

UK actions against Islamic State in Iraq and Syria | Intelligence briefing #4

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Summary of main points

1. A nationwide ceasefire began in Syria at 22:00 on 27 February greatly reducing the levels of violence in the country. The ceasefire halts attacks against government and rebel forces but still allows attacks against Islamic State and the al-Nusra Front.
2. UK forces continue to be active across Iraq and Syria, targeting IS strongholds in Mosul, Kirkuk and Ramadi in Iraq and around Raqqa in Syria, as well as across the region either side of the Iraq-Syria border.
3. The British government's long-standing position of not commenting on UK special forces operations makes it very difficult to ascertain the true nature and extent of UK ground operations against Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. UK special forces units are known to be operating on the ground in Iraq in frontline combat roles. UK intelligence operatives are also active in the region.
4. Islamic State released a video threatening action against the United Kingdom if it continues to participate in anti-IS operations. The video also shows three alleged informants for British intelligence admitting to their actions before apparently being executed in an explosion initiated by a British child who has appeared in a previous IS video.
5. In response to a Freedom of Information request, the UK Ministry of Defence claimed that Islamic State has lost control of 30% of the territory that it took in 2014 and that recent strikes on Islamic State's oil industry have reduced the group's revenues by 10%.
6. In a major intelligence coup, a disillusioned convert to Islamic State provided Sky News with a substantial cache of documents listing the personal details of many thousands of IS fighters, including previously unknown fighters from the United Kingdom.

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Recent developments

The US-led coalition launched 202 airstrikes against targets in Syria and 394 airstrikes against targets in Iraq during the reporting period of 9 February to 7 March.¹ After talks with foreign ministers from France, the United Kingdom, Italy and Germany in Paris on 13 March, the US Secretary of State, John Kerry, claimed that Islamic State (IS) has lost 600 fighters and over 1,000 square miles of territory over the previous three weeks alone.² Islamic State has lost As Shadadi in northeastern Syria and Ramadi in central Iraq. The group has responded by conducting major operations around Aleppo and Tel Abyad in northern Syria, though it has made little progress.

On 9 February, two US intelligence chiefs, the Director of National Intelligence, James Clapper, and the director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, Lt. Gen. Vincent R. Stewart, testified before the US Armed Services Committee. Clapper said that 'more than 36,500 foreign fighters – including at least 6,600 from Western countries – have travelled to Syria from more than 100 countries since the conflict began in 2012.'³ He went on to say that anti-IS forces were expected to make small gains in Iraq, but he predicted little change in Syria due to there not being sufficient ground forces to take and hold territory there.

On 12 February, the International Syria Support Group (ISSG), which consists of 17 countries and four intergovernmental organisations, announced plans to bring into force a nationwide ceasefire in Syria.⁴ The ceasefire, which is supported by both the United States and Russia, came into effect at 22:00 local time on 27 February. Attacks are still allowed against the al-Nusra Front and Islamic State, but not against government forces or rebel groups. While some violations to the ceasefire have been noted, the UN envoy to Syria, Staffan de Mistura, has said that the levels of violence in the country have been greatly reduced.⁵ However, the fate of the Syrian president, Bashar al Assad, remains a major stumbling block in diplomatic negotiations, with the US-led coalition calling for his removal while Russia has rejected such demands.

On 16 February, Islamic State released a video claiming that the United States has lost the war in Syria and Iraq.⁶ The video was primarily in response to Saudi Arabia's announcement that it will be sending ground troops to fight Islamic State. The video followed one on 11 February that threatened a response against the United Kingdom should it continue to operate against Islamic State.⁷ This video shows three alleged informants admitting that they had given information to British intelligence that led to drone strikes against IS targets. The three men are then apparently executed in an explosion initiated by a four-year-old British child who has appeared in a previous IS video.

¹ <http://airwars.org/daily-reports/>

² <http://news.sky.com/story/1659061/600-is-fighters-killed-in-three-weeks>

³ http://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Clapper_02-09-16.pdf

⁴ <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2016/02/252428.htm>

⁵ <http://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/transcript-press-encounter-staffan-de-mistura-and-jan-egeland-progress>

⁶ <http://www.clarionproject.org/analysis/isis-clip-declares-america-has-lost-battle>

⁷ <http://www.clarionproject.org/news/young-child-executes-uk-spies-latest-islamic-state-clip>

IS intelligence cache

A disillusioned convert from the Free Syrian Army to the Islamic State, Abu Hamed, has provided Sky News with a major cache of IS documents that will be of significant value to Western intelligence services.⁸ Consisting of over 22,000 individual documents, the cache includes the personal details of thousands of IS fighters, including their real names, addresses, family details, nationalities, recruiters and sponsors, and even the routes they took to get to Syria or Iraq. This information may help identify thousands of previously unknown fighters (many of whom have now returned to their home countries) and IS recruiters, as well as the routes used by militants travelling to and from the Middle East. If verified, it will also help intelligence agencies significantly develop their understanding of Islamic State's recruitment, training and command structures.⁹

The highly-sensitive files were passed to Sky News in Turkey on a memory stick stolen from the head of Islamic State's internal security police. The man calling himself Hamed has also reportedly revealed details of Islamic State's strategy. He claims that the group is planning to relinquish its major headquarters in Raqqa and move to the central deserts of Syria and ultimately Iraq. He also claims that Islamic State, the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) and Assad's government are actually working together against the moderate Syrian opposition.¹⁰

Review of UK military operations

In this reporting period (9 February to 7 March), UK military action has directly destroyed 37 assault groups, 27 IS-held buildings and complexes, 14 rocket-launching facilities, 14 heavy machine-gun teams, 11 mortar teams, one RPG unit, five vehicle-borne IEDs, five vehicles, four weapons caches, two heavy anti-aircraft artillery weapons, one 122mm howitzer and one sniper team. As seen in previous months, UK forces have continued to concentrate their resources on the IS strongholds around Mosul, Kirkuk and Ramadi in Iraq and around Raqqa in Syria, together with the central zone either side of the Iraq-Syria border. The United Kingdom continues to provide the bulk of the coalition strategic and tactical surveillance assets. UK forces are also undertaking combat air patrols to identify and engaging opportune targets, participating in intelligence-led strikes and providing close air support for Iraqi military, Kurdish Peshmerga and moderate Syrian opposition forces.

On 18 February, the UK Ministry of Defence (MoD) responded to a Freedom of Information request by Open Briefing on the strategic impact of UK airstrikes against Islamic State.¹¹ While unable or unwilling to release information on the impact of UK airstrikes specifically, the MoD's Ops Directorate claimed that over 30% of the territory that Islamic State took in 2014 has been re-taken. In relation to Iraq, the MoD stated:

⁸ <http://news.sky.com/story/1656777/is-documents-identify-thousands-of-jihadis>

⁹ <http://news.sky.com/story/1656827/islamic-state-files-goldmine-of-information>

¹⁰ <http://news.sky.com/story/1656777/is-documents-identify-thousands-of-jihadis>

¹¹ <https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/315699/response/781712/attach/html/2/20160218%20Impact%20UK%20airstrikes%20Islamic%20State.docx.html>

Working with Coalition close air support, Iraqi security forces have substantially cleared Ramadi, the capital of Anbar province, and are working to make the area safe for displaced people to return. Further north, Kurdish forces, again supported by Coalition close air support, have driven Daesh from the Sinjar area. To date, there have been over 7,500 coalition airstrikes in Iraq of which 567 have been by the RAF.

In relation to Syria, the MoD response stated:

In Syria, where the situation is much more complex, the Coalition is continuing to strike Daesh headquarters and economic targets, including oilfields where we judge that recent strikes on its illicit oil industry have reduced Daesh's revenues by some 10%. In Syria there have been nearly 3,500 coalition airstrikes of which 30 have been by the RAF.

Last month's briefing provided details of the first major combat injuries suffered by UK forces. On 5 February, the *Mirror* newspaper reported that three British special forces soldiers were wounded when their joint coalition special forces patrol was ambushed by a large group of IS fighters near Mosul, Iraq.¹² The British, German and US special forces patrol was reportedly aiming to identify IS positions outside the city and spot weak points in the group's defences. Such a joint operation would have been conducted as part of the Coalition Joint Special Operations Task Force, which operates under US command.

The incident near Mosul highlights the often overlooked presence of UK forces operating on the ground in Iraq and the possibility that British ground forces may be operating across the border in Syria too; however, the British government's long-standing position of not commenting on the operations of UK Special Forces (UKSF) makes it very difficult to ascertain the true nature and extent of UK ground operations against Islamic State. Tabloid reports from 2015 suggest around 120 soldiers from UKSF units are being used on Operation Shader, the British element of the coalition action against Islamic State; however, this cannot be verified.¹³ These soldiers are deployed on a wide variety of frontline roles, including forward air control, conducting ambushes (both independently and alongside Iraqi and Kurdish troops), providing sniper teams and crafting Kurdish Peshmerga fighters into roaming guerrilla units. There are unconfirmed reports that some UKSF units have disguised themselves as IS fighters to be able to move around more freely and in closer proximity to their targets. Travelling in unmarked pickups, these units are thought to be tasked with locating (and sometimes attacking) mobile IS assets. Such units are reportedly equipped with small unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), which provide imagery to the soldiers in the field as well as commanders in the region and in the United Kingdom.

These special forces units are also working very closely with the United Kingdom's Secret Intelligence Service (MI6) and its communications intelligence service, GCHQ. MI6 is developing a network of informants and agents within Islamic State. In addition to developing the strategic intelligence picture on Islamic State (its leadership, tactics, capabilities and plans), the intelligence services are working hard to identify and locate UK nationals within the organisation, both those who are still active in the Middle East and those who have returned to the United Kingdom and may be planning attacks on the UK mainland.

¹² <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/sas-heroes-blown-up-isis-7318678>

¹³ <http://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/609863/SAS-kill-hundreds-Islamic-State-ISIS-terror-group-Iraq-Syria> and <http://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/595439/SAS-ISIS-fighter-Jihadis>

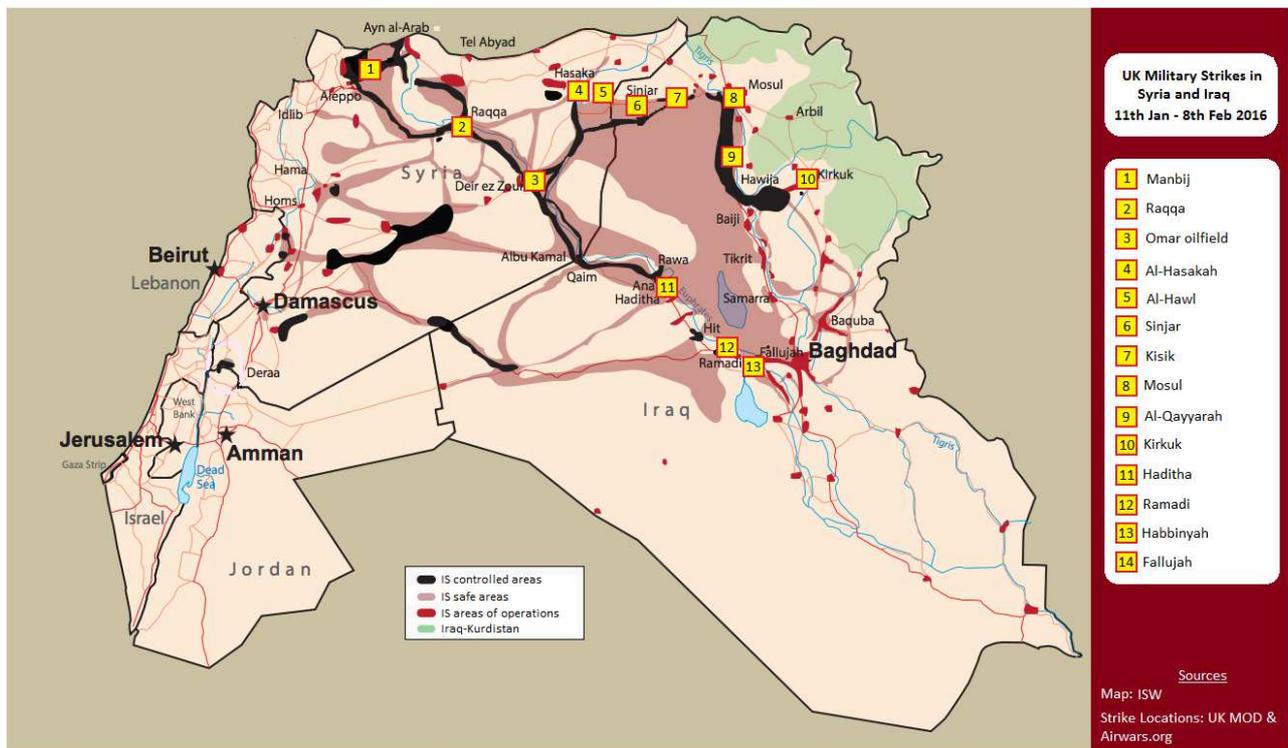
Appendix 1: Available chronology of UK military actions in Iraq and Syria

Date	Syria	Iraq
11 Jan	Manbij – Two IS buildings destroyed.	Mosul – IS security headquarters attacked.
12 Jan	Omar oilfield - Construction equipment, repairing damage from previous strikes, destroyed. Al Hasakah – Two IS buildings destroyed.	Mosul – IS security headquarters attacked.
13 Jan		Ramadi – RAF provided close air support to Iraqi forces attacking town; two machine gun positions destroyed. Sinjar – Close air support to Kurdish ground forces; one machine gun position destroyed.
14 Jan		Ramadi – One IS assault group, one firing position and a mortar unit destroyed. Mosul – One mortar unit and a patrol vehicle destroyed; one compound of three targeted buildings destroyed.
15 Jan	Raqqa – One IS barracks and one vehicle destroyed.	
17 Jan	Raqqa – One vehicle destroyed.	Sinjar – One supply vehicle destroyed.
18 Jan		Mosul – Two IS groups destroyed. Sinjar – One concealed vehicle destroyed.
19 Jan		Ramadi – One mortar team and one RPG team destroyed; supply and military construction vehicles destroyed. Haditha – One large VBIED, one assault group and vehicles destroyed.
20 Jan		Ramadi - Two IS buildings, one IS group, an armoured personnel carrier being converted into a VBIED and a stockpile of explosives destroyed. Fallujah – Provided close air support for Iraqi ground troops; one mortar unit destroyed.
21 Jan		Ramadi/Haditha – Three IS strongpoints and an explosives stockpile destroyed. Al-Qayyarah – One firing point and one mortar unit destroyed.
22 Jan		Unidentified location – Joint operations with coalition aircraft; one concealed firing position located and destroyed.

Date	Syria	Iraq
24 Jan	Omar oilfield – Three construction/repair vehicles destroyed.	<p>Ramadi – One command centre, one anti-aircraft gun and one ammunition store destroyed.</p> <p>Habbaniyah – Five IS trench positions and one bunker destroyed.</p> <p>Mosul – Three IS-held buildings destroyed.</p>
25 Jan	<p>Raqqa – Two construction/repair vehicles destroyed.</p> <p>Syria-Iraq border – One IS position destroyed.</p>	Sinjar – One mortar team and one sniper team destroyed.
26 Jan	Raqqa – Multiple construction/repair cranes destroyed.	<p>Western Iraq – One weapons stockpile, one firing position and one mobile anti-aircraft gun destroyed.</p> <p>Kirkuk – One command centre destroyed.</p> <p>Little Zab River – Two IS cave positions destroyed.</p>
27 Jan		<p>Ramadi – One IS armoured personnel carrier destroyed.</p> <p>Habbaniyah – Close air support with Iraqi troops; one IS assault group attacked.</p> <p>Between Al-Qayyarah and Mosul – One vehicle destroyed.</p>
28 Jan		<p>Habbaniyah – Four IS positions destroyed, including one heavy machine gun unit.</p> <p>Northwestern Iraq – One mortar unit and one heavy machine gun unit destroyed.</p> <p>Ramadi – One armed vehicle and one VBIED armoured truck destroyed.</p>
29 Jan	Al Hawl – Five IS fighting positions and a tunnel system destroyed.	Mosul – One IS ground unit and one weapons store destroyed.
30 Jan		<p>Ramadi – One armoured truck and one mechanical excavator destroyed.</p> <p>Syria-Iraq border – One construction vehicle destroyed.</p>
31 Jan	Eastern Syria – Two IS large ground positions attacked and destroyed.	<p>Ramadi – One truck bomb, three IS positions, including one heavy machine gun unit, destroyed.</p> <p>Northern Iraq – One IS group and one IS-held building destroyed.</p>

Date	Syria	Iraq
1 Feb		<p>Kisik – Three rocket launching units and one vehicle destroyed.</p> <p>Al-Qayyarah – One ammunition vehicle and one mortar position destroyed.</p> <p>Ramadi – Three IS positions destroyed.</p>
1-5 Feb		<p>Mosul – UK special forces units, alongside coalition SF, engaged IS units; IS position subsequently destroyed by coalition airstrike.</p>

Figure 1. Locations of known UK airstrikes against Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (11 January to 8 February 2016).



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