

# The war with Islamic State

An assessment of the United Kingdom's  
Operation Shader and the wider coalition  
campaign against Islamic State in Iraq and Syria



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## Executive summary

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1. Over the last 12 months, the US-led coalition and local partners have retaken up to 45% of Islamic State's territory in Iraq and 20% of its territory in Syria and the group has been driven out of the major cities of Tikrit and Ramadi in Iraq and Palmyra in Syria. However, Islamic State still holds at least 55% of its territory in Iraq and 80% of its territory in Syria despite 21 months of coalition airstrikes. It also still holds its strongholds of Mosul (Iraq) and Raqqa (Syria), though the coalition and local partners are drawing up plans to retake them.
2. The population controlled by Islamic State is now a third less than it was, but the group still exerts control over six million people in the territory it holds.
3. Coalition airstrikes on Islamic State's oil facilities have resulted in oil production falling by a third, but the group still produces 21,000 barrels of oil a day, accounting for 43% of its income.
4. Islamic State's revenues have dropped by 30% since mid-2015 and the group has had to reduce the salaries of its fighters by up to half; however, Islamic State's revenues are still at \$56 million a month.
5. The flow of recruits to Islamic State has been reduced and half of Islamic State's fighting force and over 100 of their senior figures have been killed. Despite this, the group still has between 20,000 and 30,000 fighters left in theatre.
6. Overall, the US-led coalition has had some considerable successes in containing and rolling back the group in Iraq and Syria; however, much more should have been achieved given the combined military might and other resources of the 66 members of the global coalition to counter Islamic State.
7. Furthermore, there are no signs that the terrorist threat to the United Kingdom from Islamic State is reducing despite nearly two years of UK airstrikes and other efforts to target the group.
8. In addition, it is likely that a minimum of 1,217 civilians have died in the 12,453 coalition airstrikes in Iraq and Syria to date. Based on estimates alone, it is possible that around 77 civilians were killed in UK airstrikes.
9. There are also concerns over the extent of the covert ground operation being carried out in Iraq and Syria by UK special forces and intelligence agents and the lack of parliamentary oversight of the operation.
10. It is clear that both the civil war in Syria and the political turmoil in Iraq must end if the coalition's current strategy is to have a real chance of success in finally defeating Islamic State. Given that political resolution in the two countries is unlikely in the short term, it is instead likely that the coalition will steadily ramp up their military efforts through incremental increases by individual coalition members, particularly of special forces and other ground troops.

# Section I

## Introduction

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After Islamic State (IS) made rapid and sweeping gains across Iraq in 2014, including capturing Mosul, Baiji and Tikrit, on 15 June 2014 the United States initiated a significant military campaign at the request of the beleaguered Iraqi government, whose still-weak armed forces were struggling to confront the violent jihadist group. The United States was later joined in the Iraq campaign by France (19 September 2014), the United Kingdom (30 September 2014), Belgium (5 October 2014), the Netherlands (7 October 2014), Australia (8 October 2014), Denmark (16 October 2014), Canada (2 November 2014) and Jordan.

The campaign was and is a predominantly airborne effort; however, there are sizeable elements from coalition special operations forces (SOF) and intelligence agencies operating on the ground. These ground forces are providing training to the Iraqi military; conducting combat operations, including kill-or-capture missions and operations to rescue hostages; and providing forward sniper units and air controllers.

On 23 September 2014, the United States extended combat operations against Islamic State (plus al-Nusra Front) to Syria, initially supported by Saudi Arabia, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Qatar. On 8 April 2015, Canada joined operations in Syria, followed by Turkey (26 August 2015), Australia (15 September 2015), France (27 September 2015) and the United Kingdom (3 December 2015).

Unlike Iraq, the Syria operation did not have the consent of the Syrian government of Bashar al-Assad, which bitterly opposed any Western or Gulf State military operations on Syrian soil, fearing outside intervention in Syria's civil war. The Assad government did request Russian military support against both the violent jihadist groups – Islamic State and al-Nusra Front – and the rebel Free Syrian Army (FSA) and other moderate armed opposition groups. Russia's military intervention in Syria began on 30 September 2015, again for the most part limited to airstrikes but with special forces and intelligence personnel operating on the ground. Ground forces from Hezbollah and Iran have also been operating alongside Syrian government forces in the west and north of the country. Iran had 2,000 to 3,000 members of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps in Syria prior to the civil war,<sup>1</sup> which had increased to 7,000 members by October 2015.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iran/10654144/Iran-boosts-support-to-Syria.html>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.wsj.com/articles/iran-expands-role-in-syria-in-conjunction-with-russias-airstrikes-1443811030>

In many ways the coalition's campaign against Islamic State in Iraq and Syria has been the first large-scale example of 'remote warfare', relying as it does on special forces, intelligence agents and local allies supported by armed drones and other high-tech weaponry and surveillance capabilities rather than conventional military assets. For several years, Open Briefing and others have been tracking the development and spread of this new way of conceptualising and executing war 'at a distance' and have raised serious concerns about the limits and unforeseen consequences of remote warfare.<sup>3</sup>

The day before the 2 December 2015 vote by the UK parliament to extend UK airstrikes against Islamic State from Iraq to Syria, Open Briefing published the first in a series of six monthly intelligence briefings on the United Kingdom's military actions in the two countries.<sup>4</sup> Using the latest open source intelligence, these briefings have tracked and analysed the military efforts of the United Kingdom and the wider US-led coalition and analysed the military and political developments behind them. In particular, this series has monitored the use of UK special forces on the ground and the number of civilian casualties caused by UK and coalition airstrikes. Funded by the Network for Social Change, these briefings have been published in order to inform public and political debate on the conflict and to ensure any UK military action is accountable.

The first briefing in this series concluded that 'The overall impression to be drawn from the proposed UK military strategy in Syria is that it is considered the "least-worst" option.'<sup>5</sup> The impression was that the strategy was being driven by the understandable need to 'do something' in the wake of the 12 November 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris; however, the lessons of Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya highlight the dangers of ill-thought through military action.

This present briefing is the sixth, and last, in the series. It provides the opportunity for an assessment of the success or not of the coalition's campaign against Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. This assessment has been made by examining a number of key indicators, including the extent of the territory held by Islamic State and the size of the population they control; oil production, revenues and the wages of IS fighters; the number of IS fighters in theatre; the impact on the international terrorism threat to the United Kingdom; and the number of civilian casualties in Iraq and Syria. This briefing also provides an update on the latest developments in the conflict and an outline of the coalition's likely next steps.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.openbriefing.org/tag/remote-control-warfare-monthly-briefing/>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.openbriefing.org/tag/uk-actions-against-islamic-state-in-iraq-and-syria/>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.openbriefing.org/regionaldesks/middleeast/uk-actions-against-islamic-state-in-iraq-and-syria-briefing-1/>

## Section II

### Latest developments

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In the last month, Islamic State has lost territory in both Syria and Iraq. On 13 April, Iraqi security forces recaptured the city of Hit in Anbar province, western Iraq, as part of operations to secure the strategic Euphrates River valley. Iraqi forces are also continuing a push against Islamic State forces in the Makhoul Mountains, north of Baiji. Meanwhile, Syrian government forces have retaken Qaryatayn, to the west of Palmyra, disrupting Islamic State's ability to operate in the west of the country. Syrian opposition forces have also recaptured territory in western Deraa province.

Despite these losses, Islamic State took control of additional territory in the Yarmouk Camp district of the Syrian capital, Damascus, from opposition forces in March.<sup>5</sup> It also reclaimed territory along the Syrian-Turkish border.<sup>6</sup> The group is seeking to extend its control over Syrian-Turkey border zones in order to allow foreign fighters to enter Syria.<sup>7</sup> In Deir al-Zor, Islamic State took control of the industrial zone.<sup>8</sup> It also took control of several small towns around Aleppo, including al-Raee. Islamic State has managed to retake territory around one of its most important towns, Dabiq – a holy town in which it is prophesised that a great battle will take place preceding the apocalypse.<sup>9</sup> Then, on 5 May, Islamic State took control of the major gas field of Shaer. In Iraq, IS forces overran the Kurdish Peshmerga holding several towns outside the IS stronghold of Mosul on 2 May (some of these, including Mahana, have now been retaken). The significant action involved multiple suicide bombs. A US Navy SEAL, Petty Officer 1st Class Charles Keating, was killed during the rescue of US military advisers who had been caught up in an attack on a checkpoint.<sup>10</sup>

During this time, protagonists in Syria's civil war have gone from a tentative truce to open fighting and back to a ceasefire. The original ceasefire ended when an airstrike devastated one of the main Red Cross hospitals in Aleppo, killing two doctors and 12 other staff and patients and destroying the A&E department, an intensive care unit and an operating theatre. Although unattributed, Assad's forces have a history of carrying out attacks on medical facilities. On 7 May, the co-chairs of the Ceasefire Task Force of the International Syria Support Group, Russia and the United States, agreed a 72-hour extension to the ceasefire. At the same time, Iraq's political system is spiralling into chaos, with anti-government demonstrators protesting over ineffective and corrupt government officials.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-32147888>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/isis-sanctuary-map-april-22-2016#sthash.CNGckfC3.dpuf>

<sup>7</sup> <http://aranews.net/2016/04/isis-militants-make-new-gains-aleppo/>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.syriahr.com/en/2016/04/20/the-islamic-state-control-al-senauh-neighborhood-getting-closer-to-deir-ezzor-airbase/>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/17/why-isis-fight-syria-iraq>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Terrorism/ISIScali.html>

These political deteriorations in Syria and Iraq are undermining the counter-IS strategy. At the same time, having suffered months of sustained losses in personnel, territory and finances, Islamic State has been focussing on extending their influence beyond Syria and Iraq in order to secure new recruitment channels and financial streams. This strategy builds on the November 2015 terror attacks in Lebanon, France and above Egypt, which were designed to demonstrate Islamic State's reach and power and thus bolster recruitment.

Earlier in May, the Syrian government reportedly used sarin gas against IS forces operating to the east of Damascus, after the group attacked two Syrian bases.<sup>11</sup> This was in breach of a 2013 agreement that required the Assad government to dismantle its chemical weapons, introduced after Assad repeatedly deployed chemical weapons against opposition forces, killing over a thousand fighters and civilians. The US government had threatened to attack Damascus at the time, but backtracked after reaching an agreement with Russia to dismantle Assad's chemical arsenal. Weapons caches were subsequently removed from the country, but it was suspected that the regime retained a small supply of chemical weapons for use if Assad's rule were threatened again.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/05/17/assads-forces-have-used-sarin-nerve-gas-for-the-first-time-since/>

<sup>12</sup> <http://theoslotimes.com/article/syrian-regime-uses-chemical-weapons-on-isis#sthash.ozaWmO54.dpuf>

## Section III

### Nature of the coalition campaign

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As of 23 May 2016, a total of 12,453 airstrikes have been carried out by the air forces of the US-led coalition. 8,492 of these strikes have been in Iraq and 3,961 in Syria.<sup>13</sup> In total, 42,000 munitions have been dropped by the coalition in both theatres. Approximately 68% of airstrikes in Iraq and 94% of airstrikes in Syria have been conducted by US aircraft.<sup>14</sup>

The United Kingdom has carried out 740 airstrikes in Iraq but only around 20 in Syria.<sup>15</sup> The RAF has also made a significant contribution to the coalition's vital surveillance force through its Sentinel R1, Sentry AEW1, RC-135W Rivet Joint and Shadow R1 aircraft as well as the tactical reconnaissance capabilities of the Tornado GR4 and MQ-9 Reapers.<sup>16</sup> Combined, the larger aircraft have provided one third of the coalition's strategic surveillance flights. The MQ-9's RAPTOR reconnaissance pods have produced 60% of the coalition's tactical reconnaissance in Iraq and 30% in the Syrian theatre.<sup>17</sup>

In addition to airstrikes, the United States is working alongside command elements of the Iraqi security forces (ISF) and Kurdish Peshmerga to provide strategic direction and support. The United States, the United Kingdom and 15 other coalition countries have also deployed military personnel on the ground in Iraq to help in the fight against Islamic State and to train Iraqi and Kurdish security forces. These forces have so far trained 16,000 Iraqi soldiers, 4,000 Kurdish Peshmerga and 2,000 Iraqi police officers, with another 1,000 Iraqi police officers currently in training.<sup>18</sup> There are 300 UK troops deployed in Iraq on a training mission. To date, UK forces have trained over 6,500 personnel in Iraq.<sup>19</sup> The United Kingdom is coordinating the coalition's counter-IED training programme in particular. A breakdown of the 300 UK troops in training roles in Iraq is provided in Table 1 opposite.

<sup>13</sup> <https://airwars.org/>

<sup>14</sup> <http://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/SN06995>

<sup>15</sup> <https://airwars.org/data/>

<sup>16</sup> <http://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/SN06995>

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201516/ldhansrd/text/151126-0001.htm> and <http://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/SN06995>

<sup>18</sup> <http://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/SN06995>

<sup>19</sup> <http://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/SN06995>

**Table 1.** Breakdown of UK ground troops in Iraq by training role (Source: House of Commons Library).

Number	Role
100	Counter-IED training across four main training sites in Iraq.
25	Training on critical skills, such as medical training, bridge building and information operators.
30	Based in Taji and Besmayah providing medical training and logistical support and training.
145	Otherwise deployed, primarily to give training to Peshmerga troops and advisory support to Iraqi headquarters.

Coalition ground forces are not limited to training roles. There are special operations forces (SOF) from the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Denmark and Australia on the ground in Iraq conducting raids and collecting intelligence in addition to providing training and support. In April 2016, the US president, Barack Obama, announced approval for an additional 250 special operations forces to join the 50 US SOF operators in Syria.<sup>20</sup> Also in April, the Danish parliament approved the government's plan to deploy a new combined land and air force to Iraq and Syria, which will include 340 troops from infantry combat and training units and 60 special forces operators.<sup>21</sup> The United Kingdom is thought to have already deployed ground assets to both Iraq and Syria that are carrying out intelligence and combat roles. Most of this work will be being carried out by SIS (MI6) agents and SAS and SBS troopers (supported by Intelligence Corps soldiers and RAF forward air controllers).

The main role of the British special forces appears to be supporting troops in identifying and arresting IS commanders. For example, it has been reported that British special forces, under the command of US forces, captured three mid-ranking IS commanders in and around Mosul, Iraq, in May 2016.<sup>22</sup> However, the UK government has consistently refused to comment on such matters, and on the whole the British mainstream media have followed suit. According to the *Mirror* tabloid newspaper, there is a new initiative involving SAS and SBS troopers parachuting into conflict areas of Iraq with mortars, light vehicles and heavy machine-guns. The soldiers reportedly use their expertise in high-altitude, low-opening (HALO) parachuting to land covertly near IS positions and take them as part of a spearhead assault supported by Kurdish and Iraqi troops.<sup>23</sup> However, this information cannot be corroborated.

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-usa-syria-idUSKCN0XL0ZE>

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.defensenews.com/story/defense/international/2016/04/21/denmark-isis-syria-iraq-military/83338340/>

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.rt.com/uk/342102-sas-snatch-isis-iraq/>

<sup>23</sup> <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/world-news/sas-para-missions-set-swoop-7881498>

The British government continues to claim that there are no UK combat troops deployed to the region; however, UK special forces units are operating in Iraq and probably Syria. The deliberate opacity surrounding UK special forces deployments allows the British government to authorise ground operations while at the same time claiming that there are no UK combat troops involved in the conflict, thereby sidestepping public and parliamentary debate.

## Section IV

### Assessment of impact on Islamic State

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#### Overall impact on Islamic State in Iraq and Syria

Figures 1 and 2 overleaf show the extent of the territory held by Islamic State in December 2015 and three months later in April 2016.<sup>24</sup> IHS estimates that overall Islamic State has lost 22% of its territory in the last 15 months.<sup>25</sup> This is broadly consistent with information from the US state department and defence department. During a speech at the Brookings Institution in February 2016, the US deputy secretary of state, Antony Blinken, provided an update on what appears to be significant territorial losses by Islamic State.<sup>26</sup> Blinken claimed that over the last 12 months the US-led coalition and local partners had retaken 40% of Islamic State's territory in Iraq and 10% of its territory in Syria (i.e. Islamic State has lost 25% of its territory in the last 12 months).<sup>27</sup> On 16 May, the Pentagon press secretary, Peter Cook, claimed that the latest figures were that the coalition had reclaimed 45% of Islamic State's territory in Iraq and 16-20% of its territory in Syria (i.e. up to 32% of its territory overall).<sup>28</sup> Islamic State has been driven out of the major cities of Tikrit and Ramadi in Iraq and Palmyra in Syria, and increasing pressure is being applied to the group's remaining strongholds in Mosul (Iraq) and Raqqa (Syria).

However, if the US estimates are correct, it is reasonable to say that Islamic State still holds at least 55% of its territory in Iraq and 80% of its territory in Syria, despite 21 months of coalition airstrikes and support to local partners, including the Iraqi security forces, Kurdish Peshmerga and local militia.

<sup>24</sup> [http://understandingwar.org/publications?type\[\]=map&tid\[\]=319&field\\_lastname\\_value=&sort\\_by=created&sort\\_order=DESC](http://understandingwar.org/publications?type[]=map&tid[]=319&field_lastname_value=&sort_by=created&sort_order=DESC)

<sup>25</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/apr/18/isis-revenue-drops-nearly-a-third-after-loss-of-territory-shrinks-tax-base>

<sup>26</sup> <http://www.brookings.edu/events/2016/02/16-counter-terror-extremism-blinken>

<sup>27</sup> [http://www.brookings.edu/~media/events/2016/02/16-counter-terror-extremism-blinken/20160216\\_cve\\_blinken\\_transcript.pdf](http://www.brookings.edu/~media/events/2016/02/16-counter-terror-extremism-blinken/20160216_cve_blinken_transcript.pdf)

<sup>28</sup> <http://www.defense.gov/News/News-Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/760847/departments-of-defense-press-briefing-by-pentagon-press-secretary-peter-cook-in>

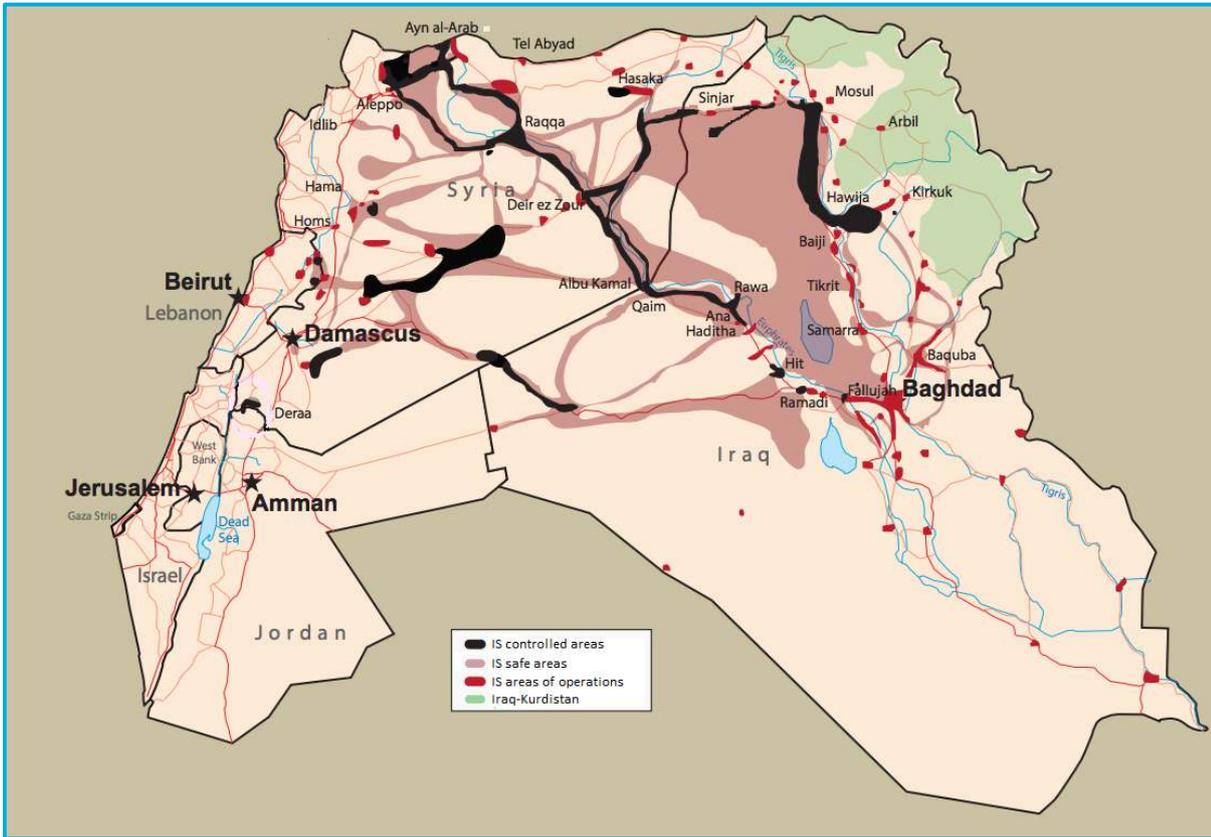


Figure 1. Territory held by Islamic State in Iraq and Syria in December 2015 (Source: Institute for the Study of War).

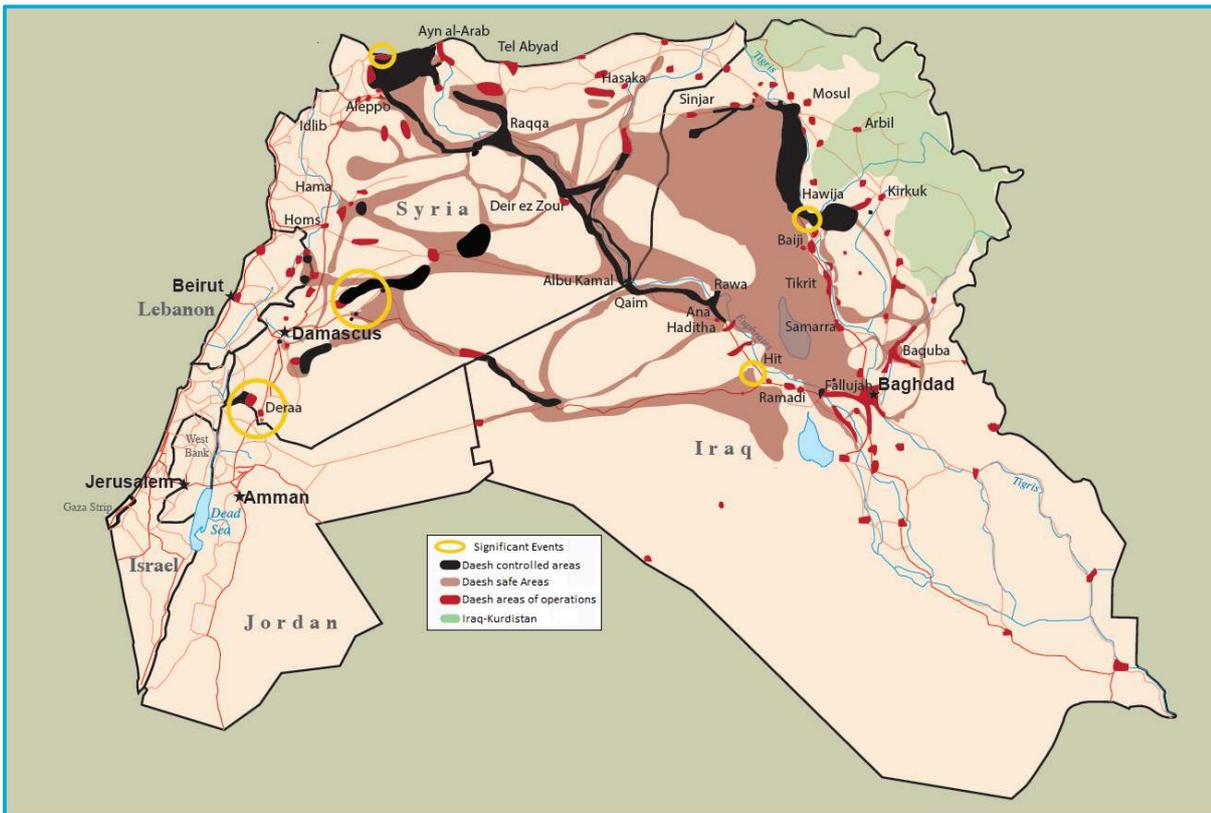


Figure 2. Territory held by Islamic State in Iraq and Syria in April 2016 (Source: Institute for the Study of War).

The loss of territory means that Islamic State now controls a population of six million people, down from nine million since the start of 2015.<sup>29</sup> This has led to a significant reduction in its tax base, which has forced the group to introduce a range of new taxes to make up the growing shortfall in its income. These new taxes include tolls for drivers using major roads controlled by Islamic State, surcharges for anyone who installs or repairs a satellite dish, exit fees for anyone who wants to leave an IS-controlled town or city, arbitrary fines for anyone who incorrectly answers questions on the Koran and cash fines to avoid corporal punishment.<sup>30</sup>

Repeated targeting by coalition airstrikes has resulted in oil production falling from 33,000 barrels a day to 21,000 barrels a day since the start of 2015.<sup>31</sup> This means an estimated 50% of Islamic State's income now comes from taxation and seizures of businesses and property, with oil revenues now only accounting for 43% of the group's income. The rest of the income comes from drug smuggling operations and donations from supporting groups in the region.<sup>32</sup> Despite the new taxes, Islamic State's revenues have still reportedly dropped by 30% since mid-2015, from an estimated \$80 million a month in mid-2015 to \$56 million a month today.<sup>33</sup>

The coalition's strategy involves targeting Islamic State in a three-pronged attack by targeting fighters and strategic assets (including arms depots), removing the leadership and key figures in precision strikes, and attacking the oilfields that provide a large proportion of the group's income. The strategic assets that are targeted also include premises where Islamic State is believed to be storing large amounts of cash to pay its fighters, with each holding millions of pounds in local currencies and US dollars. Fighters' salaries have reportedly been halved since these attacks.<sup>34</sup> One 'cash distribution centre' near Mosul, Iraq, was hit in a US airstrike on 11 January, with aerial reconnaissance footage showing clouds of money being blown into the air afterwards.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>29</sup> <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/04/17/islamic-state-income-falls-30-per-cent-as-it-loses-territory> and <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/apr/18/isis-revenue-drops-nearly-a-third-after-loss-of-territory-shrinks-tax-base>

<sup>30</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/apr/18/isis-revenue-drops-nearly-a-third-after-loss-of-territory-shrinks-tax-base>

<sup>31</sup> <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/04/17/islamic-state-income-falls-30-per-cent-as-it-loses-territory> and <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/apr/18/isis-revenue-drops-nearly-a-third-after-loss-of-territory-shrinks-tax-base>

<sup>32</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/apr/18/isis-revenue-drops-nearly-a-third-after-loss-of-territory-shrinks-tax-base>

<sup>33</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/apr/18/isis-revenue-drops-nearly-a-third-after-loss-of-territory-shrinks-tax-base>

<sup>34</sup> <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-manpower-down-to-lowest-levels-since-2014-as-territorial-losses-continue-in-iraq-and-syria-a6982971.html>

<sup>35</sup> <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-manpower-down-to-lowest-levels-since-2014-as-territorial-losses-continue-in-iraq-and-syria-a6982971.html>

The US Department of Defense estimates that half of Islamic State's fighting force has been killed, though the group still has between 20,000 and 30,000 fighters left in theatre.<sup>36</sup> The flow of new recruits has also been considerably reduced, mostly due to rapidly-improving enforcement of illegal crossings over the Turkish-Syrian border. In addition, coalition forces have killed more than 100 senior IS figures. These include British citizen Mohammed Emwazi, nicknamed Jihadi John by the British media, who was killed in November 2015, and Omar al-Shishani, Islamic State's reputed Minister for War, who had a £3 million bounty on his head. Shishani was seriously injured in an airstrike on 4 March 2016 in al-Shadadi in eastern Syria, where he had been sent to visit and motivate forces struggling against Syrian opposition forces and repeated coalition airstrikes. He is reported to have died from his injuries shortly thereafter.<sup>37</sup> The killing of leaders and key figures has mainly been achieved through precision drone strikes, but US special operations forces have been used on two occasions that are known about.

### **Islamic State assets destroyed by UK military action**

Table 2 opposite shows the numbers of various types of IS assets destroyed by UK airstrikes since 27 September 2014 up to the end of this reporting period (7 May 2016). Table 3 opposite shows the UK Ministry of Defence estimates for the numbers of IS fighters killed and injured by RAF airstrikes between September 2014 and March 2016.<sup>38</sup>

### **Impact on Islamic State's activities in the United Kingdom**

Islamic State is not only an indirect threat to the United Kingdom through destabilising the Middle East, but presents a direct threat through launching or inspiring terrorist attacks on British soil or against British interests abroad. One of the most significant security threats to the United Kingdom is that of British nationals travelling to Iraq and Syria to fight for Islamic State. Not only do such individuals bolster the group's fighting force in theatre, but they may return to the United Kingdom with combat training and experience, further ideological indoctrination and a good reputation among other violent jihadists. On their return, these people may focus on recruiting other fighters, building logistical support for Islamic State, or carrying out terrorist attacks. The British authorities state that at least 800 individuals have travelled from the United Kingdom to support or fight for violent jihadist organisations in Iraq and Syria.<sup>39</sup> Of these, 60 are believed to have been killed, but it is thought around 400 have returned to the United Kingdom.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>36</sup> <http://www.defense.gov/News/News-Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/641754/departments-of-defense-press-briefing-by-col-warren-via-teleconference-from-bagh>

<sup>37</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/14/islamic-states-war-minister-omar-al-shishani-clinically-dead>

<sup>38</sup> [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/520366/PJHQ\\_FOI2016\\_03806\\_\\_\\_Number\\_of\\_enemy\\_combatants\\_killed\\_in\\_RAF\\_airstrikes\\_in\\_Iraq\\_from\\_2014\\_to\\_2016.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/520366/PJHQ_FOI2016_03806___Number_of_enemy_combatants_killed_in_RAF_airstrikes_in_Iraq_from_2014_to_2016.pdf)

<sup>39</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-32026985> and <https://www.mi5.gov.uk/news/director-general-speaks-on-terrorism-technology-and-oversight>

<sup>40</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/apr/16/returning-jihadis-help-combat-isis-syria-eu-terrorism>

**Table 2.** Numbers of IS assets destroyed by RAF airstrikes in Iraq and Syria (Source: UK Ministry of Defence).

Type of asset	Number destroyed
Bases and other buildings	160
Assault groups	173
Vehicles	70
Machine-gun positions	80
Mortar positions	59
Rocket-launching units	49
Improvised explosive devices (IEDs)	29
Sniper positions	16
Weapons stores	21
Rocket-propelled grenade units	13
Anti-aircraft units	9
Heavy-artillery units	2
Oilfield targets	24

**Table 3.** Numbers of IS fighters killed and injured by RAF airstrikes in Iraq and Syria (Source: UK Ministry of Defence).

Country	Killed	Injured
Iraq	974	94
Syria	22	4
Total	996	98

Some of these returning fighters have been arrested and convicted for offences including inciting terrorism overseas, funding terrorism, preparing for acts of terrorism and conspiracy to murder. For example, Mohammed Rehman and Sana Amhed Khan were sentenced to life in prison in December 2015 after being found guilty of preparing an act of terrorism. When anti-terrorist police raided the couple's home in May 2015 they reportedly found chemicals for a massive bomb that was just days away from completion.

The actualisation of the IS threat in the United Kingdom can be seen in Home Office figures, which show an increase in the number of arrests for terrorism-related offenses between 2013 and 2014 and little change over 2015. In the period prior to the start of UK and coalition airstrikes against Islamic State in Iraq, the number of arrests for terrorism-related offences increased from 223 in 2013 to 289 in 2014.<sup>41</sup> Notably, there was a substantial increase in arrests for terrorism-related offenses in the period 1 October to 31 December 2014, immediately after the start of UK airstrikes against Islamic State.<sup>42</sup> Figure 3 opposite shows generally above average arrests for terrorism-related offenses in each quarter since UK airstrikes began in September 2014.<sup>43</sup> There were a comparable number of people arrested for terrorism-related offenses in 2015 as 2014: 280 people, a negligible decrease of 3% (nine arrests) on the previous 12 months.<sup>44</sup> Figure 4 opposite shows a steady increase in the number of people in custody in Britain for terrorism-related offenses over 2014 and 2015, while at the same time the number arrested for domestic extremism/separatism generally decreased.<sup>45</sup>

Furthermore, the UK threat level for international terrorism was rated as 'severe' by the Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre (JTAC) in September 2014, when the United Kingdom joined the coalition, and it remains at that level today. Overall, there are no signs that the threat to the United Kingdom from Islamic State is reducing despite UK airstrikes in Iraq and Syria and other efforts to target the group.

<sup>41</sup> [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/461404/6\\_1256\\_EL\\_The\\_Terrorism\\_Act\\_Report\\_2015\\_FINAL\\_16\\_0915\\_WEB.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/461404/6_1256_EL_The_Terrorism_Act_Report_2015_FINAL_16_0915_WEB.pdf)

<sup>42</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/operation-of-police-powers-under-the-terrorism-act-2000-financial-year-ending-march-2015/operation-of-police-powers-under-the-terrorism-act-2000-and-subsequent-legislation-arrests-outcomes-and-stops-and-searches-great-britain-financial>

<sup>43</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/operation-of-police-powers-under-the-terrorism-act-2000-quarterly-update-to-december-2015/operation-of-police-powers-under-the-terrorism-act-2000-and-subsequent-legislation-arrests-outcomes-and-stop-and-search-great-britain-quarterly-u>

<sup>44</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/operation-of-police-powers-under-the-terrorism-act-2000-quarterly-update-to-december-2015/operation-of-police-powers-under-the-terrorism-act-2000-and-subsequent-legislation-arrests-outcomes-and-stop-and-search-great-britain-quarterly-u>

<sup>45</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/operation-of-police-powers-under-the-terrorism-act-2000-quarterly-update-to-december-2015/operation-of-police-powers-under-the-terrorism-act-2000-and-subsequent-legislation-arrests-outcomes-and-stop-and-search-great-britain-quarterly-u>

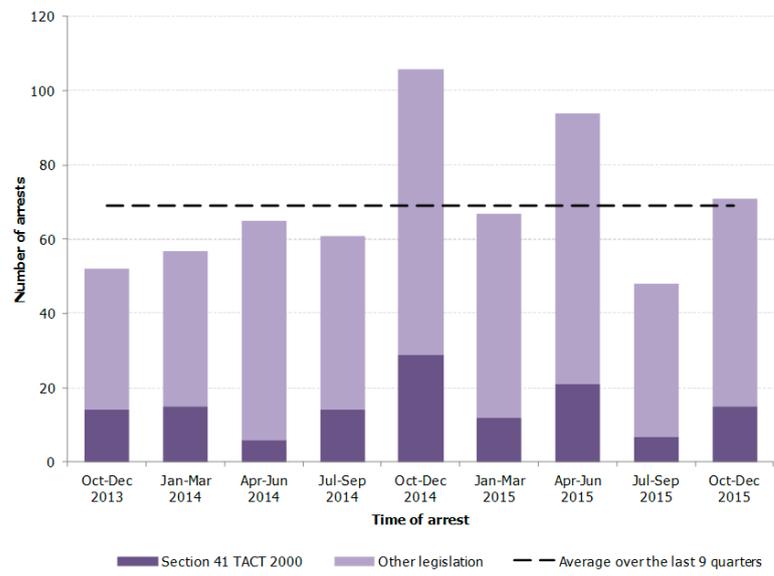


Figure 3. Arrests for terrorism-related offences in Britain (Source: UK Home Office).

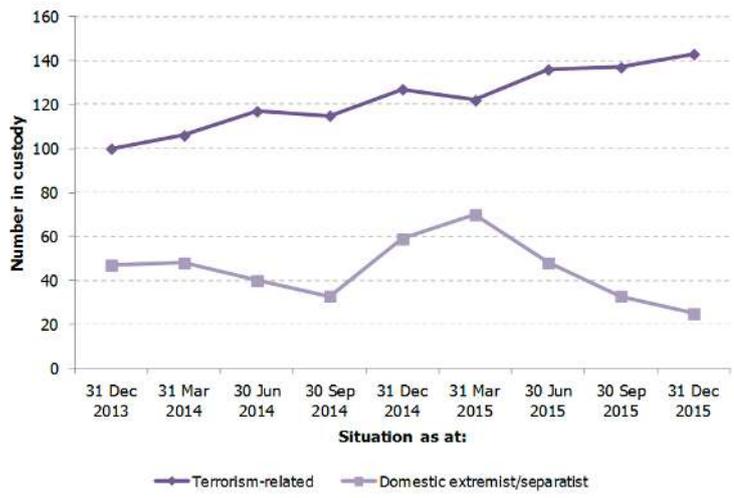


Figure 4. Persons in custody in Britain for terrorism-related offences and domestic extremism/separatism (Source: UK Home Office).

## Section V

### Assessment of civilian casualties

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A key issue in the build-up to the December 2015 vote in the UK parliament on whether or not to extend RAF airstrikes against Islamic State into Syria was the risk posed to innocent civilians in the targeted areas. The position of the government and Ministry of Defence (MoD) 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.<sup>46</sup> The argument was that precision weapons, the skill of RAF pilots and strict rules of engagement all act to minimise civilian casualties.

It is certainly true that UK forces make every possible effort to reduce civilian casualties. However, the nature of operations in Iraq and Syria make it impossible to avoid civilian casualties completely as the government and MoD have implied. The evidence suggests that a minimum of 1,217 civilians have died in the 12,453 coalition airstrikes in Iraq and Syria between 8 August 2014 and 23 May 2016.<sup>47</sup> This equates to a minimum of one civilian death per 10 airstrikes. The United Kingdom has so far launched 761 airstrikes in Iraq and 20 in Syria. Based on the coalition average casualties-per-strike figure of 0.098, it can be estimated that around 77 civilians have been killed in UK airstrikes against Islamic State in Iraq and Syria so far. However, it should be noted that the United Kingdom's risk assessment protocol is very strict and the weapons the RAF uses are highly-accurate and small yield (particularly the Brimstone 2, which is only in service with the RAF), so it is possible that the civilian deaths from UK airstrikes are below the coalition average.

The very high numbers of civilian casualties caused by airstrikes in previous Western interventions have been a prime source of propaganda and recruitment for groups such as Islamic State. 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 remain a highly-contentious issue. The UK Ministry of Defence has purportedly 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.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>46</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/29111501.pdf> and <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201516/cmhansrd/cm151202/debtext/151202-0001.htm>

<sup>47</sup> <https://airwars.org/civilian-casualty-claims/>

<sup>48</sup> [http://www.heraldscotland.com/news/14193998.Revealed\\_\\_British\\_government\\_refusing\\_to\\_accept\\_evidence\\_of\\_civilian\\_fatalities\\_in\\_UK\\_air\\_strikes/?commentSort=score](http://www.heraldscotland.com/news/14193998.Revealed__British_government_refusing_to_accept_evidence_of_civilian_fatalities_in_UK_air_strikes/?commentSort=score)

However, state militaries frequently significantly under-report the numbers of civilian casualties compared to human rights monitoring organisations and international news agencies. For example, of the 422 claimed incidents, the coalition has only confirmed that 15 in Iraq and 11 in Syria caused civilian casualties. It is likely that between 55 and 69 civilians died in these incidents – far less than the minimum 1,217 civilians actually likely killed by coalition airstrikes.<sup>49</sup>

In contrast, Islamic State is thought to have killed 7,101 civilians in Iraq<sup>50</sup> and 1,366 in Syria<sup>51</sup> in 2015 alone. The total figure of 8,467 in 2015 is considerably more than the estimate for 2014 (4,325 civilians were killed in Iraq by Islamic State in 2014<sup>52</sup>). A further 1,196 people were killed by Islamic State outside of Iraq and Syria, including attacks in Lebanon, Paris and Belgium and over Egypt.<sup>53</sup> Of these, 31 were British.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>49</sup> <https://airwars.org/civilian-casualty-claims/>

<sup>50</sup> <https://www.iraqbodycount.org/analysis/numbers/2015/>

<sup>51</sup> <http://sn4hr.org/blog/2016/01/02/16116/>

<sup>52</sup> <https://www.iraqbodycount.org/analysis/numbers/2014/>

<sup>53</sup> <http://blogs.channel4.com/factcheck/factcheck-victims-islamic-state/22134>

<sup>54</sup> <http://blogs.channel4.com/factcheck/factcheck-victims-islamic-state/22134>

## Section VI

### The next stage

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The coalition's campaign strategy is undergoing constant revision in this highly dynamic operation. However, the US Department of Defense has outlined three priorities:<sup>55</sup>

1. Stabilise Iraq's Anbar province.
2. Develop Iraqi ground forces to be able to surround and contain Mosul.
3. Develop local ground forces in Syria to conduct an offensive on Raqqa.

The US defence secretary, Ash Carter, has said that the United States wants to increase its capabilities in the fight against Islamic State, including extending airstrikes, increasing the cyber offensive and deploying more troops on the ground. Obama has since approved this extension, sending 250 additional SOF soldiers to Syria. Carter suggested the United States may shift the focus of its military strategy, conducting more strikes based on intelligence from agents and special forces operators on the ground.

In March, General Joseph Dunford, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said that he and Carter believe there will be an increase in US forces in Iraq in the short term. It is unclear whether the increase would see the White House approve a higher cap on troop levels in Iraq, which is currently set at 3,780. According to US officials, there are actually around 5,000 US forces operating in Iraq, but many of these do not count towards the cap because they are on temporary duty.<sup>56</sup> The increase in ground forces could see the deployment of Apache attack helicopters and heavy artillery to support ground operations by local forces.<sup>57</sup>

In the immediate term, the coalition will be working with local allies in joint offensives against IS strongholds in Mosul and Fallujah in Iraq and Raqqa in Syria. At the time of writing, Iraqi forces have begun operations in Fallujah while others have dug in around Mosul; however, operations against Islamic State in Mosul are being hampered by ethnic rivalries among Iraqis and Kurds, causing delays to a major assault.<sup>58</sup> Plans for an attack on Islamic State's Syrian capital, Raqqa, are in the advanced stages according to Colonel Steve Warren, the spokesperson for Operation Inherent Resolve.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>55</sup> [http://www.defense.gov/News/Special-Reports/0814\\_Inherent-Resolve](http://www.defense.gov/News/Special-Reports/0814_Inherent-Resolve)

<sup>56</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/apr/16/ash-carter-isis-syria-iraq>

<sup>57</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/apr/16/ash-carter-isis-syria-iraq>

<sup>58</sup> <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/c1e5ccca-1e6a-11e6-b286-cddde55ca122.html#axzz49ZvEw5Zn>

<sup>59</sup> <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/anti-isis-coalition-preparing-to-launch-final-assault-on-raqqa-stronghold-us-official-says-a6987946.html>

The United Kingdom is demonstrably highly active on multiple fronts in Iraq and Syria, including airstrikes, drone operations, aerial surveillance, special forces, and human intelligence (HUMINT) and signals intelligence (SIGINT) operations. While the British government remains silent on its plans for the future of the country's military commitment to the coalition's efforts, it is expected that UK forces will continue to be heavily involved.

## Section VII

### Conclusion

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The UK military has conducted a strong campaign in Iraq and to a lesser extent Syria as part of the US-led coalition against Islamic State. As of 19 May 2016, the RAF has conducted 761 airstrikes in Iraq, significantly behind the US effort of 5,764 airstrikes, but still the second-highest number.<sup>60</sup> In addition, the United Kingdom has provided the majority of the coalition's strategic and tactical surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities. On the ground, UK intelligence assets and special forces have also played a significant role, with strike, reconnaissance, forward air control and sniper teams operating deep within IS-held territory. The UK military also has training units working with Iraqi and Kurdish forces, developing their combat skills and providing assistance in command and control.

Over the last 12 months, the US-led coalition and local partners have retaken up to 45% of Islamic State's territory in Iraq and 20% of its territory in Syria and the group has been driven out of the major cities of Tikrit and Ramadi in Iraq and Palmyra in Syria. However, Islamic State still holds at least 55% of its territory in Iraq and 80% of its territory in Syria despite around 21 months of coalition airstrikes and still holds its strongholds of Mosul (Iraq) and Raqqa (Syria). The population controlled by Islamic State is now a third less than it was, but the group still exerts control over six million people in the territory it holds.

Coalition airstrikes on Islamic State's oil production facilities have resulted in oil production falling by a third, but Islamic State still produces 21,000 barrels of oil a day, accounting for 43% of its income. Islamic State's revenues have dropped by 30% since mid-2015 and the group has had to reduce the salaries of its fighters by up to half; however, Islamic State's revenues are still at \$56 million a month. The flow of recruits to Islamic State has been reduced and half of Islamic State's fighting force and over 100 of their senior figures have been killed. Despite this, the group still has between 20,000 and 30,000 fighters left in theatre.

Overall, the US-led coalition has had some considerable successes in containing and rolling back the group in Iraq and Syria; however, much more should have been achieved in the last 21 months given the combined military might and other resources of the 66 members of the global coalition to counter Islamic State. Furthermore, there are no signs that the terrorist threat to the United Kingdom from Islamic State is reducing despite nearly two years of UK airstrikes and other efforts to target the group.

<sup>60</sup> <https://airwars.org/data/>

In addition, those gains that have been made have come at the expense of civilian casualties. It is likely that a minimum of 1,217 civilians have died in the 12,453 coalition airstrikes in Iraq and Syria to date. Despite the fact that the UK military undertakes stringent risk assessments of collateral damage immediately prior to conducting airstrikes, it is reasonable to estimate that a minimum of 77 civilians have been killed in UK airstrikes against Islamic State so far. Of course the number *intentionally* killed by Islamic State is far greater, but we hold ourselves to higher standards.

It is clear that both the civil war in Syria and the political turmoil in Iraq must end if the coalition's current strategy is to have a real chance of success in finally defeating Islamic State. Given that political resolution in the two countries is unlikely in the short term, it is instead likely that the coalition will steadily ramp up its military efforts through incremental increases by individual coalition members, particularly of special forces and other ground troops. This will move the coalition, including the United Kingdom, increasingly away from the strategy of remote warfare and towards a far more conventional-looking war, albeit one not on the scale of previous interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, for example, and therefore far less likely to draw sustained public and media attention.

# Appendix

**Table 4.** Available chronology of UK military actions in Iraq and Syria (8 April to 7 May 2016).

Date	Syria	Iraq
8 April		Hit – One artillery piece destroyed.
9 April		Hit – One mortar team destroyed.
10 April		Mosul – One building, one rocket cache and one rocket-launching site destroyed. Qayyarah – One sniper position destroyed.
11 April		Mosul – One machine-gun position destroyed. Qayyarah – Three assault positions destroyed.
12 April		Mosul – Two IS positions, including one rocket-launching team, destroyed. Qayyarah – One mortar team destroyed. Hit – One RPG and one machine-gun position destroyed.
13 April		Hit – One strongpoint and one machine-gun position destroyed. Kisik – Rocket and mortar teams destroyed. Mosul – One vehicle transporting a prepared VBIED and two clusters of transport barges destroyed.
14 April		Sinjar-Kisik – One mortar team and one tunnel complex destroyed. Qayyarah – One IS building destroyed. Hit – Two transport barges destroyed.
17 April	Manbij – One mortar unit destroyed.	Kisik/Mosul/Kirkuk – One mortar team, four vehicles and three buildings destroyed.

Date	Syria	Iraq
18 April		<p>Kisik – Two mortar positions destroyed.</p> <p>Mosul – One bomb factory and two other buildings destroyed.</p> <p>Al Baghdadi – Ten rocket rails and a supply cache destroyed.</p>
19 April		<p>Barimah – One large towed mortar destroyed.</p> <p>Mosul – Two mortar units destroyed.</p> <p>Hit – Two machine-gun posts destroyed.</p>
20 April		<p>Fallujah – One machine-gun team and one mortar team destroyed.</p> <p>Qayyarah – Two buildings destroyed.</p>
21 April		<p>Al Baghdadi – Major tunnel complex destroyed using new Enhanced Paveway III deep penetration munition.</p>
22 April	<p>Abu Kamal – One weapons factory destroyed.</p> <p>Raqqa – One assault group and one vehicle destroyed.</p>	<p>Fallujah – Two sniper positions, one bunker and one assault position destroyed.</p> <p>Kirkuk – One strategic bridge and one communications post destroyed.</p>
24 April		<p>Fallujah – One sniper position and one compound destroyed.</p>
25 April		<p>Kirkuk – Two buildings destroyed.</p>
26 April		<p>Mosul – One vehicle destroyed.</p> <p>Fallujah – One bunker destroyed.</p>
27 April		<p>Hit – One mortar team and one truck VBIED destroyed.</p> <p>Fallujah – One tactical command post destroyed.</p> <p>Qayyarah – One mortar team and two rocket-launching teams destroyed.</p> <p>Mosul – One mortar position destroyed.</p>

Date	Syria	Iraq
28 April		<p>Qayyarah – One tunnel system destroyed.</p> <p>Fallujah – One machine-gun position destroyed.</p>
29 April		<p>Fallujah – One T-55 main battle tank and one armed truck destroyed.</p>
2 May		<p>Fallujah – One machine-gun team and one 23mm anti-aircraft gun destroyed.</p> <p>Mosul – One building destroyed.</p> <p>Qayyarah – One assault group destroyed.</p>
3 May		<p>Mosul – One VBIED truck and one other vehicle destroyed.</p> <p>Fallujah – One mortar team and one support vehicle destroyed.</p>
4 May		<p>Fallujah – Two assault positions destroyed.</p> <p>North and west Iraq – One VBIED truck, multiple assault positions, heavy weapons and a tunnel complex entrance destroyed (no further details).</p>
5 May		<p>Mosul – One assault group destroyed.</p> <p>Fallujah – One tunnel complex and one mortar team destroyed.</p>
6 May		<p>Euphrates - One ammunitions barge destroyed.</p> <p>Mosul – One mortar team destroyed.</p> <p>Fallujah – One heavy machine-gun unit destroyed.</p>

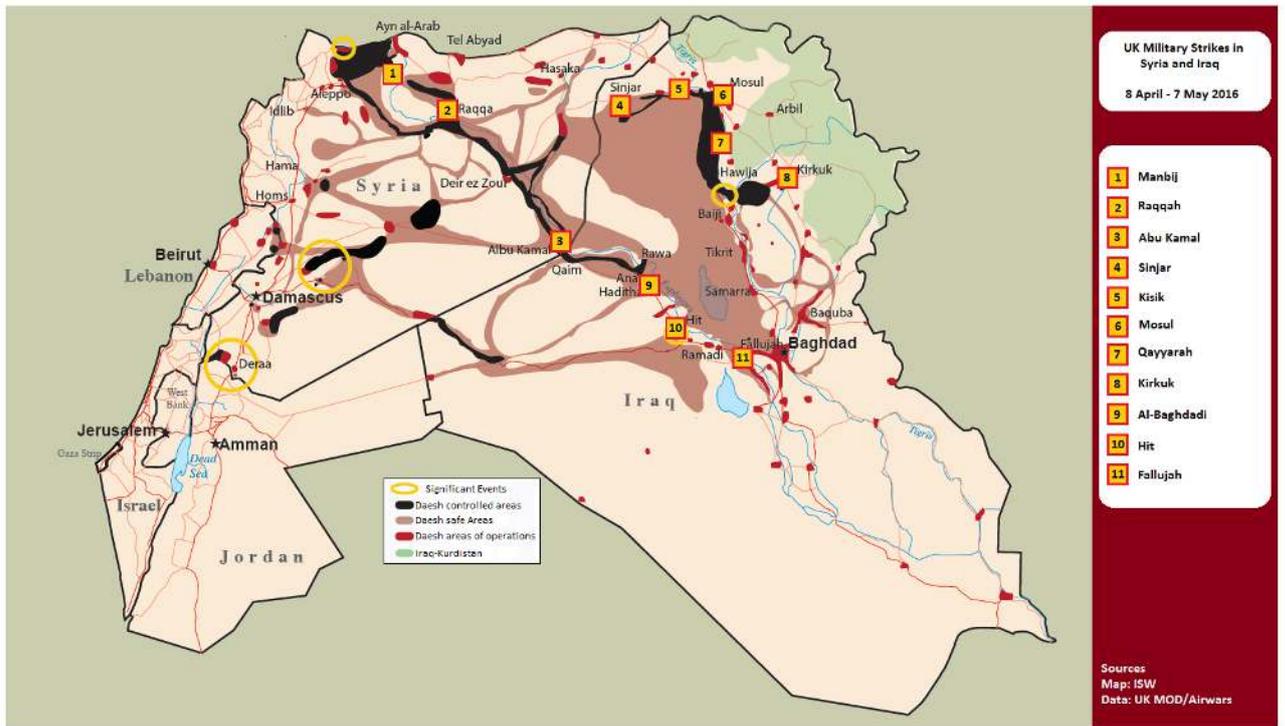


Figure 5. Locations of known UK airstrikes against Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (8 April to 7 May 2016).







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