



BRIEFING PAPER

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ISIS/Daesh: what now for the military campaign in Iraq and Syria?

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Summary

ISIS has lost 98% of the territory it once held in Iraq and Syria, including Raqqa, the capital city of its self-declared caliphate, which was liberated in October 2017. In December 2017 the Iraqi government subsequently declared military victory over ISIS in Iraq and the US declared the end of major combat operations. Small pockets of ISIS resistance remain, however, focused in eastern Syria in the Middle Euphrates River Valley and around the Syria/Iraq border. Many ISIS fighters are believed to have dispersed into the desert and mountains; while others have attempted to blend back into urban populations.

As such clearance operations continue, while stabilisation operations are increasingly becoming the focus of the campaign in Iraq.

In Syria, however, the strategic picture remains complex with operations to defeat ISIS complicated by the ongoing Syrian civil conflict and recent Turkish military action in northern Syria.

For the foreseeable future the Coalition has committed to maintain its military commitments in Iraq and Syria. While tracking down remaining enclaves of ISIS resistance remains a key priority, the military campaign has steadily begun to transition towards maintaining security, stabilisation and training.

This shift in the focus of the military campaign has been reflected in coalition air operations over the last few months. While airstrikes continue there has been a notable shift toward Syria and supporting SDF operations in clearing remaining pockets of ISIS fighters; while the number of airstrikes conducted has decreased significantly.

The United States, France, the UK and the Netherlands currently undertake offensive strike operations on behalf of the Coalition. Canada, Germany and Poland all continue to deploy reconnaissance, refuelling and transport aircraft in an enabling role; while NATO continues its AWACS surveillance flights.

With the transition toward stabilisation operations and capacity building, the training mission is set to continue and expand. NATO leaders recently agreed to initiate planning for a new training mission in Iraq that will put the training effort on a more sustainable, long term basis, focusing on the training of Iraqi instructors and developing Iraqi military schools. That training mission will be formally launched at the NATO Heads of State summit on 11-12 July 2018.

In Syria, the United States has stated that it intends to maintain a “conditions-based” military presence that will remain firmly focused on the threat posed by ISIS. Part of that presence will be the continued training of local security forces in Syria, including the Syrian Kurds which form a significant element of the SDF.

British participation

At present, approximately 850 UK personnel are supporting Operation *Shader* in Iraq and Syria, conducting airstrikes in support of local forces on the ground and providing intelligence and surveillance to Coalition operations. With the UK’s training contingent in Iraq (currently 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 air operations in Iraq and Syria, behind the United States, conducting sorties at a tempo not seen since the end of the Second World War. To date, the UK has conducted 1,700 airstrikes against ISIS targets in Iraq and

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Syria and provided approximately a quarter of intelligence and surveillance to the Coalition. And operations are still ongoing.

With the start of transition to a military campaign focused on clearance, stabilisation and training, attention has increasingly been given to the long-term presence of British military assets in the region, in particular the air component. The MOD has made it clear, however, that the military effort is not over and “there will be no respite in UK operations against Daesh until we can guarantee their absolute defeat”.

1. Background

A coalition of 77 partners 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 has been 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

It is the military campaign against ISIS which is the focus of this paper. It does not examine the other elements of the counter-ISIS/Daesh campaign. Nor does it look at the April 2018 military airstrikes against the Syrian government's chemical weapons facilities, the ongoing civil war in Syria, recent Russian and Turkish actions in Syria or the Syrian peace process. These are all the subject of other Commons Library briefing papers. Papers of note include:

- CBP8337, [Iraq and the 2018 election](#), 12 June 2018
- CBP 8287, [The legal basis for airstrikes against Syrian government targets](#), 16 April 2018
- CBP 8283, [Chemical weapons and Syria – in brief](#), 16 April 2018
- CBP8247, [Syria: what next?](#), 7 March 2018
- CBP8157, [Russia 2017](#), 20 December 2017

Previous briefing papers on the military campaign against ISIS include:

- CBP8011, [Syria and Iraq: Update July 2017](#), 21 July 2017
- CBP06995, [ISIS/Daesh: the military response in Iraq and Syria](#), 8 March 2017

Other relevant Library briefing papers include:

- CBP8029, [The Future of ISIS](#), 30 June 2017

¹ The Republic of Guinea and the Community of Sahel-Saharan States formally joined the [Coalition](#) in June 2018

² <http://theglobalcoalition.org/en/partners/>

2. Situational report

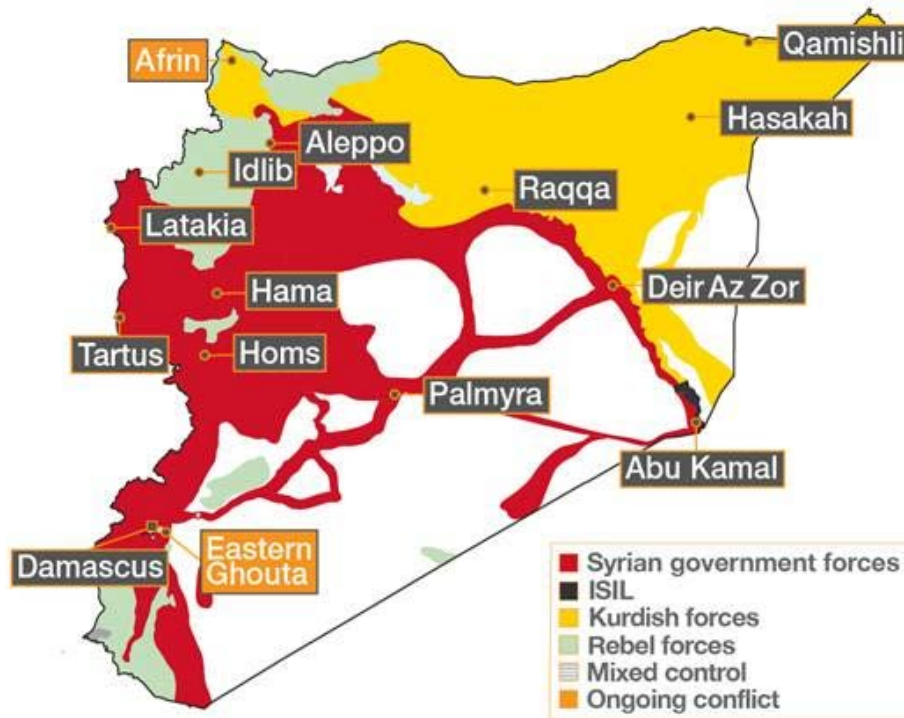
ISIS has lost 98% of the territory it once held in Iraq and Syria,³ including Raqqa, the capital city of its self-declared caliphate, which was liberated in October 2017. In December 2017 the Iraqi government declared military victory over ISIS in Iraq and the US declared the end of major combat operations. Small pockets of ISIS resistance remain, however. The remaining territory under ISIS control is focused in eastern Syria in the Middle Euphrates River Valley and around the Syria/Iraq border. Many ISIS fighters are believed to have dispersed into the desert and mountains; while others have attempted to blend back into urban populations.

Stabilisation and support operations have increasingly become the focus of the campaign in Iraq. In Syria the strategic picture remains complex. The Coalition-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)⁴ retain control of Raqqa and have made significant advances in the Khabur and Middle Euphrates River Valley on the eastern side of the Euphrates. Syrian government forces, supported by Russian airstrikes, have also made significant gains against ISIS in eastern Syria, to the West of the Euphrates.

Efforts to track down and destroy those ISIS remnants in the border region with Iraq, while also ensuring the stability and control of already liberated areas, remains the Coalition's key priority in Syria. At the beginning of May 2018 the SDF announced the beginning of Operation Round Up, which is focusing on eliminating the last pockets of ISIS resistance and securing the region to the east of the Euphrates and along the Iraq/Syria border; while also establishing defensive positions in coordination with the Iraqi Security Forces on the other side of the border. Coalitions forces are operating in support.

³ Statement by Stephen Hickey, UK Acting Deputy Permanent Representative to the UN, 8 February 2018

⁴ An alliance of opposition and local forces including the Syrian Arab Coalition and Kurdish forces in Syria.



Source: [Aljazeera](#) and [Institute for the Study of War](#). Updated 21 February 2018

However, moving the campaign forward into its final stages has continued to be complicated by the civil conflict in Syria and Russia's continued support for the Assad regime;⁵ and more recently Turkey's military intervention into northern Syria. Justified by the Turkish government as a need to "rout out terrorists" in the region, the intervention in northern Syria has been part of the Turkish campaign to secure its sphere of influence along the Syrian border. But it is also one which has led to confrontation with the Syrian Kurds, who are a key US ally in the SDF, and has resulted in drawing Kurdish fighters away from the fight in the Middle Euphrates River Valley. As Pentagon chief spokesperson, Dana White, commented in a press briefing on 22 February 2018:

Obviously, we want Turkey to focus on the common threat, and that's defeating ISIS. But we recognize that Turkey has legitimate concerns, and we're helping them to address it.

So we will continue to have that dialogue, but it is important that all parties -- this is a very complicated battle space, and it's important that all parties understand that the common threat is ISIS and that fight is not over [...]

Anything that is not directed toward the fight against ISIS is a distraction.⁶

⁵ On 11 December 2017 President Putin announced a military victory in Syria and that a significant part of the Russian contingent would be withdrawn. Russia will, however, maintain its military bases at Latakia and Tartus on the Mediterranean coast. Russia made a similar announcement in March 2016, although very little of its military capability was withdrawn and military operations in support of the Assad government continued.

⁶ Department of Defense Press Briefing, 22 February 2018

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In April 2018 the Coalition acknowledged that offensive SDF operations in the region had become limited in nature as a result.⁷

Efforts to resolve the tensions in northern Syria⁸ has allowed the return of Kurdish fighters to the region over the last few months and subsequently allowed offensive SDF operations to resume.

Going forward, a [Department of Defense Press release](#) on 9 July 2018 stated:

Since the May 1 start of Operation Roundup, Syrian Democratic Forces resumed major offensive operations in the Middle Euphrates River Valley. Since then, the SDF has continued to gain ground through offensive operations coupled with precision coalition strike support.

Over the coming weeks, Operation Roundup will continue to build momentum against ISIS remnants remaining in the Iraq-Syria border region and the Middle Euphrates River Valley. the Coalition remains committed to the lasting defeat of ISIS here, increasing peace and stability in the region and protecting all our homelands from the ISIS threat.

⁷ Department of Defense Press Conference, 17 April 2018

⁸ On 4 June, for example, the US and Turkey agreed a road map to withdraw Kurdish fighters from the northern city of Manbij, which has long been regarded as a potential flashpoint in the Turkish campaign in northern Syria. Under the agreement US forces will conduct military patrols of the city in support of the Manbij Military Council. Turkish soldiers will not, however, enter the town but will establish a base on the outskirts of the city and maintain an observer status

3. Evolution of the counter-ISIS military campaign

With a view to building the capacity of local forces on the ground, the main focus of offensive military action in Iraq and Syria, has largely been 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 have provided advisory assistance to Iraqi and local forces; while a US-led programme of support has also been provided to opposition forces in Syria.

Following the liberation of Raqqa, victory over ISIS in Iraq and the conclusion of major combat operations, the focus of the military campaign has started to shift. While tracking down latent pockets of ISIS fighters remains a key priority, along with securing the Iraqi/Syrian border; efforts have begun to shift towards maintaining security, stabilisation and training.

In February 2018 the Global Coalition met to review the success of the campaign, reaffirm commitments and discuss the future role of the coalition. Sustaining the victories achieved in Iraq and Syria were a central part of that discussion, as was the need to adapt to address the worldwide, and evolving, threat that ISIS continues to pose. As UK Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson noted at the meeting “the threat they pose is evolving and intensifying but our resolve to defeat them will not fade”.⁹

The Coalition subsequently revised its guiding principles to provide a framework for moving forward:

Recognizing that we are at an inflection point, where we must sustain attention to Iraq and Syria to secure our significant gains, while simultaneously adapting our footing to curb ISIS/Daesh’s global ambitions, we offer these Guiding Principles as our vision for the future of this Coalition.

Ultimately to achieve a full and enduring defeat of ISIS/Da’esh, the Coalition will fully eliminate ISIS/Da’esh as a territorial threat in Iraq and Syria and stabilize liberated communities in an inclusive manner. We will mobilize Coalition members and external partners, using a whole-of-government approach, to disrupt ISIS/Da’esh networks and its branches and affiliates, including possible new manifestations and variants, and deny its freedom of movement, safe havens, and access to resources in accordance with and in support of UNSCR 2396. We will combat ISIS/Da’esh’s ideology to prevent its re-emergence, recruitment, and expansion. We will support local voices that offer an alternative vision to ISIS/Da’esh’s propaganda, and we will redouble our efforts to deny ISIS/Da’esh space to exploit social media and the Internet. We will work to consolidate our gains to date and prevent a re-emergence of ISIS/Da’esh by supporting Iraqi-led political and

⁹ Ministry of Defence, [Defence in the media](#), 14 February 2018

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security sector reforms, and, through UNSCR 2254, committing to reach a political solution in Syria, thus helping to address root causes for the appearance of ISIS/Da'esh [...]

The defense aspects of the Coalition also will continue to evolve as the nature of the threat changes and the Coalition increasingly focuses on ISIS/Da'esh networks and branches. As with the Coalition's Foreign Ministers, Defense Ministries also will continue to coordinate regularly on how best to address the threat. The Coalition will pursue its military commitment in Iraq and Syria, and the existing Coalition Force Command in Tampa will continue to support the efforts in the region, in order to secure and stabilize the liberated areas to help retain our significant successes against ISIS/Da'esh to date.¹⁰

With respect to Iraq specifically, a Pentagon statement on 5 February 2018 confirmed that:

Enabled by accelerated successes following the liberation of Mosul, the Coalition will shift its focus in Iraq from enabling combat operations to sustaining military gains against Daesh.

Although OIR's force composition may change over time to ensure we have the best forces on hand for the task, we will retain an appropriate amount of capabilities as well as an advisory presence to continue training, advising and equipping our partners in the continued fight against Daesh, all with the approval of the Government of Iraq.

Our enduring presence as invited guests in Iraq will shift to focus more on policing, border control and military capacity building. We will sustain the successful momentum and enhance the capacities of the Iraqi Security Forces in pursuing Daesh, now and in the future [...]

Continued Coalition presence in Iraq will be conditions-based, proportional to the need and in coordination with the government of Iraq.¹¹

On the Coalition's presence in Syria, at the meeting of the Global Coalition on 13 February 2018 then Secretary of State Tillerson commented:

To ensure an enduring defeat of ISIS in Iraq and Syria, we are working with the global coalition and local partners to consolidate military gains. Home forces are essential to securing liberated areas and setting the conditions for safe and voluntary return of IDPs and refugees.

The United States will maintain a conditions-based and ISIS-focused military presence in Syria. As part of that presence, we will continue to train local security forces in Syria. We are also working to ensure the local forces we train are effective, professional, accountable, and respectful of human rights. It is essential that these forces be representative of their local communities and do not pose a threat to neighboring communities or neighboring countries.¹²

Reiterating the overriding message that "the fight is not done", he went on to state:

¹⁰ Global Coalition,

¹¹ [Operation Inherent Resolve Statement](#), 5 February 2018

¹² Remarks by Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson, 13 February 2018

the end of major combat operations does not mean that we have achieved the enduring defeat of ISIS. ISIS remains a serious threat to the stability of the region, our homelands, and other parts of the globe. Without continued attention on the part of coalition members, we risk the return of extremist groups like ISIS in liberated areas in Iraq and Syria and their spread to new locations.

Each of us must continue our commitment to the complete defeat of ISIS.¹³

3.1 What is happening in the air campaign?

For the foreseeable future the Coalition has committed to maintain its military commitments in Iraq and Syria in order to track down remaining enclaves of ISIS resistance, consolidate achievements made against ISIS, and to secure and stabilise the region.

This shift in the focus of the military campaign has been reflected in coalition air operations since the end of 2017. The overall number of airstrikes conducted has decreased significantly, with the majority of ongoing air operations now conducted in support of SDF operations to clear remaining pockets of ISIS fighters in Syria. Indeed, air activity in support of SDF operations has shown a marked increase since the start of Operation Round Up.¹⁴

In November 2017 the Pentagon confirmed that, going forward:

From the air component perspective, you're going to see those number of strikes drop even further. But what you will see is a continued requirement for aircraft...to do surveillance and reconnaissance.

And, as ISIS is defeated in the Euphrates River Valley, one of our challenges is continuing to find pockets of ISIS as they are- have moved to the desert [...]

that part of our air support and intelligence and development is going to continue for some time [...]

We are cognizant of the fact that we still need air support over both Iraq and Syria, and – not to be too quick to start reducing support before it's proven that we can.¹⁵

In light of the overall downward trend in airstrikes a number of coalition countries have withdrawn their strike aircraft since the end of 2017. Whether further changes will be made to force composition over the remainder of 2018 is yet to be determined.

Contributing nations

Although there are 77 coalition countries engaged in international efforts to counter ISIS, only a handful of nations have been directly involved in offensive air combat operations over Iraq and Syria.¹⁶ Several others, notably Canada, Germany and Poland, have been providing

¹³ Remarks by Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson, 13 February 2018

¹⁴ <https://www.defense.gov/OIR/Airstrikes/>

¹⁵ Department of Defense press briefing, 7 November 2017

¹⁶ During the period of major combat operations the US, France, Australia, Jordan, the UK, Belgium, Denmark, Canada, and the Netherlands have conducted air strikes in Iraq and Syria; while Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and United Arab Emirates have conducted air combat operations solely in Syria, with the support of Qatar. Only a handful of these countries have maintained a continuous deployment however.

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force-enabling capabilities such as air-to-air refuelling and surveillance and reconnaissance assets in support of coalition air operations. NATO has also been providing direct AWACS support to the coalition.¹⁷

Since the end of major combat operations in Iraq a number of coalition countries have withdrawn their combat aircraft from the region.

Belgium withdrew its contingent of four F-16 aircraft in December 2017; while Australian fast jet aircraft ceased strike operations on 14 January 2018.¹⁸ The following countries currently contribute assets to the air campaign:

- **United States** – US aircraft continue to have the highest sortie rate, conducting more than half of coalition operations in Iraq and Syria.

At the beginning of February 2018 the Pentagon confirmed that progress against ISIS had allowed the US to “realign some of its deployed combat air power and personnel to Afghanistan, including A-10 Thunderbolt II aircraft, MQ-9 Reaper unmanned aircraft and HH-60 Pave Hawk helicopters”.¹⁹

- **UK** – see [British participation: Operation Shader](#)
- **France** - has 10 Rafale aircraft deployed, operating out of Jordan and UAE, supported by an Atlantique 2 maritime patrol aircraft and E-3F AWACS aircraft.²⁰
- **The Netherlands** – the recently withdrawn Belgian contingent were replaced by six aircraft from the Royal Netherlands Air Force in January 2018. Those aircraft, two of which are reserve aircraft, will be stationed in Jordan.

Jordan has also been a longstanding contributor to the air campaign. The Jordanian government has not announced the withdrawal of its aircraft from the campaign, although there is little in official documents to indicate current active involvement. The same could be said of Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates which both re-joined the campaign in 2016 but have undertaken few sorties since.

Canada, Germany and Poland all continue to deploy reconnaissance, refuelling and transport aircraft in an enabling role;²¹ while NATO continues its AWACS surveillance flights.

Although a member of the counter-ISIS coalition, airstrikes conducted by Turkey have been in support of its campaign against the Syrian Kurds in northern Syria, and not in the campaign against ISIS.

¹⁷ Although NATO initially stated that such assistance did not make the Alliance a member of the Global Coalition, in May 2017 NATO became a full member as part of an action plan to do more in the fight against terrorism.

¹⁸ Headquarters Joint Operations, [Operation Okra Press Release](#), 31 January 2018

¹⁹ US Department of Defense press briefing, 13 February 2018

²⁰ French Ministry of Defense, [Dossier de Presse: Operation Chammal](#), 9 February 2018

²¹ Canada's air-to-air refuelling and transport aircraft have an operational mandate until 31 March 2019. The [German mandate](#) has been extended until 31 October 2018, although German aircraft will no longer participate in the sea-based mission in the Mediterranean.

3.2 Future of the Train, Advise and Assist mission

The train and assist mission has been a key part of the military campaign. Twenty six coalition countries have contributed over 4,000 troops to the training mission in Iraq which, to date, has trained more than 150,000 members of the Iraqi security forces, including 25,000 police and border guard personnel and 18,000 counterterrorism forces.²² The US-led programme of training for moderate partner forces in Syria²³ has also trained 12,577 personnel, including the Raqqa internal security force.²⁴

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.

With the transition toward stabilisation operations and capacity building, the training mission is set to continue and expand.

Iraq

As outlined above, the Coalition has reaffirmed its commitment to retaining a training presence in Iraq. The expectation is that, in the longer term, the training effort will shift towards policing, border control and military capacity building.

On 1 February 2018 the Coalition also established a Coalition Aviation Advisory and Training Team (CAATT) “designed to help our Iraqi partners build a capable, affordable, professional and sustainable Iraqi aviation enterprise”. The team is comprised of US and coalition personnel already deployed in theatre and will serve a bridging function to the establishment of an air expeditionary wing towards the end of 2018 which will take over this mission.²⁵

NATO training mission

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. Following a request from the Iraqi government, at the NATO summit in Warsaw in July 2016 Alliance leaders announced that counter-IED, medical, civil-military cooperation and security training would be expanded into Iraq itself. That new training and capacity building mission was launched in Besmaya on 5 February 2017.

In response to a request from the Iraqi government, at a meeting of NATO Ministers of Defence in February 2018 the Alliance agreed to begin planning for a new training mission in Iraq.

The new mission will build upon NATO’s current training efforts with a view to making them more sustainable in the longer term, with better

²² Department of Defense Press Briefing, 22 May 2018

²³ The US has also provided equipment packages and weapons.

²⁴ [Global Coalition website: Maps and Stats](#), 24 January 2018

²⁵ US Department of Defense Press Briefing, 13 February 2018

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resourcing and an established process for Allies to contribute forces. The training mission will involve several hundred personnel and will train Iraqi instructors and develop Iraqi military schools.

The new mission will be formally launched at the NATO Heads of State summit in Brussels on 11-12 July 2018.

Syria

The United States has stated that it intends to maintain a “conditions-based” military presence in Syria that will remain firmly focused on the threat posed by ISIS. Part of that presence will be the continued training of local security forces in Syria, including the Syrian Kurds which form a significant element of the SDF.

In a statement on 17 January 2018 the Pentagon said:

The US continues to train local security forces in Syria. The training is designed to enhance security for displaced persons returning to their devastated communities. It is also essential so that ISIS cannot reemerge in liberated and ungoverned areas. This is not a new “army” or conventional “border guard” force.

This training is consistent with campaign objectives to ensure an enduring defeat of ISIS, facilitate stabilization efforts and create the conditions that support the UN-led Geneva process.

These security forces are internally-focused to prevent ISIS fighters from fleeing Syria and augment local security in liberated areas. These forces will protect the local population and help prevent ISIS from launching new attacks against the US and its allies and partners, pending a longer-term political solution to the Syrian civil war... ²⁶

More specifically, the intention is to establish local security forces throughout liberated areas as more civil councils are established, along the lines of the Raqqa Internal Security Force.²⁷

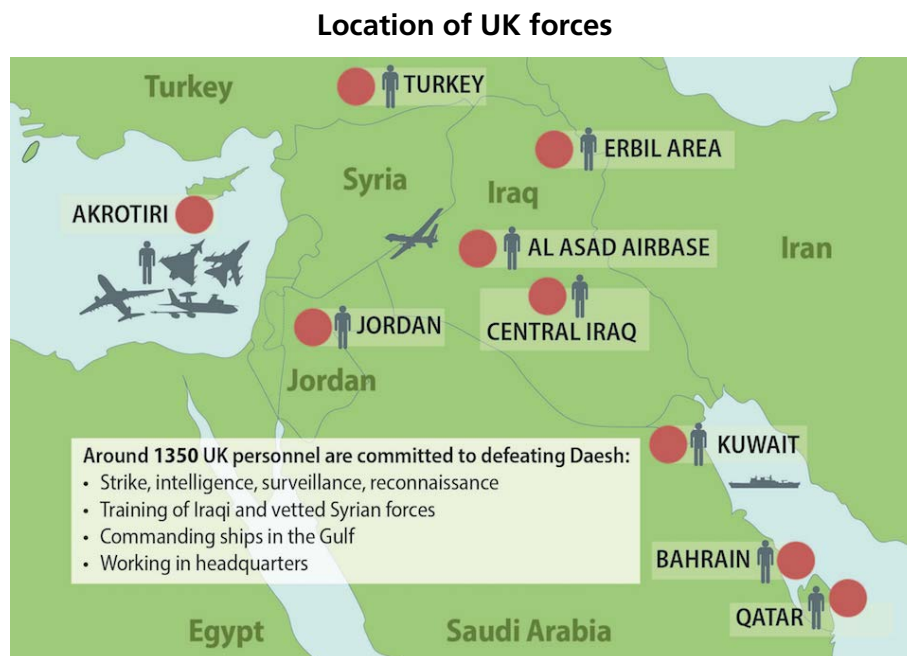
²⁶ US Department of Defense Press release, 17 January 2018

²⁷ US Department of Defense Press briefing, 19 December 2017

4. British participation: Operation Shader

British military forces have been operating in Iraq and Syria since September 2014 and December 2015, respectively.²⁸

At present, approximately 850 UK personnel are supporting Operation Shader in Iraq and Syria, conducting airstrikes in support of local forces on the ground and providing intelligence and surveillance to Coalition operations. With the UK's training contingent in Iraq (currently 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.



Source: [Ministry of Defence](#), 26 June 2018 update

Air campaign

During its nearly four-year campaign, the RAF operation has been substantial. The UK has been the second largest contributor to air operations in Iraq and Syria, conducting sorties at a tempo and scale, relative to the RAF's size, not seen since 1945.²⁹ The UK has conducted 1,700 airstrikes against ISIS targets in Iraq and Syria³⁰ and provided intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance to Coalition partners. In evidence to the defence select committee in May 2018 Air Vice-Marshal

²⁸ Details of the parliamentary approval process is set out in Library briefing paper CBP6995, [ISIS/Daesh: the military response in Iraq and Syria](#), March 2017

²⁹ Comments by Air Vice Marshal Stringer, Chief of Staff Joint Command, to the [defence select committee inquiry on UK military operations in Mosul and Raqqa](#), 15 May 2018, Q2

³⁰ Ministry of Defence, *Update: air strikes against Daesh*, updated 13 February 2018

Stringer, former UK Air Component Commander in the Middle East revealed that “our Sentinel stand-off radar provided about 25% to 30% of the overall [intelligence] contribution”.³¹

And operations are still ongoing. RAF assets have continued to strike Daesh targets in northern and western Iraq, and eastern and southern Syria. On 21 June 2018 the MOD also reported:

Coalition forces operating against Daesh in the south of Syria were fired on by hostile positions, not believed to be held by Daesh. Although the coalition forces decided to withdraw to attempt to de-escalate the situation, one particular position continued to fire on them. As an act of collective self-defence, RAF Typhoons dropped a single Paveway IV on the position, which successfully removed the threat to our coalition partners.³²

The MOD later stated:

The RAF’s rules of engagement give our aircraft the right to act in defence of our coalition partners. This was a wholly proportionate response which complied with both International Humanitarian Law and the Law of Armed Conflict. There were no civilian, coalition or partner casualties.³³

In written evidence to the Defence Select Committee inquiries on the campaign in Iraq and Syria³⁴ the MOD has provided a monthly breakdown of airstrikes which gives an indication of the change of tempo in the campaign since October 2017.

Deployed RAF assets include a mixture of combat, surveillance, reconnaissance, and refuelling/transport aircraft:

- 8 Tornado GR4 fast jet aircraft
- 6 Typhoon combat aircraft
- Reaper Remotely Piloted Air Systems
- Airseeker surveillance aircraft
- Voyager air-to-air refuelling aircraft
- 2 C130 transport aircraft.
- Sentinel surveillance aircraft (deployed in the Middle East in support of Operation Shader and other taskings).³⁵

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

Royal Navy vessels have also periodically deployed to protect French and US carriers deployed in the region.³⁶

³¹ Oral evidence: UK Military operations in Mosul and Raqqa, HC 999, Q.9

³² Ministry of Defence, [Air strikes against Daesh](#), 26 June 2018 update

³³ Ministry of Defence, Defence in the Media, 1 July 2018

³⁴ [UK military operations in Iraq and Syria, HC 106, Session 2016-17](#); and [UK Military Operations in Mosul and Raqqa inquiry](#), ongoing as of 2 July 2018.

³⁵ E3-D sentry aircraft have also been deployed as part of Operation Shader in the past.

³⁶ Further detail is available in Library briefing paper, CBP06995, [ISIS/Daesh: the military response in Iraq and Syria](#), last updated 8 March 2017

On 2 May 2018 the MOD acknowledged an “unintentional civilian fatality” as a result of an RAF airstrike in eastern Syria, the first in nearly four years of operations in the region.³⁷

Future plans?

With the start of transition to a military campaign focused on clearance, stabilisation and training, attention has increasingly been given to the long term presence of British military assets in the region, in particular the air component. The MOD has made it clear, however, that the military effort is not over and “there will be no respite in UK operations against Daesh until we can guarantee their absolute defeat”.³⁸

Giving evidence to the Defence Select Committee on 21 February 2018 the Defence Secretary, Gavin Williamson commented:

We have been very successful in depriving Daesh of territory, but that threat is dispersing, not just across Iraq but across Syria, and it is right that we continue to remain engaged and eliminate that threat at every opportunity that we have to do so. That is what our armed forces are engaged in doing. We need to remain committed to these countries. I think we have made mistakes in the past where we have felt that we have dealt with the threat, and we have retreated too quickly from it.³⁹

Training mission

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. 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. The MOD has since expanded its training to other locations in Iraq.

The total UK training contingent based in Iraq currently comprises approximately 500 personnel. When asked about future plans for the UK training effort the MOD stated at the beginning of February 2018:

...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.⁴⁰

To date, the UK has trained over 75,000 Iraqi security forces personnel, including Kurdish Peshmerga, in Besmaya, Taji and al-Asad.⁴¹

Syria

The UK has also participated in the US-led training programme for moderate opposition groups in Syria. From October 2016 20 personnel were deployed at a number of locations in the region, outside of Syria,

³⁷ Written Statement, HLWS645, 2 May 2018

³⁸ Ministry of Defence press release, 6 March 2018

³⁹ Defence Committee: [Oral evidence: Departmental Priorities](#), HC814, 21 February 2018, Q130

⁴⁰ [PQ HL4891](#), *Iraq: military intervention*, 2 February 2017

⁴¹ PQ157737, *Iraq: Islamic State*, 3 July 2018

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to provide training on basic infantry tactics; command and control; medical training and explosive hazard awareness training.

In September 2017 the MOD confirmed, however, that the UK training teams involved in the Coalition training programme in Syria were being held at readiness in the UK, due to partner forces focusing on operations to defeat Daesh.

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