

UK actions against Islamic State in Iraq and Syria | Briefing #1

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Summary of main points

1. During November, the Royal Air Force assisted Kurdish forces fighting Islamic State around Sinjar, Iraq. Four attacks using Paveway IV guided missiles, one with a Brimstone missile and another with a BGU-12 guided bomb were reported.
2. British intelligence enabled the United States to target and kill IS executioner Mohammed Emwazi ('Jihadi John') in Raqqa, Syria, using an armed Reaper drone.
3. Islamic State coordinated or inspired attacks on a Russian airliner travelling from Egypt to Russia; in Beirut, Lebanon; and in the French capital, Paris.
4. The UN Security Council unanimously passed a French resolution calling for 'all necessary measures' to be taken against Islamic State in the territory it controls
5. MPs will shortly vote on whether to extend British military action against Islamic State from Iraq to Syria.
6. After the Labour leader, Jeremy Corbyn, announced he would allow Labour MPs a free vote on military action against Islamic State in Syria, the prime minister, David Cameron, will be confident in winning the vote, and it is likely air strikes will begin soon.
7. There are serious concerns over the UK military strategy, which appears to be considered simply the 'least worst' option.

During November, the United States and other coalition partners carried out 219 confirmed strikes against Islamic State (IS) in Syria and 484 confirmed strikes in Iraq.¹ The French Air Force destroyed 56 IS targets in Syria, including command and control centres, recruitment centres, armouries and IED factories.² On 20 November alone, Russia conducted 522 sorties and launched 101 air- and sea-based cruise missiles, destroying 826 IS targets and killing a claimed 600 IS fighters in a strike on a facility near Deir ez-Zor.³ Over the next two days, Russia claimed responsibility for 141 strikes destroying 472 targets in Syria.⁴ Amid allegations that strikes by Russia were mainly directed at opposition forces, Moscow has quickly switched its focus to IS targets as evidence emerged that an IS bomb had destroyed a Russian airliner.

¹ <http://airwars.org/daily-reports-nov15/>

² <http://airwars.org/daily-reports-nov15/>

³ <http://eng.syria.mil.ru/en/index/syria/news/more.htm?id=12066437@egNews>

⁴ <http://eng.syria.mil.ru/en/index/syria/news/more.htm?id=12066491@egNews>

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UK actions against Islamic State in November were limited to Iraq. On 25 November, the RAF assisted Kurdish forces against Islamic State around Sinjar. Two Tornado GR4s conducted three attacks with Paveway IV guided missiles on groups of IS fighters and destroyed a vehicle with a Brimstone missile. The Tornados then conducted a fourth Paveway strike against an IS heavy machine-gun position to the southeast of Sinjar. A second Tornado patrol continued to support the Peshmerga ground operations, destroying a heavy machine-gun position to the southwest of Sinjar. Meanwhile, an RAF Reaper drone provided overwatch for the Kurdish forces and destroyed a building in an IS compound near Mosul with a GBU-12 guided bomb.⁵

On 12 November, combined forces took control of Highway 47, connecting the IS stronghold of Raqqa in Syria to Mosul in Iraq. The road was a key supply route for IS fighters. Assisted by airstrikes from coalition members, Iraqi special forces and Kurdish Peshmerga established blocking points on the highway, and began taking control of Sinjar in Iraq. Meanwhile, the Kurdish-Arab alliance of the Syrian Democratic Forces has warned civilians in Raqqa to stay away from government buildings as they prepare ground attacks on the city. Over the course of 2015, IS commanders had moved their families into Raqqa from Mosul, Islamic State's less secure second city. Following increased airstrikes targeting Raqqa, the families of senior IS commanders are reportedly evacuating the city.

Outside of Iraq and Syria, Islamic State has recently claimed responsibility for several attacks on Middle Eastern and European targets. On 1 November, 224 people – mainly Russian – died when a bomb exploded on board a flight from Egypt to Russia. On 12 November, two suicide bombers killed themselves and at least 40 other people in Beirut, Lebanon. The next day, a series of IS attacks in the French capital, Paris, killed 132 people. Plots have subsequently been discovered for further attacks in Paris, Brussels and Hanover. Islamic State is now thought to have been responsible for around 1,000 civilian deaths outside Iraq and Syria during 2015.⁶ In the wake of the Paris attacks, the UN Security Council unanimously passed a French resolution calling for 'all necessary measures' to be taken against the terrorist group in the territory it controls. A week later, the French president, François Hollande, called on British MPs to support the air campaign against Islamic State in Syria.

These developments have made it far more likely that the United Kingdom will extend its existing military actions against Islamic State from Iraq to include Syria.

United Kingdom parliament close to vote on action against Islamic State in Syria

UK involvement in Syria to date has been largely limited to non-offensive and indirect support, including participation in the (now inactive) training programme of moderate Syrian opposition forces,⁷ training the Kurdish Peshmerga forces that are operating across Iraq and Syria, and sharing intelligence with the United States and other coalition forces. However, British military personnel have participated in actions against Islamic State in Syria while embedded with allied forces. Five British aircrew have participated in offensive operations while under the command of US and Canadian forces in Syria, and SAS soldiers have been embedded with US special forces operating in Syria since at least since May 2015. SAS soldiers have also been reportedly operating in Syria providing security for MI6 officers.

⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/update-air-strikes-in-iraq>

⁶ http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/06/17/world/middleeast/map-isis-attacks-around-the-world.html?_r=0

⁷ <http://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/SN06995>

The United Kingdom has so far only undertaken one direct offensive operation in Syria that is known about. On 21 August 2015, an RAF Reaper drone was used to kill two British IS fighters operating in Syria. In authorising the strike, the British prime minister, David Cameron, was widely criticised for ignoring the will of parliament, which had voted against air strikes in Syria in August 2013, though the target at that time had been Bashar al-Assad's government. So when British intelligence services pinpointed IS executioner 'Jihadi John' to a specific car travelling in Raqqa on 12 November 2015, the intelligence was quickly passed to the United States, which had an armed Reaper drone in position able to carry out a strike at immediate notice.

British MPs will shortly vote on whether to extend direct military action to Syria. The prime minister does not strictly need parliamentary consent to go to war, but it has been the norm since Tony Blair's vote on the Iraq War in 2003. Cameron has declared he will not hold a vote until the government is predicted to win by a significant majority. With a Conservative working majority of just 16 seats (330 MPs) and a likely, albeit minor, Conservative rebellion of 15-20 MPs, the government will need to convince MPs from other parties to vote with them. The Democratic Unionist Party (8 MPs) will vote with the government, but the Scottish National Party (54 MPs) and Liberal Democrats (8 MPs) will vote against action. Around 30 Labour MPs (out of 231) have indicated that they will vote for airstrikes in Syria, which would allow the government to pass the motion. Furthermore, the Labour leader, Jeremy Corbyn, has estimated that 25% of Labour MPs (around 58 MPs) support action.

Much depended on the whip issued by the Labour leader on how Labour MPs should vote. Corbyn is firmly against strikes, but has largely failed to set out a convincing alternative. The shadow cabinet is divided, and many senior party figures are in favour of military action. (While, the division within Labour has been used by some to criticise Corbyn's leadership, it is more indicative of the misalignment of the parliamentary Labour Party with the party membership than anything else.) It would have been a major political blow for Corbyn if he had set a whip telling Labour MPs to vote against action and significant numbers of them voted with the government; however, he will allow a free vote (while at the same time lobbying colleagues to vote against the government motion). A free vote for Labour MPs will make Cameron confident of achieving a majority, and he will therefore hold the vote very soon. The government will likely win the motion with a majority of between 40 and 70, and British air strikes will begin shortly.

While precise details of any British military group have not been revealed, the United Kingdom would offer a far smaller force than the United States or Russia. However, any contribution would be significant and involve some of the world's most advanced assets and weaponry. The United Kingdom could offer the coalition greater access to GCHQ and MI6 intelligence product, alongside strike assets in the form of RAF Tornado GR4 and Reaper unmanned combat air vehicles and SAS reconnaissance and strike groups. The Royal Air Force also possesses 'dynamic strike', a unique capability among the coalition that allows Tornado aircraft to fly combined reconnaissance and strike roles.

UK air assets are very well suited to patrolling the major roads so vital to the IS supply network. Both Tornados and Reapers are able to conduct prolonged standing patrols along roads and the surrounding areas, identifying and engaging militant vehicles and patrol bases. This task is central to the overall strategy of fragmenting the various IS groups prior to ground assault by allied forces. Other likely missions will be against training facilities, command centres, and the oil facilities and supply pipelines that provide a reported \$1.5 million a day to the IS coffers.⁸

⁸ <http://www.parliament.uk/documents/commons-committees/foreign-affairs/PM-Response-to-FAC-Report-Extension-of-Offensive-British-Military-Operations-to-Syria.pdf> (p. 12)

To estimate the impact that British offensive operations could have in Syria, it is valid to examine the similar deployment to Iraq. There, a deployment of eight Tornado GR4 strike aircraft, 10 Reaper armed drones and six dedicated reconnaissance aircraft enabled the RAF to conduct 1,600 missions with 360 strikes,⁹ fly 30% of the coalition's reconnaissance missions¹⁰ and provide 60% of its tactical reconnaissance¹¹. Furthermore, despite relying heavily on Iraqi and Kurdish forces, coalition air support has reversed the IS advance in Iraq and regained 30% of the territory it had seized. What is less clear is the strategic impact of this contribution on Islamic State.

The overall impression to be drawn from the proposed UK military strategy in Syria is that it is considered the 'least worst' option. However, the danger is that the complexities of the situation in the country will result in the UK strategy in Syria beginning and ending with air strikes, with much less progress on the wider diplomatic strategy needed to emasculate Islamic State. Politicians understandably reach for the military option in response to the very real need to 'do something'; however, the lessons of Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya highlight the dangers of ill-thought through military action.

The very high numbers of civilian casualties caused by air strikes in previous Western interventions have been a prime source of propaganda and recruitment for groups such as Islamic State. It is unclear how many civilian casualties have been caused by coalition air strikes against Islamic State in Iraq and Syria to date. Since August 2014, 8,659 coalition air strikes have been conducted in Iraq and Syria, with over 28,000 bombs and missiles dropped. This has resulted in the deaths of an estimated 20,000 IS fighters and between 682 and 2,057 civilians.¹² If these figures are accurate, coalition air strikes in Iraq and Syria have resulted in one civilian death per four to 12 strikes or one civilian death per 10 to 30 IS fighters killed. International NGOs operating on the ground have noted that strikes by the more advanced coalition forces are significantly more accurate than those by Syrian and Iraqi air forces and are therefore *relatively* safer for civilians.¹³

The argument is not over whether or not to confront Islamic State, but how best to do so. The optimum military approach would require a major ground force to dislodge Islamic State from Raqqa. However, after the brutal wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, there is little political will (and even less popular will) within NATO to deploy major forces into yet another Middle Eastern conflict. Instead, it is suggested that the mainstream opposition forces, such as the Free Syrian Army, and the Kurdish Peshmerga will provide the ground forces necessary for Western air strikes to make a significant difference. However, the opposition fighters are not a unified force and are more focussed on fighting the Syrian Army than Islamic State. Indeed, a substantial unresolved complication is the presence of the Syrian Army, which is in conflict with both Islamic State and the opposition forces that the West supports.

⁹ <http://www.parliament.uk/documents/commons-committees/foreign-affairs/PM-Response-to-FAC-Report-Extension-of-Offensive-British-Military-Operations-to-Syria.pdf> (p. 7)

¹⁰ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-34931421>

¹¹ <http://www.parliament.uk/documents/commons-committees/foreign-affairs/PM-Response-to-FAC-Report-Extension-of-Offensive-British-Military-Operations-to-Syria.pdf> (p. 24)

¹² <http://airwars.org/>

¹³ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/aug/03/us-led-air-strikes-on-isis-targets-killed-more-than-450-civilians-report>

With the recent arrival of substantial Russian forces, the current three-way conflict in Syria – involving the United States, Europe, the Sunni Gulf states and the mainstream Syrian opposition; Russia, Shia-ruled Iran, Iraq and Syria and Hezbollah; and Islamic State – has become dangerously unworkable. The shooting down of a Russian SU-24 that had entered Turkish airspace on 24 November demonstrates the risk of accidental escalation. While the United States has signed a memorandum of understanding with Russia, and is treating it as an ally in the conflict, Russia and the West ultimately have different end games in mind for Syria and its president. An agreement needs to be quickly reached on how Russian and Syrian government forces will fit alongside the coalition’s anti-IS strategy and how the coalition’s anti-Assad strategy will be received by Russia. Without this agreement, the United Kingdom risks entering an extremely volatile military and geopolitical situation.

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