

UK actions against Islamic State in Iraq and Syria | Intelligence briefing #2

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Summary of main points

1. During December 2015, the RAF assisted Iraqi forces fighting Islamic State in and around Haditha, Ramadi and Fallujah and Kurdish forces fighting in Mosul, Al-Qayyarah, Bayji, Sinjar, Kisik and Tal Afar.
2. On 2 December, the UK parliament voted in favour of authorising British airstrikes against Islamic State in Syria.
3. The RAF has since targeted well heads within the Omar oil field in Syria and undertaken multiple missions around the Islamic State's self-proclaimed capital, Raqqa, including destroying a command and control centre.
4. On 3 January, Islamic State released a video featuring a militant with a British accent mocking the impact of UK airstrikes, threatening attacks on the United Kingdom and executing five men accused of spying for the British.
5. A key issue in the build-up to the vote in the UK parliament was the risk posed to innocent civilians in the areas of Iraq and Syria targeted by the RAF.
6. The British government and Ministry of Defence have repeatedly stated that there is no evidence of civilian casualties from UK military action against Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.
7. However, it is fair to estimate that between 40 and 125 civilians may have been killed in UK airstrikes against Islamic State so far.

Recent developments

During December 2015, the United States and its coalition partners, including the United Kingdom, carried out a reported 524 airstrikes in Syria and 218 in Iraq, with a total 3,133 weapon releases.¹ These strikes resulted in in up to 224 civilian casualties and 28 deaths among local allied forces. So far in January 2016, there have been 166 coalition airstrikes in Iraq and 45 in Syria, with no reported civilian casualties.²

The United Kingdom has been heavily active in coalition missions in central Iraq supporting joint coalition/Iraqi forces in and around Haditha, Ramadi and Fallujah, where they are pushing Islamic State (IS) out of these strategic towns on the major transport route between Baghdad and Syria. On 28 December, Iraqi forces retook the government compound in Ramadi – a key city for all forces in the region, which had been captured by Islamic State in May 2015. Pockets of resistance remain in the now destroyed city, but this is a victory for the Iraqi government nonetheless.

¹ <http://airwars.org/daily-reports-dec15/>

² <http://airwars.org/daily-reports-jan16/>

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In northern Iraq, there has been significant UK participation in operations, this time supporting joint coalition/Kurdish Peshmerga forces engaging Islamic State. These were primarily in Mosul, Sinjar, Kisik and Tal Afar, all highly-strategic towns located on the main route going west from Mosul to Syria. The United Kingdom has also been operating with coalition and Kurdish forces in and around Al-Qayyarah and Bayji, south of Mosul. These towns are on the transport routes between Mosul and IS forces operating in Kurdistan and northeastern Iraq.

Of Islamic State's combat assets in Iraq, the RAF has destroyed 31 machine gun teams, seven sniper units, 15 rocket-launching units, 15 mortar teams, 30 bases/camps/bunkers, 35 groups of fighters, 24 vehicles and three anti-aircraft guns in this reporting period (1 December 2015 to 10 January 2016). UK forces have also destroyed several vehicle-borne and roadside improvised explosive devices (IEDs).

After the heated debate in the UK Parliament on 2 December over military action in Syria, there has been relatively little activity by UK forces in the country so far. In the days immediately following parliamentary authorisation for airstrikes, the RAF destroyed 15 well heads within the Omar oil field near Deir Ezzor, which contributes an estimated 10% of Islamic State's oil income, and then on Christmas Day destroyed a road checkpoint near Raqqa. On 10 January 2016, multiple UK missions around Raqqa destroyed a command and control centre, one IS building, one tunnel complex, one combat position and one supply truck. The same day, the RAF returned to the Omar oilfield and destroyed multiple construction/repair vehicles that were working on the previously bombed well heads. (See Appendix 1 for a full chronology and a location map of the known UK airstrikes against Islamic State in Iraq and Syria during December 2015 and January 2016.)

On 3 January, Islamic State released a 10-minute propaganda video featuring a man and young boy speaking with British accents. In the video, the man – thought to be Siddhartha Dhar – mocks the impact of UK airstrikes and threatens the British prime minister, David Cameron, with attacks in the United Kingdom. The video also shows the killing of five men accused of spying for the United Kingdom.

Meanwhile, the Syrian government has reportedly instigated some form of conscription. In November and December 2015, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights recorded the arrests of 1,217 young men (including 358 university students) primarily in Damascus, Aleppo, Hama, Lattakia and Homs.³ The group claims the arrested men are to be forcibly recruited into government forces.

United Kingdom extends military action into Syria

A key development in the United Kingdom's operations against Islamic State is the expansion of RAF airstrikes from Iraq to Syria. Following an 11-hour debate in parliament on 2 December, MPs voted 397 in favour to 223 against conducting airstrikes against Islamic State forces in Syria (a majority of 174). In the end, 66 Labour MPs (out of 231) backed military action in Syria after the Labour leader, Jeremy Corbyn, issued a free vote on the matter, with nearly half of his shadow cabinet abstaining or voting for action. This included his shadow foreign secretary, Hilary Benn, who gave an impassioned 14-minute speech in support of extending airstrikes to Syria. Benn survived the following reshuffle of the Labour front bench, but is widely thought to have been silenced and told to remain loyal to Corbyn on contentious issues.

³ <http://sn4hr.org/blog/2015/12/22/15807/>

The RAF carried out its first airstrikes in Syria hours after MPs voted to authorise military action. However, the British government has since remained largely quiet about action in Syria and Iraq – partly due to the lengthy break over Christmas. The primary coalition strategy appears to be one of ‘divide and conquer’. Efforts are focussed on retaking the major transport routes; restricting the movement of fighters, weaponry and logistics between IS units; and confining Islamic State within the towns before conducting joint operations providing coalition air support to local ground forces. It is highly unlikely that UK military operations will be extended further during 2016, given Corbyn’s profound opposition to military action and little public support for a ground war; however, there is still room to develop non-kinetic responses, particularly against IS revenue streams (which provide the group with an estimated annual turnover of between \$2 billion and \$3 billion⁴).

Civilian casualties once more a contentious issue

A key issue in the build-up to the vote in the UK parliament was the risk posed to innocent civilians in the areas of Iraq and Syria targeted by the RAF. The government’s position was that the risk was minimal and that no civilian casualties had been recorded in over a year of UK airstrikes against Islamic State in Iraq. On 29 November, the defence secretary, Michael Fallon, stated in a BBC interview that ‘our estimate is that there hasn’t yet been a single civilian casualty because of the precision of [the RAF’s] strikes’.⁵ Then in the debate in parliament on 2 December, the prime minister told the house that ‘In Iraq, for a year and three months there have been no reports of civilian casualties related to the strikes that Britain has taken.’⁶ Furthermore, the Ministry of Defence (MoD) has repeatedly stated that there is no evidence of civilian casualties from UK military actions against Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. The argument is that precision weapons, the skill of RAF pilots and strict rules of engagement all act to minimise civilian casualties.

These claims went largely unchallenged at the time, but do not stand up to scrutiny. It is certainly true that UK forces will be making every possible effort to reduce civilian casualties, including conducting risk assessments before approving strikes (with a very high percentage of operations purportedly cancelled due to the risk to civilians being assessed as too high). However, the nature of operations in Iraq and Syria make it impossible to avoid civilian casualties completely as the government and MoD have implied. There have been a reported 824 to 2,387 civilians killed by 9,622 coalition airstrikes in Iraq and Syria, or one civilian death per four to 12 strikes. The United Kingdom has so far launched 483 airstrikes in Iraq and 23 in Syria.⁷ From these figures, it is fair to estimate that between 40 and 125 civilians may have been killed in UK airstrikes against Islamic State in Iraq and Syria so far.

⁴ <http://www.openbriefing.org/regionaldesks/middleeast/transnational-organised-crime-monthly-briefing-islamic-states-income-from-transnational-organised-crime/>

⁵ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/29111501.pdf>

⁶ <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201516/cmhansrd/cm151202/debtext/151202-0001.htm>

⁷ <http://airwars.org/index.html>

More attention has been paid to the deaths caused by Russian airstrikes, which are considered less accurate than strikes from coalition platforms. For example, Amnesty International reported 200 civilian casualties from Russian airstrikes between 30 September and 29 November,⁸ and the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights claimed the true number is 570 civilian casualties in a documented 138 airstrikes⁹. However, there were up to 224 civilian casualties reported as a result of coalition airstrikes during December 2015 alone.¹⁰ On 7 December, a US aircraft attacked IS fighters in al-Khan near al-Hawl in northeastern Syria, where locals were defending the village from attack by Islamic State. Six families were caught in the airstrike, and between 26 and 40 people were killed and 17 injured.¹¹ As many as 20 of the dead were children. On 21 December, a coalition airstrike successfully targeted an IS commander at his house in Mosul; however, a reported 8 civilian adults and 12 children were also killed and as many as 50 people were injured. The strike included two weapon releases, one of which allegedly hit a medical centre.¹²

As in the Iraq War of 2003-11, the exact number of civilian casualties as a result of coalition airstrikes against Islamic State in Iraq and Syria will quickly become a highly-contentious issue. The Ministry of Defence has reportedly stated that it will not consider reports from independent monitoring groups and will only investigate reports of civilian deaths from UK military personnel, its own aerial surveillance or friendly local forces.¹³ However, state militaries frequently significantly under-report the numbers of civilian casualties compared to human rights monitoring organisations and international news agencies. Furthermore, a lack of transparency around UK airstrikes in Iraq and Syria – particularly around those from unmanned combat aerial vehicles (or armed drones) – makes verifying military accounts very difficult. This lack of accountability gives the government some room to side step the issue of civilian casualties. Whatever the merits or pitfalls of military action, individuals killed in British airstrikes in Iraq and Syria should be accorded the dignity of having their deaths recorded and recognised by the British government.

⁸ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2015/12/syria-russias-shameful-failure-to-acknowledge-civilian-killings/>

⁹ http://sn4hr.org/wp-content/pdf/english/They_Came_to_Kill_Us_en.pdf

¹⁰ <http://airwars.org/civcas-2015/>

¹¹ <http://airwars.org/civcas-2015/>

¹² <http://airwars.org/civcas-2015/>

¹³ http://www.heraldsotland.com/news/14193998.Revealed__British_government_refusing_to_accept_evidence_of_civilian_fatalities_in_UK_air_strikes/?commentSort=score

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

Date	Syria	Iraq
2 Dec 2015	Omar oil field – six well heads destroyed.	
3-4 Dec 2015		Ramadi – One sniper position destroyed.
4 Dec 2015	Omar oil field – eight well heads destroyed.	Sinjar – One truck-borne bomb destroyed.
6 Dec 2015	Omar oil field – one oil head destroyed. Eastern Syria – Armed reconnaissance missions.	Western Iraq – Armed reconnaissance missions.
7 Dec 2015		Ramadi – One mortar position destroyed. Sinjar – One IS vehicle destroyed.
8 Dec 2015		Al-Qayyarah – Two IS positions destroyed. Sinjar – Three IS positions destroyed.
9 Dec 2015		Northern Iraq – Close air support cover. Kisik – One IS mortar and one machine gun position destroyed. Sinjar – Three vehicles destroyed.
10 Dec 2015		Northern Iraq – One building and one bunker destroyed. Sinjar – One building, one mortar position, one sniper position and one vehicle destroyed.
11 Dec 2015		Mosul – One machine gun position and two groups of ground forces destroyed. Sinjar – One sniper team housed in probable weapons store destroyed (large secondary explosions reported); one rocket team and one mortar position destroyed.
13 Dec 2015		Mosul/Sinjar – Two rocket launching units and one mortar position destroyed.
14 Dec 2015		Sinjar – One sniper and one machine gun position destroyed.

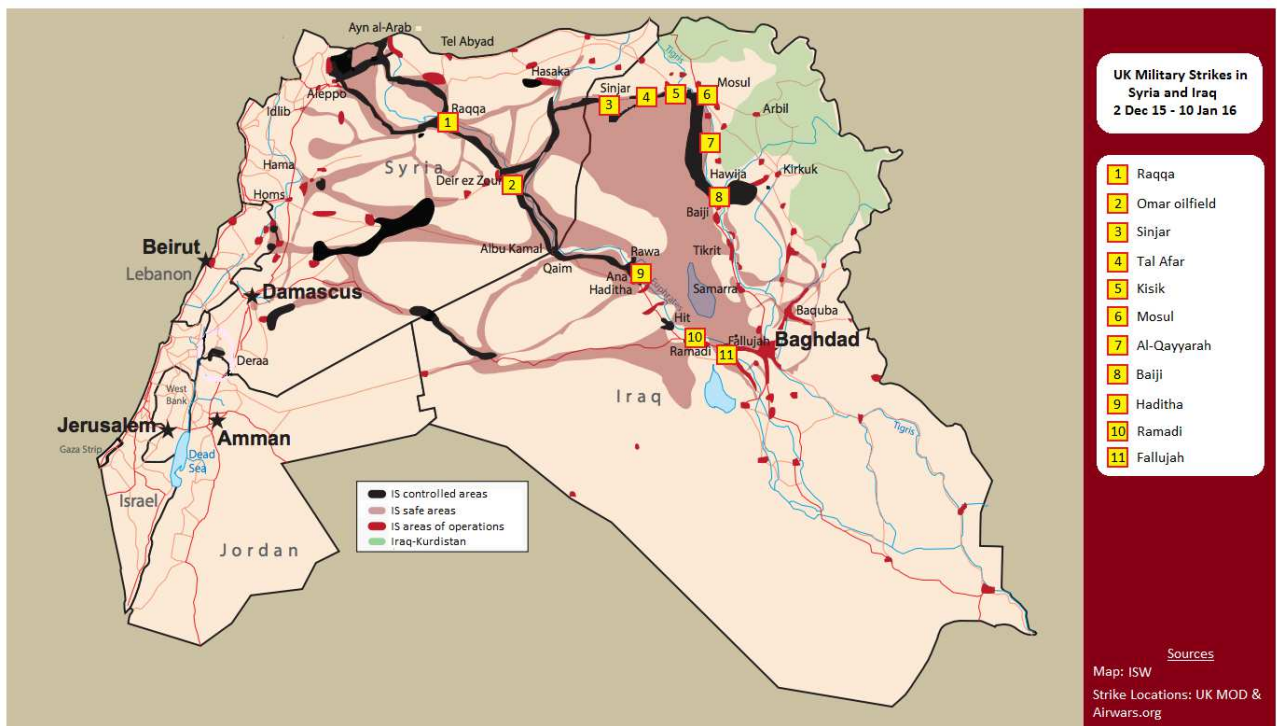
Date	Syria	Iraq
15 Dec 2015		<p>Sinjar – One mortar position destroyed.</p> <p>Ramadi – One large encampment destroyed.</p> <p>Kisik – One mortar position destroyed.</p>
16 Dec 2015		<p>Northern Iraq – Close air support.</p> <p>Ramadi – Multiple machine gun, sniper positions and IS-held buildings destroyed. Multiple assault ground groups attacked.</p> <p>Mosul – Four heavy machine-gun, two rocket launching units, three vehicles (one of which was a large truck-bomb) and six assault groups destroyed.</p>
17 Dec 2015		<p>Sinjar – Three vehicles destroyed.</p> <p>Western Iraq – Roadside IEDs blocking a major route destroyed.</p> <p>Northern Iraq – One assault group destroyed.</p>
18 Dec 2015		<p>Mosul/Sinjar – Two mortar positions destroyed.</p> <p>Ramadi – Three positions destroyed.</p>
20 Dec 2015		<p>Bayji – Two assault groups destroyed.</p> <p>Mosul – Logistics group destroyed.</p> <p>Ramadi – Surveillance cover for coalition joint attack.</p>
21 Dec 2015		<p>Mosul – Two vehicles and one IS-held building destroyed; one Reaper provided targeting asset for coalition strike on a mortar position.</p>
22 Dec 2015		<p>Ramadi – Close air support for Iraqi assault on IS positions; two units and one anti-aircraft gun destroyed.</p> <p>Northern Iraq – One building and one observation post destroyed.</p>

Date	Syria	Iraq
23 Dec 2015		<p>Mosul – Six IS-held buildings, supply tunnel, ammunitions stores, several heavy machine-guns and a sniper position destroyed.</p> <p>Ramadi – Three IS teams armed with rocket-propelled grenades, a sniper position, a group in close combat with Iraqi troops, and another large group destroyed.</p>
24 Dec 2015		<p>Mosul – One building destroyed.</p> <p>Ramadi – Two groups destroyed.</p>
25 Dec 2015	Raqqqa – One road checkpoint destroyed.	<p>Ramadi – Two assault groups, an anti-aircraft gun and a massed assault group about to counter-attack an Iraqi advance destroyed.</p>
26 Dec 2015		<p>Northern Iraq – One vehicle destroyed and targeting cover provided for a coalition strike on a supply tunnel.</p>
27 Dec 2015		<p>Tal Afar/Kisik – Armoured vehicle and a mortar team destroyed.</p> <p>Mosul – Two IS-held buildings and one group destroyed.</p> <p>Northeastern Iraq – Two groups destroyed.</p>
28 Dec 2015		<p>Mosul – One rocket launching team, two buildings and three vehicles destroyed.</p>
29 Dec 2015		<p>Ramadi – Four machine-gun positions, one tunnel, one strongpoint and one group destroyed.</p>
30 Dec 2015		<p>Ramadi – Two machine gun positions and a rocket-launching team destroyed.</p> <p>Sinjar – One machine gun position, one rocket launching team and one assault group destroyed.</p>
1 Jan 2016		<p>Ramadi – Reconnaissance cover for coalition strikes.</p>
2 Jan 2016		<p>Fallujah – One mortar position destroyed.</p>

Date	Syria	Iraq
3 Jan 2016		<p>Ramadi – One mortar team, five machine gun positions, one sniper position and three other assault groups destroyed.</p> <p>Haditha – One truck bomb, two armed pick-up trucks and group destroyed.</p> <p>Northern Iraq – Two mortar and four machine gun positions destroyed.</p>
4 Jan 2016		<p>Mosul – One IS building and one assault group destroyed.</p> <p>Ramadi – One rocket launching group, one mortar position, four IS buildings and an assault group destroyed. Surveillance cover for a coalition strike plus two vehicles and one machine gun team destroyed.</p>
5 Jan 2016		<p>Ramadi – Two machine gun and an anti-aircraft position destroyed.</p> <p>Haditha – Two armed pick-up trucks, two machine-gun teams and groups of fighters destroyed.</p> <p>Mosul – Two rocket teams destroyed.</p>
6 Jan 2016		<p>Haditha – Two assault groups destroyed.</p> <p>Ramadi – One IS combat position, three machine-gun positions and two armoured personnel carriers destroyed.</p> <p>Sinjar – One racket launching team.</p> <p>Mosul – Three IS combat positions and three buildings destroyed.</p>
7 Jan 2016		<p>Ramadi – Four combat positions and two machine-gun posts destroyed.</p> <p>Mosul-Kisik – One combat position and a rocket-launching unit destroyed.</p>
8 Jan 2016		<p>Mosul – One rocket unit and one machine gun position destroyed.</p>

Date	Syria	Iraq
10 Jan 2016	<p>Raqqa – One command and control centre, one IS building, one tunnel complex, one combat position and one supply truck destroyed.</p> <p>Omar oilfield – Multiple construction/repair vehicles, working on previously bombed well heads, destroyed.</p>	

Figure 1. Locations of known UK airstrikes against Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (December 2015 and January 2016).



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