extra firepower".[187]

In response the MOD stated:

> The RAF is fully resourced to meet any future operational demands – as shown by the expansion of the Typhoon fleet and a £135 million investment which has doubled the number of Reaper aircraft.[188]

Indeed, following the vote in Parliament on 2 December 2015 to extend airstrikes in Syria, the MOD announced that two additional Tornado aircraft and six Typhoon aircraft would deploy to the region.

Responding to a question about RAF capabilities on 18 January 2016, the Defence Secretary, Michael Fallon, stated:

> the RAF is deploying a range of aircraft on Operation Shader in the middle east, including modern Typhoons and unmanned

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184 "'Bare bones' RAF will struggle to mount Iraq operation", *Daily Telegraph,* 25 September 2014
185 "We won't beat them with airstrikes", *Sunday Times,* 28 September 2014
186 MOD, Defence in the Media, 5 August 2015
187 "RAF faces struggle to find extra firepower after cuts", *The Financial Times,* 2 July 2015
188 MOD, Defence in the Media, 3 July 2015

> aircraft alongside the Tornados […] I can confirm that the RAF is well able to sustain that effort.[189]

This is a view shared by Major General Shaw (Retd) in his evidence to the Defence Select Committee's recent inquiry into military operations in Iraq and Syria. He expressed the opinion that "I think we can continue our current rate of operations for a long time. I do not see it as a problem. I would be very surprised if sustaining the current campaign was a problem".[190]

4.6 Costs of the mission

The net additional costs of military operations are funded through the Treasury Special Reserve.[191] Additional costs include the costs of fuel and munitions; extra maintenance requirements; spares; the deployment and recovery of equipment and personnel from theatre including accommodation; operational allowances (if applicable) and theatre-specific training. It does not include the costs of the base salaries of the service personnel involved or the base level of equipment usage.[192] In essence, the MOD pays for the military to be ready for operations but the net additional costs of those operations themselves are met from the Reserve.

In March 2015 the MOD confirmed that the net additional costs of the military air operation[193] would be met from the Treasury Special Reserve; while the costs of training and equipping the Iraqi and Kurdish security forces, and the provision of key enablers, would be met from the MOD's Deployed Military Activity Pool (DMAP).[194] Training for the moderate Syrian opposition will also come from this pool.[195]

In answer to a Parliamentary Question in February 2017 the MOD set the costs of the operation, up to the end of March 2016, at £238.8 million (£21.9 million for 2014-15 and £216.9 million in 2015-16).[196]

DMAP costs for 2014-15 were £23.5 million and £23.7 million for 2015-16. However, not all of those costs are directly attributable to the counter-ISIS campaign. DMAP funds have also been used for the NATO mission in the Aegean, training of the Ukrainian armed forces and the EU mission in the Mediterranean.[197]

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189 HC Deb 18 January 2016, c1119
190 Defence Committee, *Oral evidence: UK military operations in Syria and Iraq*, HC657, 19 January 2016
191 This was established in 2002 specifically for the Iraq conflict and has since been used to finance the additional costs arising from military operations, including urgent operational requirements.
192 HC Deb 13 December 2012 c419W
193 The Tornado GR4, Reaper RPAS and Voyager air-to-air refuelling aircraft
194 In terms of broader support for the Iraqi government, the UK's Conflict, Stability and Security Fund is also being utilised to support Iraqi reform and reconciliation efforts, stabilisation and counter-ISIS strategic communications (PQ50012, Iraq: Conflict, stability and security fund, 31 October 2016)
195 PQHL1516, Middle East: military intervention, 13 September 2016
196 PQ65155, *Iraq: peacekeeping operations*, 27 February 2017
197 Ministry of Defence, *Annual Reports and Accounts 2015-16*, p.25

Up to October 2016, and as part of those overall costs, approximately £63 million has been spent on Brimstone and Hellfire missiles.[198]

The net additional costs of the military support provided to the humanitarian mission in Iraq in August and September 2014 were £3.5 million, the majority of which has been recovered from the Department for International Development.[199]

The Government has not provided an overall estimate for the cost of the mission going forward.

Box 2: Suggested reading

- Defence Select Committee, *UK military operations in Iraq and Syria*, HC 106, Session 2016-17
- Evidence to the Defence Select Committee Inquiry: UK military operations in Iraq and Syria
- *Prime Minister's Response to the Foreign Affairs Select Committee's Second Report of Session 2015-16: The Extension of Offensive British Military Operations to Syria*, November 2015
- Foreign Affairs Committee, *The extension of offensive British military operations to Syria*, HC 457, 3 November 2015
- Michael Fallon, "Britain is bringing quality, not quantity, to the fight against Islamic State", *The Spectator Blog*, 16 November 2015
- *Inherently unresolved*, RUSI Occasional Paper, 2015

198 PQ44289, *Islamic State: military intervention*, 12 September 2016 and PQ46644, *Middle East: guided weapons*, 12 October 2016

199 Iraq, PQ224989, 2 March 2015

5. Russian involvement in the campaign against Daesh/ISIS

In September 2015 Russia began forward-deploying troops and other military assets to Humaymim air base in Latakia province on the Mediterranean coast. Syria is already home to Russia's only other military base outside of the former Soviet Union, at the naval port of Tartus.

Estimates of the number of deployed Russian military capabilities varied but what was generally accepted was that Russia had established a powerful strike group in Syria consisting of fast jet combat aircraft,[200] utility and attack helicopters and a small number of T-90 tanks, armoured personnel carriers, artillery units and howitzers. By November 2015 the Russian air force was estimated to have around 50 combat aircraft deployed at Latakia, including the Su-34 which made its combat debut.

The Russian Ministry of Defence also deployed a navy cruiser equipped with S-300 surface-to-air missiles, and a destroyer to the Eastern Mediterranean; while also establishing a multi-layered air defence network covering virtually the whole of Syria, including the deployment of the S-400 air defence system to Humaymim.

Personnel appeared to have been deployed in support of air operations and to provide a base protection capability. However, continued infrastructure expansion at the base led many to speculate that Russia intended to establish a presence at Latakia in the longer term.[201]

It had also been reported that Russian equipment has been provided to the Syrian regime and to other allied militia forces.[202]

5.1 Initial operations

On 30 September 2015 Russia launched its first airstrikes in Syria, the first time that Russian forces had undertaken a military operation beyond the boundaries of the former Soviet Union since the end of the Cold War.

Russia presented the campaign as a counter-terrorist action to protect religious minorities and to protect the secular government. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said that it was targeting ISIS "and other terrorist groups" in Syria at the invitation of the legitimate Syrian government.[203]

However, Russia was immediately criticised for targeting rebel groups rather than ISIS, including moderate opposition forces supported by the US. According to a RUSI analysis in early October 2015, approximately

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200 The air contingent was a mixture of old Soviet-era aircraft and the more advanced Su-34 which have never before been deployed militarily

201 "Humaymin air base, Syria", *Jane's Defence Weekly,* 28 October 2015

202 Pentagon press conference, 10 February 2016

203 'Russian Foreign Minister Defends Airstrikes in Syria', *New York Times,* 1 October 2015

80% of airstrikes by that point had targeted armed opposition groups fighting the Assad regime.[204]

In a Joint Statement issued on 2 October 2015, the Governments of France, Germany, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the US and the UK criticised Russian actions:

> [We] Express our deep concern with regard to the Russian military build-up in Syria and especially the attacks by the Russian air force on Hama, Homs, and Idlib which led to civilian casualties and did not target Da-esh.
>
> These military actions constitute a further escalation and will only fuel more extremism and radicalization.
>
> We call on the Russian Federation to immediately cease its attacks on the Syrian opposition and civilians and to focus its efforts on fighting ISIL.[205]

In a move which was widely regarded as an escalation of Russia's involvement in the Syrian civil conflict, on 7 October the Syrian army and allied militia conducted a ground offensive against rebel forces, backed up by Russian airstrikes. Those allied militia were thought to include several thousand Iranian fighters.

Russia also launched attacks on targets in Syria using long-range Russian bombers reportedly based in North Ossetia; from Russian warships based in the Caspian Sea and on 9 December the Russian Ministry of Defence confirmed that its Navy had launched a number of cruise missiles from a submerged submarine stationed within the Mediterranean.

The use of land attack cruise missiles, as opposed to air strikes, was questioned by a number of analysts. An analysis by *Jane's Aerospace, Defence and Security* suggested that "Russia's military operation in Syria is providing a useful opportunity to test its latest weaponry".[206] Jonathan Marcus, defence correspondent with *BBC News* suggested that:

> Sea-launched cruise missile have long been a favourite US weapon of choice in interventions overseas, so there may be an element of Russia demonstrating that it has the full military panoply of any other "superpower".[207]

However, western analysts also questioned the success of the strikes after it was suggested that a number of missiles had failed to reach their targets and hit Iran, an allegation which both Moscow and Tehran disputed.

Throughout its entire campaign Russia has been continually criticised for targeting opposition groups, as opposed to ISIS. In a Pentagon press conference on 3 February 2016 Operation Inherent Resolve spokesman, Colonel Steve Warren, suggested that "the Russians at this point have made it very clear that their offensive operations, their strikes are in

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204 "Russia's war plan in Syria", *RUSI Analysis*, 2 October 2015
205 Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 2 October 2015
206 "Russia to deploy Ka-52 helicopters to Syria", *Jane's Aerospace, Defence and Security,* 15 January 2016
207 "Syria: what can Russia's military do?", *BBC News Online,* 7 October 2015

support of Bashar al-Assad and his regime… the Russians are striking opposition forces to the tune of probably 90 percent".[208]

General MacFarland, Commander of the Combined Joint Task Force also expressed his belief that:

> Russia and the United States are fighting very different wars in Syria. We're fighting in Syria to defeat Daesh. They're fighting in Syria, allegedly to fight Daesh, but in practice, they're supporting the Syrian regime against all comers… I wouldn't characterize it as a proxy war, I would say that we are pursuing different goals in that country.[209]

Russian airstrikes were also estimated to have caused significant civilian casualties. It had been alleged that Russia was responsible for the deliberate destruction of civilian infrastructure such as hospitals. In March 2016 the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights estimated that Russian airstrikes had "killed 1,733 civilians, including more than 429 children";[210] while the destruction of two hospitals in Aleppo allegedly left "over 50 thousand Syrians are now without any access to life-saving assistance".[211] Amnesty International accused Russia of deliberately attacking health facilities as part of their military strategy, which they argued amounts to war crimes.[212] The Russian government consistently denied targeting health facilities in Syria.

5.2 A drawdown of Russian forces?

In mid-February 2016 the International Syria Support Group reached agreement on a ceasefire, pursuant to UN Security Council Resolution 2254 (2015), that would apply:

> to any party currently engaged in military or paramilitary hostilities against any other parties other than Daesh, Jabhat al-Nusra, or other groups designated as terrorist organizations by the United Nations Security Council.[213]

Russian Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, called it a "first step" towards a ceasefire but said that Russia would still press ahead with its campaign of airstrikes. Commentators widely agreed, however, that Russian airstrikes on opposition forces would have to cease if the agreement was to hold. Then Foreign Secretary, Philip Hammond, commented:

> If implemented fully and properly by every ISSG member, this will be an important step towards relieving the killing and suffering in Syria. But it will only succeed if there is a major change of behaviour by the Syrian regime and its supporters.
>
> Russia, in particular, claims to be attacking terrorist groups and yet consistently bombs non-extremist groups including civilians. If this agreement is to work, this bombing will have to stop: no

208 Pentagon press conference, 3 February 2016
209 Pentagon press conference, 1 February 2016
210 http://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=44684
211 Pentagon press conference, 10 February 2016
212 https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2016/03/syrian-and-russian-forces-targeting-hospitals-as-a-strategy-of-war/
213 Statement of the International Syria Support Group, 11 February 2016

> cessation of hostilities will last if moderate opposition groups continue to be targeted.[214]

The cessation of hostilities came into force on 27 February 2016, at which point the Russian Ministry of Defence announced that Russian "combat aviation", including long-range flights from Russian territory, had ceased flights over Syria, and that it would "fully implement its ceasefire obligations". However, it went on to state that "the fight against illegal armed groups recognized by the UN as terrorist ones will be continued".[215]

Just over two weeks later, and after a five-month air campaign, President Putin announced a somewhat surprise drawdown of "the main part" of Russian combat forces in Syria, stating that the Russian campaign "had been completed".

The first group of Russian combat aircraft was withdrawn on 15 March, with further groups following on the morning of 16 March.[216] Russia reportedly completed its withdrawal of forces on 20 March 2016.

The announcement was cautiously welcomed, although many observers remained reticent due to the lack of detail on Russia's part and the fact that Russia continued to conduct some airstrikes. Pentagon Press Secretary, Peter Cook, commented on 15 March 2016:

> we have seen some Russian aircraft depart Syria and return to Russia, but we've not seen a large contingent of Russian forces leave- just a small number of aircraft at this point. And so we'll wait to see, like everybody else, what the Russians do with regard to President Putin's reference to a partial withdrawal.

On the issue of continuing airstrikes, he went on to state:

> I think for the most part the strikes that we've seen in the last 24 hours were focused more in ISIL areas, but I can't give you the exact nature of all those strikes. But that seemed to be the more significant focus.[217]

The strategic goal of President Putin in announcing a drawdown was also the subject of much discussion. Opinions continued to be divided on whether this was a genuine move to support the ceasefire and the ongoing peace talks or whether it was a tactical move by Russia to consolidate the military presence that Russia now had in Syria at its bases at Latakia and at Tartus on the Mediterranean coast. This was a view supported by Dr Fred Kagan of the American Enterprise Institute. In his evidence to the Defence Select Committee Inquiry in March 2016 he stated:

> Virtually everything the Russians do has caught us on the hop, although it should not have because it is all entirely predictable and in accord with Putin's strategy, which has nothing to do with Syria and everything to do with establishing and maintaining an air and naval base on the eastern Mediterranean coast. He has done that and we appear to have ceded it to him, which I would

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214 MOD, *Defence in the Media,* 12 February 2016
215 Russian Ministry of Defence statement, 27 February 2016
216 http://eng.syria.mil.ru/
217 Pentagon press conference, 15 March 2016

> note is one of the most significant geostrategic infractions of modern times, although it has gone virtually unremarked upon.
>
> I do think that Putin was probably to some extent attempting to press Assad, but, primarily, this move is actually meaningless. The only forces that he is taking out are those that could be very rapidly brought back. There are very good military operational reasons for rotating them. Fundamentally, he is undertaking a military movement with much diplomatic fanfare, and the diplomatic fanfare and political objective are secondary […]
>
> He is going to use that, and already has been doing so, to create an expeditionary air and sea capability in the Mediterranean, which will become contested space for the first time since the end of the Cold War.[218]

5.3 Russia's continued military presence

Indeed, despite President Putin's claims of a drawdown of the 'main part' of Russian forces in Syria, Russia has retained a significant military force in the country.

While many combat aircraft were withdrawn from theatre, Russia retained at least 24 combat aircraft at Humaymim air base, including 11 Su-24M, 5 Su-34, 4 Su-30SM and 4 Su-35 fighters. A number of new attack helicopters were also deployed to the base, suggesting a change of focus for Russian military operations.

Russia also retained its S400 air defence system at the base, which many analysts suggested has become a permanent fixture. Following the recapture of Palmyra from ISIS forces in late March, Russia also established a forward operating base just to the west of the city, with a Russian combat unit equipped with air defence systems reportedly deployed to the base.[219]

At a press briefing on 18 May 2016 the Pentagon stated:

> Their capabilities are largely the same, or almost identical, frankly.
>
> They continue to have air power there, they continue to have ground forces, they continue to have artillery. They still have Spetsnaz providing advice and assistance to the Syrian regime.
>
> In Palmyra they have appeared to have established some sort of forward operating base, giving them a foothold for a more enduring presence…in that area.[220]

In early July 2016 the Russian Ministry of Defense also announced that it would deploy its flagship aircraft carrier, the Admiral Kuznetsov, to the Mediterranean from mid-October 2016, to serve as a platform for carrying out airstrikes in Syria.

Continued support for the Syrian regime

Following the February 2016 ceasefire agreement, many analysts concurred that there had been a shift in Russian military activity, which appeared to be increasingly focused on ISIS and other groups such as

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218 Defence Committee, Oral evidence: UK military operations in Syria and Iraq, HC 657, 17 March 2016, Q.217 and Q.233

219 "Russia sets up Palmyra base", *Jane's Defence Weekly,* 9 May 2016

220 Department of Defense Press Briefing, 18 May 2016

the al-Nusra Front, or Jabhat Fatah al-Sham, as it has been known since dropping its al-Qaeda affiliation in July 2016. This was a position confirmed by the Pentagon on 18 May 2016 when it stated that "in the last several weeks, a majority of their strikes have been more ISIL focused".[221]

However, that shift in attention appeared to have been relatively short-lived as Russian operations in support of Syrian government forces subsequently came to dominate the strategic picture in Syria, in particular in the besieged city of Aleppo which became the focus of a major assault by Syrian government forces, backed by militias, Iranian ground forces and Russian air power.

The result has been an increased blurring of the lines between the campaign to defeat ISIS in Syria and Russia's involvement in the broader civil conflict and its support for the Assad regime.

Focus after the fall of Aleppo

By mid-December 2016 Syrian forces, backed by Russia, had succeeded in re-taking eastern Aleppo from rebel opposition forces. A subsequent Turkish/Russian-brokered ceasefire agreement, followed by Russian-led peace talks in Astana in January 2017 have been regarded by many as indicative of Russia's desire to take on the role of power broker in the region.

As such, the possibility of a drawdown of Russian forces has been widely mooted. In early January Russia announced the withdrawal of its aircraft carrier, Admiral Kuznetsov, from the Mediterranean, having reportedly completed its mission.[222] At the same time the Chief of the Russian armed forces, General Valery Gerasimov, suggested that a reduction of Russia's armed deployment to Syria would also begin.[223]

With the exception of the withdrawal of the Admiral Kustensov, there has, however, been little evidence, to date, of a drawdown; more a change of focus. In recent weeks a battalion of Russian military police[224] has deployed to Aleppo in order to enhance security; while Russian involvement in counter-ISIS operations has increased. Russian warplanes have been conducting airstrikes against ISIS forces in Palmyra, around the eastern Government enclave of Dayr al-Zawr and in conjunction with Turkey in and around the town of al-Bab near the Turkish border.

In a briefing on 7 February 2017, the Chief of the Main Operational Directorate of the General Staff, Lieutenant General Sergei Rudskoy, stated that Syrian government forces, supported by the Russian Air

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221 Department of Defense Press Briefing, 18 May 2016

222 The carrier was, however, already scheduled to enter an extended period of maintenance and modernisation in early 2017, thereby precipitating her withdrawal from theatre.

223 "Syria conflict: Russia 'withdrawing aircraft carrier group", *BBC News Online,* 6 January 2017 and "Russia swaps Su-24 for Su-25 aircraft in Syria", *Jane's Defence Weekly,* 13 January 2017

224 Thought to be between 400 and 600 personnel

Force were conducting a successful offensive against ISIS, having destroyed 4,608 ISIS targets since 1 January 2017.

At present Russia's actions, in concert with Syrian government forces, are focused on ISIS targets in eastern Syria and the region north of Aleppo. The question remains, however, as to whether it will increasingly turn its focus towards Raqqa. Coalition plans for the isolation and liberation of Raqqa currently do not envisage Russian participation.[225] However, Russian aircraft are reported to have targeted ISIS positions in Raqqa in recent weeks;[226] while Russian Defence Minister Sergey Shoigu, has reportedly indicated Russia's willingness to engage in joint operations with the US in the region.[227]

[225] Joint Press Conference by Secretary Carter and minister Le Drian in Paris, 25 October 2016
[226] http://www.infowars.com/russian-strategic-bombers-hit-isis-in-raqqa/
[227] http://rbth.com/news/2017/02/21/russia-us-joint-operations-raqqa-707171

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