



House of Commons
Defence Committee

UK military operations in Syria and Iraq

Second Report of Session 2016–17



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to the report*

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The Defence Committee

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1 Introduction

1. Following the decision to hold a vote in the House of Commons on extending military operations to Syria, we announced on 1 December 2015 that we would be conducting an inquiry into UK military operations in Syria and Iraq. This builds upon our joint oral evidence session with the Foreign Affairs Committee,¹ earlier in this Parliament, and our predecessor Committee's report on military action in Iraq.²

Terms of reference

2. The terms of reference for our inquiry posed the following questions:
- What is the order of battle (ORBAT) and military capability of ISIL/DAESH in Syria and Iraq and what tactics and strategy should we employ to confront it?³
 - Will airstrikes alone be effective in degrading and defeating DAESH?
 - Do the RAF have the capacity, in terms of equipment and personnel, to sustain or increase the involvement in a campaign of airstrikes against DAESH in Syria?
 - Which ground troops are active in theatre, countering DAESH, which might benefit from UK airstrikes?
 - Is there adequate intelligence to ensure that airstrikes are accurately targeted against DAESH?
 - What would be the impact of deploying UK ground troops?
 - Will military engagement in Syria increase the UK's ability to broker a political peace process and transition to a democratically-elected representative government?
 - Should the UK engage bilaterally with Iran and Russia on deconfliction if the decision is taken to extend airstrikes into Syria?

The Inquiry

3. We held nine oral evidence sessions as part of this inquiry, with contributions from academics, retired military officers, journalists and NGOs, as well as Government officials and the Secretary of State for Defence, the Rt Hon Michael Fallon MP. The full list of witnesses can be found at the end of this report.

4. We also visited several countries in the region, the better to understand the military effort being carried out by the UK Government. We held meetings with senior politicians

1 Oral evidence taken before the Defence Committee and Foreign Affairs Committee on 8 October 2015, HC (2015–16) 457

2 Defence Committee, Seventh Report of Session 2014–15, [The situation in Iraq and Syria and the response to al-Dawla al-Islamiya fi al-Iraq al-Sham \(DAESH\)](#), 27 January 2015, HC 690

3 Although we intended to look in detail at the DAESH order of battle, we have not managed to explore this matter sufficiently, due to lack of evidence.

and military figures in Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Saudi Arabia. We visited the Sovereign Base Area of Akrotiri in Cyprus, as well as incorporating meetings to discuss the UK military effort with relevant individuals and institutes during a visit to Washington DC.

5. We are grateful to all of our witnesses who provided oral and written evidence, as well as the Ambassadors and staff at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office posts in the countries we visited for their assistance in programming and logistics. Finally, we wish to thank the foreign governments and the individuals that we met on these visits for assisting us in our understanding of the conflict in the region.

2 DAESH and the threat posed by DAESH affiliates

6. The nature of DAESH has been the subject of intense concern and debate throughout its existence. On 26 November 2015, the then Prime Minister described DAESH as a snake, the head of which was in Raqqa.⁴ By contrast, others have referred to DAESH as a hydra, with the ability to survive and grow even if several of its ‘heads’ are cut off. The importance of assessing this correctly is central to its containment and eventual defeat, as the tactics employed will depend upon what form DAESH adopts. Charles Lister, a senior fellow at the Middle East Institute, explained:

Raqqa, Mosul and Fallujah are three particularly significant areas for ISIS. If it comes under pressure in one, it will reinforce the other two—that is practised ISIS strategy [...] Unless we establish conditions on the ground whereby multiple significant targets can be attacked at the same time, ISIS will continue to be able to be, as you suggest, a kind of Hydra force that is always significantly strong in one area of strategic significance, even while taking losses elsewhere.⁵

Tim Marshall, formerly of Sky News and editor of ‘The What & The Why’, agreed, telling us that “if you squeeze Raqqa, people will go to Mosul. If you squeeze Mosul, people will go to Raqqa. They are part of a whole”.⁶

7. A central question, therefore, is whether DAESH is reliant upon territory for its survival. Dr Frederick Kagan of the American Enterprise Institute and Charles Lister believed that the existence of a ‘caliphate’ was an important recruiting tool for DAESH and that it therefore needed to be dismantled if DAESH were to be beaten.⁷ Michael Eisenstadt, a fellow at the Washington Institute of Near East Policy, agreed:

If there is no caliphate, there is no lording over non-believers. There is no glory. There is no victory of their version of Islam. There are no sex slaves or spoils of war: all the reasons why people go over there to fight. That is a necessary but not a sufficient condition of victory—of defeating the ideology.⁸

8. Both Patrick Cockburn, foreign correspondent for the *Independent*, and Tim Marshall thought that the loss of territory and therefore its ‘caliphate’ was a vital psychological blow which had to be delivered. Tim Marshall told us:

The blow to them is equally political, military and psychological—we shouldn’t underestimate the psychological blow. I think that’s where the currency came in. They introduced a currency because if they were a state, they could have a currency.⁹

4 HC Deb, 26 November 2015, [col. 1524](#)

5 Q238

6 Q361

7 Q227; Q240

8 Q229

9 Q364

9. Despite this need to retake territory, Michael Eisenstadt believed that it alone would not remove the threat. He cited the overthrow of Nazi Germany as an example of support and ideology surviving the defeat of a state:

People said, “Well, we had some stupid leaders who made stupid mistakes,” but if you look at polling data through the ’50s and ’60s, it took a generation of change, social engineering, the rise of the left in Europe and Willy Brandt’s policies in the ’60s to finally bury the ideology—and the fact that you had an occupation for several decades.¹⁰

He suggested that the key was “to create frameworks where they are unable to act on their belief”. He used the example that, after Nasser’s death, there was no Nasserist state although there were still lots of Nasserists. We were told that this demonstrated that:

You cannot defeat them by counter-narratives. You have to defeat them by creating an overwhelming reality problem—that their whole ideology flies in the face of the reality on the ground, which is that they are defeated.¹¹

10. Richard Atwood of the International Crisis Group also questioned the extent to which the loss of territory would result in the defeat of DAESH. Whilst he agreed that it would weaken DAESH, he believed that the organisation would survive and morph into a different entity.¹²

11. A number of our witnesses supported that position. Both Michael Eisenstadt and Dr Neil Quilliam of Chatham House thought that DAESH would revert to an underground terror network.¹³ Dr Lina Khatib of the Arab Reform Institute suggested that in order to compensate for losses in Iraq and Syria, DAESH would escalate its operations elsewhere and increase the number of opportunistic terror attacks in which it was engaged, particularly in the West.¹⁴ Dr Khatib also believed that the longer DAESH remained in control of territory, the more likely it was to become a franchise rather than a hierarchal organisation, with “pockets like al-Qaeda which are decentralised”.¹⁵ General (retired) Jack Keane of the Institute for the Study of War agreed, likening the ‘caliphate’ to the safe haven provided in Afghanistan to al-Qaeda and concluded that the re-taking of territory was vital but was not in itself sufficient to defeat DAESH. In support of that view he told us that DAESH now had nine affiliates of which Libya was the largest and concluded that there was “no comprehensive strategy to deal with any of those affiliates”.¹⁶ Peter Ford, the former UK Ambassador to Syria, similarly highlighted his concern that even in the event of defeat in Syria and Iraq, DAESH could simply relocate to another area.¹⁷

12. Our meetings in the Middle East highlighted concerns about the nature of the campaign and the fact that it was being fought on a tactical rather than a strategic basis. Whilst it is clear that DAESH must be removed from Iraq and Syria, whether that can be done simply by defeating their strongholds in these countries is not at all certain. Few of our interlocutors in the Middle East could demonstrate the existence of the infrastructure

10 Q241

11 Q228

12 Q324–327

13 Q237; Q310

14 Q238; Q291

15 Q294

16 Q229

17 Q144

or tools necessary to fill the vacuum of social and economic stability in which DAESH had taken up residence. DAESH have also proven to be highly adept at evolving its structures to meet the changing nature of the conflict. The recognisable and well organised military force which stormed across Iraq in 2014 bears little resemblance to the guerrilla, asymmetric fighters which we now see in Iraq, Syria, and elsewhere. The reality is that conventional warfare alone is not likely to defeat DAESH and the fluid nature of DAESH and the ease of movement for its forces, weapons and goods between Syria and Iraq means that unless they are encircled simultaneously, one can be reinforced from the other. The battle in both Iraq and Syria will be neither quick nor easy.

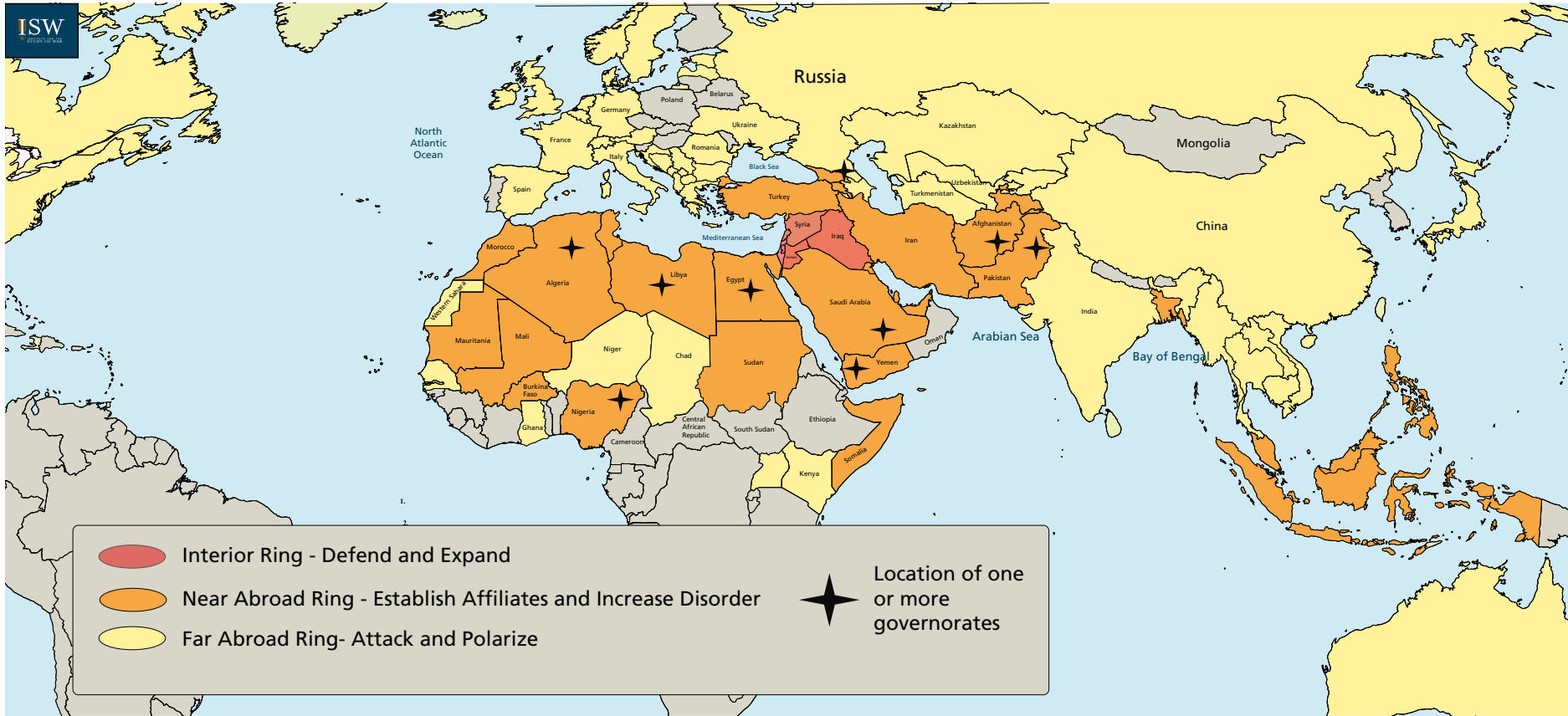
13. We also discussed the retaking of Mosul and Raqqa by local forces, which was considered by some to be key to the downfall of DAESH. However, the experience of the retaking of Ramadi demonstrates that this may only be achieved at enormous cost. Eighty per cent of Ramadi was destroyed in that operation and casualties, both civilian and military, were extensive. In addition large numbers of IEDs remain in the city which makes it uninhabitable in the near future, or without vast effort and cost.

14. Whilst the battles for Mosul and Raqqa are clearly at the forefront of the strategy to defeat DAESH, this does not address the financial or ideological strength of DAESH. In Saudi Arabia, we were warned that of the four levels of the organisation—Ideology, Finance, Planners and Executors—only the last two levels (command and control and soldiers) were being countered effectively. Without all four levels of the organisation being addressed, the defeat of DAESH in the territory that it holds risks leading to the further spread of extremist ideology and finances. Should we fail to eliminate DAESH effectively, we may be condemned to years of playing what one US interlocutor described as ‘jihadi whack-a-mole’.

15. Our counter-DAESH strategy should be as effective in Nigeria, Afghanistan, or Libya as it is in Iraq, or Syria. There needs to be a grand strategic discussion about the threat posed by DAESH and how we can defeat it. It is therefore vital that a grand strategy is developed which addresses the threat posed by DAESH, in all its forms. This is a matter to which we may return in a future inquiry.

DAESH Affiliates

16. In March 2016, the Institute for the Study of War produced a map showing the geographical spread of DAESH-affiliated groups.



Source: Institute for the Study of War

17. Following the announcement of the DAESH ‘caliphate’ in June 2014, a number of existing terrorist groups announced their support for, and affiliation to, DAESH. The Centre on Religion & Geopolitics published its Global Extremism Monitor in March 2016 which found that a “trend in the first quarter of 2016 has been ISIS’ dominance over al-Qaeda. In March, ISIS-affiliated groups killed twice as many people as al-Qaeda and its affiliates”.¹⁸

18. The International Crisis Group has also examined the proliferation of DAESH affiliates, noting that:

IS aims to expand beyond its regional base by establishing provinces (wilayaat) through aggressive recruitment and luring in other groups. It appears less discerning in allowing groups to join than al-Qaeda is about accepting new affiliates. It has had some success elsewhere but nothing like in Iraq—perhaps unsurprising given its strong Iraqi identity and roots in conditions there.¹⁹

19. A January 2016 Brookings paper, produced by Charles Lister, listed the DAESH ‘wilayat’ (as of August 2015) demonstrating the geographical reach of the organisation.²⁰ These are set out in the table below:

Country	Wilaya (province)
Iraq	Baghdad
Iraq	Shamal (North) Baghdad
Iraq (south of Baghdad)	Al-Janub (South)
Iraq	Al-Anbar
Iraq	Al-Fallujah
Iraq	Salahuddin
Iraq	Diyala
Iraq (northern)	Dijla (Tigris)
Iraq	Ninevah
Iraq	Kirkuk
Syria	Damascus
Syria	Homs
Syria (Hassakeh)	Al-Baraka
Syria (deir el-Zour)	Al-Khayr
Syria	Hama
Syria	Aleppo
Syria	Al-Raqqa
Iraq & Syria (northern)	Al-Jazeera
Iraq & Syria	Al-Furat (Euphrates)
Yemen	Sanaa
Yemen	Shabwa
Yemen	Hadramawt

18 Centre on Religion and Geopolitics, [Global Extremism Monitor](#), March 2016

19 International Crisis Group, [Exploiting Disorder: al-Qaeda and the Islamic State](#), March 2016

20 Charles Lister, [Jihadi Rivalry: Islamic State Challenges al-Qaida](#), Brookings Doha Centre Analysis Paper, January 2016

Country	Wilaya (province)
Yemen	Al-Bayda
Yemen	Lahj
Yemen (Ibb)	Liwa al-Akhdar
Libya (Cyrenaica/eastern Libya)	Barqa
Libya	Tripoli (or Tripolitania)
Libya	Fezzan
Algeria	Algeria
Egypt	Sinai
Saudi Arabia	Najd
Afghanistan-Pakistan	Khorasan
Nigeria	Gharb (West) Africa
Russia	Al-Qawqaz (Caucasus)

20. Dr Kagan told us that DAESH could not be defeated whilst *wilayat* remained under the control of DAESH.²¹ Mr Eisenstadt highlighted his belief that although the DAESH flagship operation continued to be Syria and Iraq, it was now setting up camp in Libya with further operations elsewhere. The overseas operations were important to DAESH as they created the perception of momentum, and “image and image management [was] key to their success”.²²

Libya

21. Dr Khatib warned that there were “definite links between DAESH in Syria and DAESH in Libya”,²³ which went as far back as 2011. At first, Libyan militants had travelled to Syria to train Syrian rebels. However, she suggested that those militants had now returned in order to train Libyan extremists. Dr Khatib also warned that unless DAESH were defeated in Syria and Iraq in the near future, its current hierarchical structure would evolve into a franchise organisation with “pockets like al-Qaeda, which are decentralised”.²⁴

22. Another of our witnesses, Claudia Gazzini of the International Crisis Group, suggested that DAESH operated outside of Syria and Iraq in an “opportunistic way” by “sending out feelers, sending out people, across the region and seeing where they can set up base”. It was this opportunism which had allowed them to take advantage of a “series of local factors, local crises and animosities” in Libya to gain control of a 200km stretch of the Libyan coast.²⁵ She also noted that a number of local Islamist groups in Libya had joined or affiliated to DAESH, despite the absence of a single strategy which brought them together:

How they exist and who is part of the groups very much depend on the local conflict that is taking place. For example, in Benghazi these DAESH affiliates have an alliance of convenience with moderate Islamists, so there is a flow of fighters in their ranks between moderate Islamists and DAESH,

21 Q227

22 Q238

23 Q293

24 Q294

25 Q328

and a certain extent of coordination. In the other city, Derna, there are al-Qaeda affiliate groups that are fighting against DAESH, so that is containing their expansion in Derna.²⁶

The Sinai and Yemen

23. Richard Atwood highlighted the Sinai as the next-largest affiliate after Libya.²⁷ We were told that “a mostly Bedouin group, Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis” had declared affiliation to DAESH and had demonstrated ties and exchanging of expertise. In Yemen, there were a number of small groups which had declared affiliation to DAESH which had been “conducting high-profile attacks against the holy sites of the Zaidis—the Houthis” in an attempt to increase sectarian divisions in Yemen. That said, Mr Atwood pointed out such groups were greatly overshadowed by the al-Qaeda affiliate, AQAP (al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula). Patrick Cockburn of the *Independent* has also concluded that AQAP are “the real winners in this war” having created a mini-state which stretches for 340 miles [...] along the south coast of Yemen”.²⁸

Afghanistan

24. The DAESH influence in Afghanistan was also brought to our attention. Richard Atwood said that its success in that country would depend on “the direction of the overall conflict and on the direction taken by the Taliban”.²⁹ At present, those affiliates had been seen in parts of eastern Afghanistan and were composed of “Taliban splinters, Pakistani Taliban commanders, central Asian militants”, in addition to other local groups. In conclusion, Mr Atwood argued that DAESH appeared to be “putting down roots” in Afghanistan and that there were some ties with DAESH in Iraq and Syria.³⁰

Africa

25. Boko Haram in Nigeria has also declared its affiliation with DAESH but our witnesses believed that it remained a movement that was “very much rooted in the political economy of northern Nigeria”. The only difference which Mr Atwood could identify was that its online promotion was “a little more polished” and that some of the statements of its leader, Abubakar Shekau, had “changed a little”.³¹ Recent reports have suggested that the DAESH leadership had replaced Shekau with an alternative leader; but he later claimed that an attempted coup had failed and that he remained in control of the group.³²

US Assessment

26. The US State Department publishes an annual report analysing global terrorism trends. In its 2015 report, the DAESH affiliates in Libya, Egypt, Afghanistan and Nigeria were all considered to pose a threat within their home countries. The report also noted that:

26 Q328; 331

27 Q335

28 [Thanks to the UK and US intervention, al-Qaeda now has a mini-state in Yemen. It's Iraq and Isis all over again](#), *Independent*, 15 April 2016

29 Q335

30 Q335

31 Q335

32 [What Next for Boko Haram's Forsaken Leader, Abubakar Shekau?](#) *NewsWeek*, 10 August 2016

ISIL-aligned groups have also emerged in other parts of the Middle East, Africa, the Russian North Caucasus, Southeast Asia, and South Asia, although the relationship between most of these groups and ISIL's leadership remained symbolic in most cases. Many of these groups are made up of pre-existing terrorist networks with their own local goals and lesser capabilities than ISIL.³³

27. The Secretary of State for Defence acknowledged the importance of being aware of the danger posed by the DAESH affiliates although he declined to comment on the threat posed by any of them to the UK.³⁴ He did, however, raise concerns about expansion of DAESH into Libya:

On DAESH's ability to expand abroad, we have already seen DAESH grow quite rapidly in northern Libya. That is obviously of concern, and we are intensifying our efforts now to support the new Government in Libya and to get it—of course it has 100 priorities—to focus on what needs to be done to stop DAESH spreading westwards from Sirte.³⁵

28. Dominic Wilson, Director of Operational Policy at the Ministry of Defence, set out the differences between the DAESH affiliates:

There are very different kinds of groups. Some affiliates have just taken the name. Some have bought into the ideology and are using the brand. Some aspire to have more established links with DAESH in Iraq and Syria. There are a mix of individuals and groups at differing stages of development, but the agencies are obviously keeping an eye on them all. Key to the strategy to deal with that is that, while they are in their relative infancy, you have the opportunity to nip them in the bud through...building the capacity of local security forces and agencies to deal with the problems before they expand.³⁶

29. The spread of DAESH and its affiliates is indicative of a wider problem that we are facing. We are not yet convinced that the strategy to counter this problem is a coherent and integrated strategy which will achieve our national objectives in Syria, Iraq, and the wider Middle East. All the separate pieces are linked together in the international coalition's strategic rhetoric, but there is not an obvious integration of UK Government policy instruments in the evidence we have taken. Considering the global and far-reaching nature of this problem, this is concerning. As Charles Lister told us:

Certainly since ISIL took Mosul and declared its caliphate, our strategy has appeared to be constantly reactive. There certainly is a recognition—although this is whispered—that this is going to be [...] a generational struggle. It absolutely is; it will probably be longer than 50 years, but it might not only be against ISIS. It might be against al-Qaeda and another thing that comes after it.³⁷

33 United States Department of State Bureau of Counterterrorism and Countering Violent Extremism, [Country Reports on Terrorism 2015](#), June 2016

34 Q426

35 Q421

36 Q425

37 Q260

30. Global terrorism trends indicate that, as in the case of al-Qaeda previously, pre-existing Islamist organisations will attach themselves to whichever militant network appears to be in the ascendant at any given time.

31. The UK and Coalition's strategy to counter DAESH is predominately focused on Iraq and Syria; and relies on the removal of territory from DAESH in order to eliminate it. That is a necessary, but not sufficient, strategy. If DAESH transforms itself into an international movement or a network of affiliates—like al-Qaeda before it—which can survive the loss of territory, the UK Government approach will need to adapt. For example, if DAESH is defeated in the Middle East but then grows strong in Africa, the current strategy will require major revision.

32. *We recommend that the Government should set out how the strategy will be flexible enough to cope with the various possible outcomes, and should explain what the differing options are. If the military action is successful but the overall strategy does not adapt, then DAESH will continue to pose a threat to stability and safety across the region and, indeed, much more widely.*

33. At present the UK has as its primary focus the defeat of DAESH in Iraq. However, the rapid increase in DAESH-affiliated groups elsewhere should be a cause for grave concern, particularly where there are strong links between the DAESH leadership in Iraq and Syria and those groups. The danger posed by the majority of these DAESH-affiliated groups may be minimal at present, but the evidence presented to us suggests that, if unchecked, they could form yet another front in the battle against international Islamist terrorism. The International Community needs to work together to provide a holistic approach to counter violent Islamic extremism through improving education, governance and infrastructure in areas at risk as well as countering the funding and export of extreme Islamic views. This should be parallel and complimentary to any military action.

34. *We recommend that, as part of an explanation of how it is countering the global threat from DAESH, the Government should provide more details of the military and capacity-building operations which are being undertaken to counter the DAESH affiliates.*

3 The UK military effort

Introduction

35. On 26 September 2014, the House of Commons voted in favour of the UK Government providing military support to the Government of Iraq. The first British airstrikes took place on 30 September³⁸ and, on 12 October, the Ministry of Defence announced the presence of British military trainers in Iraq.³⁹ Just over a year later, on 2 December 2015, the House of Commons approved a motion which supported “Her Majesty’s Government in taking military action, specifically airstrikes, exclusively against [DAESH] in Syria”.⁴⁰ Both the 2014 and 2015 resolutions specifically prohibited the deployment of conventional UK troops in ground combat operations.⁴¹

36. It should also be noted that the UK military operations in Iraq and Syria are in support of an International Coalition which consists of 67 partner nations.⁴²

Progress so far

37. On 18 May 2016, Colonel Steve Warren of the US Department of Defense gave the following analysis of the International Coalition’s progress in the fight against DAESH. He explained that the Coalition had:

- killed more than 120 high-value individuals in ISIL’s attack network, including the removal of cell leaders, facilitators, planners, recruiters;
- disrupted media operations, and removed some of the active ties between foreign fighters and Mosul-based ISIL leadership; and,
- conducted 40 airstrikes against 24 financial targets, destroying DAESH cash to the tune of hundreds of millions of dollars, including the targeting of DAESH oil production which the US Treasury Department estimated had reduced DAESH oil revenues by as much as 50%.

38. In addition, Colonel Warren stated that, in Iraq, DAESH had lost about 45% of the territory it once controlled—amounting to approximately 25,000 square kilometres. In Syria, DAESH had lost about 20% of their territory—amounting to approximately 9,000 square kilometres. He concluded that DAESH had lost up to 35% of the populated area it once had held in Iraq and Syria combined.⁴³

38 [‘RAF conducts first air strikes of Iraq mission’](#), Ministry of Defence, 30 September 2014

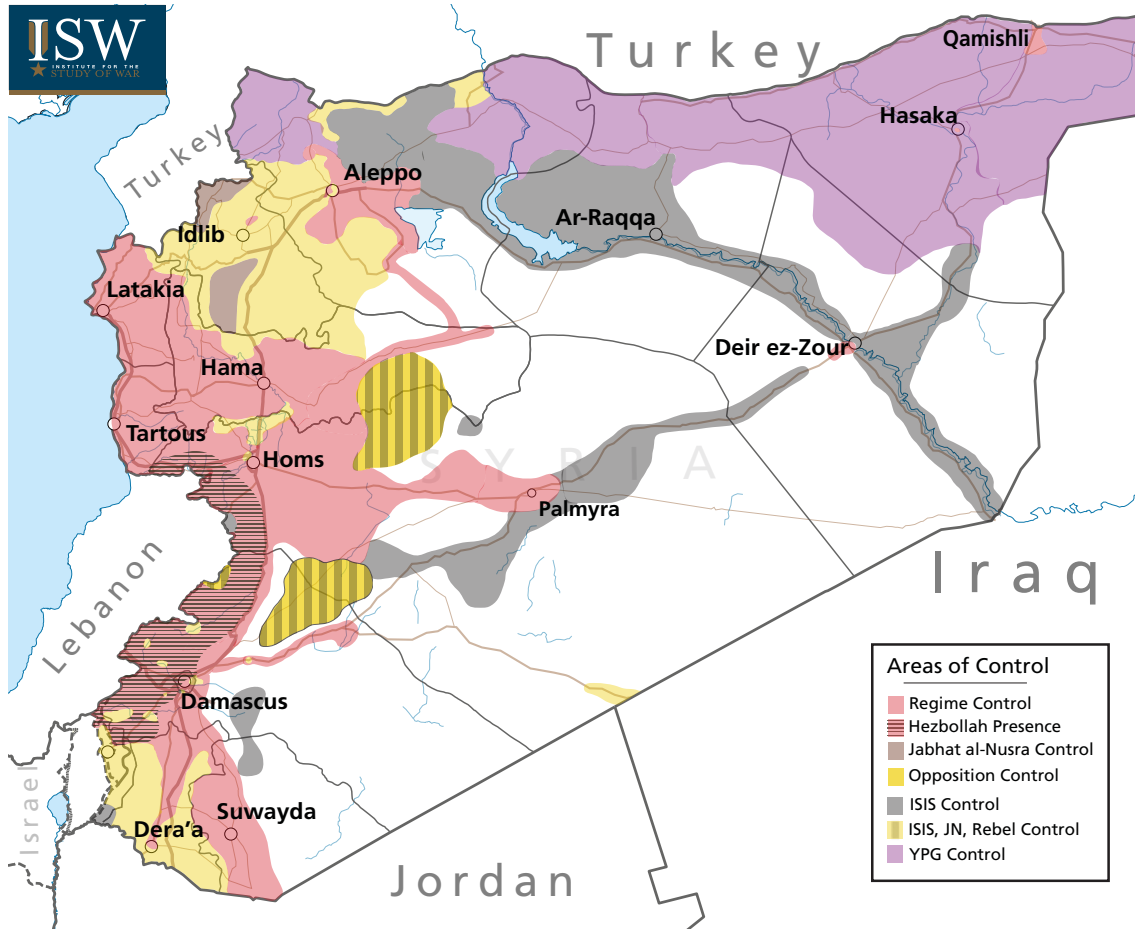
39 [UK troops training Kurdish forces in Iraq, says MoD](#), BBC, 12 October 2014

40 HC Deb, 2 December 2015, [col. 323](#)

41 HC Deb, 26 September 2014, [col. 1255](#)

42 A [full list of partner nations](#) can be found at the US State Department website.

43 Department of Defense [Press Briefing](#) by Colonel Steve Warren, spokesman, Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve via teleconference from Baghdad, Iraq, May 18, 2016



Source: Map produced by the Institute for the Study of War detailing the areas of control on 29 August 2016⁴⁴

39. In oral evidence, the Secretary of State for Defence set out the Coalition's gains:

We are now well into this campaign to counter DAESH in Iraq, where considerable progress has been made in pushing DAESH back west along the Euphrates and north up the Tigris, and in liberating towns, cities and territory that it formerly held. In Syria, the situation is obviously more complicated, but DAESH has come under some pressure from the Kurdish forces and the moderate Syrian opposition. Overall, the Coalition that we have mobilised—you are right to refer to the United States' leadership—in which we and other countries are supporting the United States, is making progress.⁴⁵

He went on to argue that the momentum was now with the Coalition:

Clearly, progress has been made: I think it took eight months to liberate Ramadi, it took eight weeks to liberate Hit and probably just a week or so to liberate al-Rutbah, so there is a real sense of momentum of the Iraqi and Kurdish forces now advancing. That needs to be sustained.⁴⁶

44 The Institute of the Study of War, [Russian Airstrikes in Syria: July 28–August 29](#), 30 August 2016

45 Q384

46 Q391

40. This was in line with evidence from some other witnesses. For instance, Michael Eisenstadt of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy told us that:

To quote a great British statesman I would say we are at the end of the beginning, but it may be just the beginning of the end with DAESH. There is still a long way to go. We are seeing that, as US military officials will point out, [DAESH] have not had a major success since the conquest of Ramadi in May last year.⁴⁷

41. Charles Lister agreed that progress was being made. He said that in Iraq, “a corner has been turned” and that DAESH were now under pressure from the Coalition’s targeting of financial resources, which had had “a significant impact” both on the organisation’s internal morale and on the ability of DAESH to go on the offensive on the battlefield.⁴⁸ However, he added the caveat that this alone would not automatically lead to the organisation’s defeat. Rather, he believed that the Coalition’s efforts would “revert them back to something that can be managed”. Charles Lister believed that victory over DAESH was “entirely dependent on local allies” and believed that there was “a significant shortfall” in Syria as well as “significant challenges politically” in Iraq. He concluded that “we cannot do it from the air and, arguably, we cannot do it ourselves by ourselves”.⁴⁹

42. In similar vein, Anthony Loyd of *The Times* argued that military victory on the ground would be possible in both Syria and Iraq only when “a specific confluence of circumstances” was achieved, including air power and forward observers, alongside either “a concentration of a semi-coherent group like the Iraqi Army”, or “an ethnic disparity”, for example, a Kurdish area in Syria—from which it would be far easier to drive out DAESH, who are “by and large Sunni Arabs”. Without those conditions, Mr Loyd believed any victory in Syria would be “far more difficult”.⁵⁰

43. Patrick Cockburn suggested that this reliance on local partners meant that even the perceived successes could be meaningless. In his experience, the Iraqi Army was still limited in its ability to take and hold territory and, as a result, there was an over-reliance on air power. He argued that a consequence of this was the devastation of places like Ramadi and Sinjar which did not represent “a victory in any full sense”. Furthermore, he asserted that DAESH was reverting to “guerrilla tactics”. Therefore, the extent to which the Coalition’s current victories were going to lead to the collapse of DAESH had been “exaggerated”.⁵¹

44. Richard Atwood also argued that, whilst it was important to win back territory from DAESH, until the underlying conditions which had allowed it to arise in Iraq and Syria were addressed (in particular Sunni marginalisation) “any victory would be short-lived”.⁵²

47 Q237

48 Q237

49 Q237

50 Q361

51 Q361

52 Q319

UK military action—airstrikes

45. In ongoing military operations, the number of airstrikes changes as the conflict progresses. Therefore, it is possible to provide only a snapshot of UK activity at any particular date. In statements to both Houses of Parliament on 24 May 2016, the Government revealed that the UK had carried out at least 804 airstrikes (761 in Iraq and 43 in Syria)⁵³ in the campaign against DAESH. This represented the second highest number of airstrikes by a Coalition partner in Iraq and, since it had obtained Parliamentary permission for airstrikes, the second highest number of airstrikes in Syria as well.⁵⁴ However, although the military operation is against a single enemy, DAESH, there are significant differences in the political and military conditions in Iraq and Syria. These must be acknowledged before any conclusions can be drawn on the effectiveness of the UK operation.

UK assets

46. Prior to the vote on extending military operations to Syria, the RAF had eight Tornado GR4 attack jets and up to ten MQ-9 Reaper Remotely Piloted Air Systems (RPAS) available for airstrikes in Iraq, and for Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) in Iraq and Syria. The RAF also has at its disposal, the Sentinel R1 surveillance aircraft, the E3-D sentry aircraft and the Airseeker surveillance aircraft operating as part of the ISR effort over Iraq and Syria. During the debate on the extension of airstrikes in to Syria, the then Prime Minister told the House that:

last week, the whole International Coalition had some 26 aircraft available, eight of which were British Tornados. Typically, the UK actually represents between a quarter and a third of the International Coalition's precision bombing capability. We also have about a quarter of the unmanned strike capability flying in the region. Therefore, we have a significant proportion of high-precision strike capability, which is why this decision is so important.⁵⁵

47. Following the vote on 2 December 2015 to carry out airstrikes in Syria, the Ministry of Defence increased the number of available assets by a further two Tornado GR4 jets and six Typhoon FGR4 jets. The full array of UK assets available to the Coalition is set out in the table below:

53 There is a slight difference between the statements given in the House of Commons and the House of Lords on this matter. The Defence Secretary's statement (found [here](#)) gives the number as "over 760" in Iraq and 43 in Syria. The House of Lords Hansard records the statement given by Earl Howe (found [here](#)) as stating that 761 airstrikes were carried out in Iraq and 42 in Syria. Presuming the Defence Secretary had updated information, this suggests that additional strikes carried out on 23 May were included in the statement made in the House of Commons but not in that made in the House of Lords which appears to have only incorporated strikes up until the 22 May.

54 [UK considering further support to fight against Daesh](#), Ministry of Defence (via U.S. Central Command), 11 May 2015

55 HC Deb, 2 December 2015, [col. 329](#)

UK assets available to the Coalition

Asset	Purpose	Weapons which can be carried
10 Tornado GR4 fast jet aircraft (2 aircraft deployed from 2 December 2015)	ISTAR and ground attack	Brimstone missiles (Dual Mode Seeker and Legacy variants), Paveway II, III and IV, enhanced Paveway II, Stormshadow and ASRAAM missiles
6 Typhoon combat aircraft (from 2 December 2015)	ISTAR and ground attack	Enhanced Paveway II, Paveway IV, ASRAAM and AMRAAM missiles.
Reaper Remotely Piloted Air Systems (10 available but no official confirmation of how many are deployed in the Middle East)	ISTAR and ground attack	GBU-12 500lb laser guided bombs and AGM-114 Hellfire missiles
Voyager air-to-air refuelling aircraft	Refuelling	None
2 C130 transport aircraft.	Transportation of troops, passengers or freight	None
Sentinel surveillance aircraft.	Long-range wide area battlefield surveillance	None
E3-D sentry aircraft	Airborne surveillance and command-and-control role	None
Airseeker Rivet Joint RC-135W signals intelligence aircraft	Airborne electronic surveillance	None

Definition of the term 'airstrike'

48. Although the Government has regularly updated the House of Commons on the number of UK airstrikes carried out, the method of calculating those airstrikes has changed. Since July 2015,⁵⁶ the UK has used the Coalition's method of calculating airstrikes. The Government provided the following explanation of that definition:

The Coalition defines a strike as a target and time-based count, not aircraft or weapon-based. Regardless of the number of aircraft or weapons, a strike is an attack against a target within a timeframe consistent with a single engagement. By example, two Tornado aircraft drop two bombs each on the same target. This counts as one strike using the Coalition definition.⁵⁷

Numbers of airstrikes

49. A monthly breakdown of the targets hit by airstrikes, provided by the Ministry of Defence, is appended to this report. However, for the sake of clarity we have produced a table showing the numbers of airstrikes per month. In answer to a Parliamentary Question on 6 June, the then Minister for Armed Forces, Penny Mordaunt MP, cautioned that

56 HC Deb, 16 July 2015, [col 32WS](#)

57 Ministry of Defence, [FOI2015/07034](#), 2 September 2015

“strike numbers are constantly reviewed and updated by the Coalition to ensure records are as complete and accurate as possible. As such, there may be minor changes in future statements regarding such statistics”.⁵⁸

UK Airstrikes in Iraq and Syria, December 2015—August 2016

Month	Iraq	Syria
December	75	11
January	79	20
February	54	6
March	64	3
April	67	5
May	65	3
June	72	5
July	39	5
August	35	7
Total	550	65

Source: MoD written evidence [See also Appendix 3]

Comparison of the number of airstrikes in Iraq and Syria

50. The difference between airstrikes carried out in Iraq and those carried out in Syria highlight the difficulty of operating in Syria. The figures above indicate that almost nine times as many airstrikes were being carried out in Iraq as in Syria. Well over half of the very limited total of airstrikes in Syria in the first seven months were carried out in the first two months of the campaign. Between February and August 2016, the numbers of monthly airstrikes in Syria have declined to low single-figure totals.

51. When questioned about these differences, Lieutenant General Mark Carleton-Smith, Deputy Chief of Defence Staff (Military Strategy and Operations), Ministry of Defence, told us that there was “a clear distinction” between the Coalition’s contribution in support of the Iraqi Government and what it was able to undertake in Syria. He explained that a key reason was that in Iraq, the Coalition was “supporting the sovereign entity and a unitary military command against a reasonably clearly identifiable military threat” but that those advantages were not present in Syria. As a result, in Syria the UK was “marginally engaged, from the air only, across a much less homogenous battlefield, where the identification of the multifaceted parties, agencies and militias is much more difficult to determine”. Furthermore, he added that harnessing “a significant ground component that might maximise the tactical advantage that Coalition air support might provide” was much more difficult.⁵⁹

Targets of airstrikes

52. Information provided by the Ministry of Defence in September 2016 shows that the targets of airstrikes differ substantially in Iraq and Syria. For instance, in Iraq, enemy forces constitute 55% of the targets of airstrikes whereas, in Syria, the figure was only 25% until

58 PQ [38846](#) [Syria: Military Intervention] 6 June 2016

59 Q391

the end of May but this has recently risen to 40%. According to media reports, this recent increase is a result of air support for the campaign to liberate Manbij by the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces.⁶⁰ Conversely, buildings, vehicles and oil-related infrastructure accounted for 65% of targets at the end of May but this has recently decreased to 28% of the targets in Syria, whereas they represent only 10% of targets in Iraq. This predominance of largely static targets in Syria explains why the total of 31 airstrikes in Syria in the first two months of the aerial campaign rapidly declined to single-figure monthly totals, once the initial static targets had been hit and destroyed.

53. When pressed on the breakdown of airstrikes in Iraq and Syria, the Secretary of State told us:

The aim of these missions is not to kill as many DAESH as possible, but to degrade them on occasions by tackling their leadership and in the end to try to undermine their will to fight by attacking their command and control, their infrastructure and so on. It is far too simplistic simply to measure a mission by the number of people killed. As you are implying, many of the missions are to gather intelligence rather than to inflict casualties. The pre-planned missions are usually targeted at infrastructure.⁶¹

This echoes the assertion made by the then Prime Minister in the debate on 2 December when he told the House what he believed could be achieved by airstrikes alone:

We do not need ground troops to target the supply of oil which Daesh uses to fund terrorism. We do not need ground troops to hit Daesh's headquarters, its infrastructure, its supply routes, its training facilities and its weapons supplies.⁶²

54. Lieutenant General Mark Carleton-Smith explained that the campaign against DAESH was focused on a strategy of "Iraq first" in order to ensure a "tactical overmatch" in terms of DAESH in that country. By contrast, in Syria the objective was to "disrupt command and control and to interdict and disrupt lines of communication".⁶³ That description conforms to the targeting data provided by the Ministry of Defence which suggests that very few airstrikes in Syria are being carried out in support of forces fighting on the ground.

55. In order to cater for his suggestion that the overall total of airstrikes in both countries was too great to permit more detailed analysis,⁶⁴ we pressed the Secretary of State on the number of airstrikes in direct support of opposition forces fighting on the ground in Syria alone, given that the total number of airstrikes in that country has been so low. The Secretary of State replied that the UK was part of a Coalition and that it was the Coalition which determined the targets. Whilst he asserted that "a significant proportion" of RAF strikes in Syria had been to support the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)⁶⁵ he wrote:

60 ["In our name: British air strikes help liberate Manbij"](#), politics.co.uk, 15 August 2016

61 Q394

62 HC Deb, 2 December 2015, col. 332

63 Q394

64 See MoD written evidence in Appendix 3

65 Q397

I would stress that neither the UK nor the Coalition is undertaking a generalised bombing campaign in Syria in support of moderate armed opposition groups. Rather the Coalition, including the RAF, is giving targeted air support to specific counter-DAESH offensives, in particular in northwest Syria where the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) are engaged around Manbij and where other opposition forces have been seeking to push eastwards from the area of Azaaz and Mar'a.⁶⁶

56. In our final letter to the Secretary of State we suggested that—on the breakdown of weapons releases—it was highly improbable that any significant number of airstrikes in Syria had been mounted in direct support of moderate forces on the ground, apart from airstrikes in support of Kurdish forces. He conceded that:

as you have indicated, the information we have provided in relation to weapon releases, when taken with the additional information on the various categories of target provided in my last letter to you, should allow conclusions to be drawn on the broad order contribution of RAF aircraft against different types of target in Syria.⁶⁷

Furthermore, beyond the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces, the Secretary of State has refused to confirm the identity of any of the moderate opposition forces for which the UK is supposed to be providing air support.⁶⁸ This has further frustrated our attempts to obtain clarity regarding our operations in Syria. We discuss the breakdown of moderate forces in Syria later in our Report.

Comparison of UK airstrikes with those of Coalition partners

57. The change in the definition of airstrikes used by the UK allowed us to calculate the percentage of Coalition airstrikes which are UK airstrikes using data provided by the US Department of Defense.⁶⁹ Airstrikes against DAESH started in Iraq on 8 August 2014 and in Syria on 22 September 2014. As of 22 May 2016, the Coalition had carried out 8,503 airstrikes in Iraq, 2,723 of which were carried out by non-US forces. Prior to the vote in the House of Commons which allowed UK airstrikes in Iraq, the US had carried out 216 airstrikes⁷⁰ and the French had carried out 2 airstrikes.⁷¹ As the UK were the second partner nation to join the US in airstrikes in Iraq (after France on 19 September 2014), this means that there have been 2,721 non-US airstrikes in Iraq during the period that the UK has been engaged in airstrikes. Between the vote on 26 September 2014 (seven weeks after airstrikes started) and 22 May 2016, the UK is believed to have carried out at least 761 airstrikes.⁷² According to data published by the US Department of Defense, in Syria the

66 MoD Written Evidence, 9 July 2016 [See Appendix 3]

67 MoD Written Evidence, 9 July 2016 [See Appendix 3]

68 See MoD written evidence in Appendix 3

69 www.defense.gov/News/Special-Reports/0814_Inherent-Resolve (This page is regularly updated. For full details on the data used to make these calculations, please see Appendix 1)

70 [‘U.S. Military Conducts Airstrikes Against ISIL in Iraq and Syria’](#), U.S. Central Command, 24 September 2014; [‘U.S. Military Conducts Airstrikes Against ISIL in Iraq’](#), U.S. Central Command, 25 September 2014; [‘U.S. Military Conducts Airstrikes Against ISIL in Iraq and Syria’](#), U.S. Central Command, 26 September 2014

71 [‘Opération Chammal: deuxième frappe française en Irak’](#), Ministère de la Défense, 26 September 2014

72 HL Deb, 24 May 2016, [col. 271](#) For further explanation, please see footnote 63

Coalition had carried out 3,950 airstrikes up to 22 May, consisting of 3,715 by the US and 235 by other coalition members.⁷³ There have been 77 non-US airstrikes in Syria between 1 December 2015 and 22 May 2016 of which the UK seemingly carried out 42.⁷⁴

58. Lieutenant General (retd) Sir Simon Mayall has stated that 75% of Coalition air missions do not drop ordinances, citing intelligence and rules of engagement as primary reasons for this.⁷⁵ The UK Government has told the House that no UK airstrikes have caused civilian casualties in either Iraq or Syria since the start of combat operations in 2014 and 2015 respectively.⁷⁶ During our visit to Baghdad we visited the Air Operations Centre where we discussed with both Coalition and Iraqi personnel the targeting criteria that they employ. We were impressed by the care taken to minimise collateral damage and civilian casualties which was at the forefront of all targeting decisions.

International Coalition airstrikes in Iraq and Syria during the period the UK was engaged

	Airstrikes in Iraq (between 27 September 2014 and 22 May 2016)	Airstrikes in Syria (between 1 December 2015 and 22 May 2016)
US	8287	939
Non-US	2721	77
UK	761	42 ⁷⁷
UK as % of non-US strikes	28%	55%
UK as % of all strikes	7%	4%

Source: Table prepared by Committee staff using data provided by UK Government and US Department of Defense

UK military action—Training

Training in Iraq

59. The UK has trained a significant number of the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), including Kurdish forces. In July 2016, the Ministry of Defence provided briefing showing that the UK had trained over 3,900 Kurdish Peshmerga and contributed to the training of 13,800 other Iraqi Security Forces personnel. To put this in context, on 18 May 2016, Colonel Steve Warren told Pentagon reporters that the Coalition had trained more than 31,000

73 See Appendix 2 for the full figures

74 On 24 May, the Secretary of State announced that 43 airstrikes had been carried out in Syria. However, according to Gov.uk, one of these took place on 23 May and therefore outside the timeframe represented by the US DoD data. Later correspondence from the Ministry of Defence (containing the figures shown in Appendix 3) appears to suggest that the number of UK airstrikes was greater than 42 in the period examined here but without exact dates for each of the airstrikes, it is not possible to update the data in this table.

75 Oral evidence taken on 8 October 2015, HC (2015–16) 457, Q57 [Mr Blunt]

76 PQ 43259 [Islamic State] 26 July 2016

77 On 24 May, the Secretary of State announced that 43 airstrikes had been carried out in Syria. However, according to Gov.uk, one of these took place on 23 May and therefore outside the timeframe represented by the US DoD data. Later correspondence from the Ministry of Defence (which is shown in Appendix 3) appears to suggest that the number of UK airstrikes was greater than 42 in the period examined here but without exact dates for each of the airstrikes, it is not possible to update the data in this table.

Iraqi forces.⁷⁸ UK forces have also provided training in counter-IED and infantry skills, weapons maintenance, bridge-building skills, medical and logistics.⁷⁹ UK troops are providing training at several locations in Iraq: Al-Asad air base, Irbil, Besmaya and Taji.⁸⁰

60. In September 2015, it was announced that British troops had trained 2,000 Iraqi personnel.⁸¹ More recent figures given in January 2016 stated that 3,000 members of the Peshmerga and 5,000 members of the Iraqi Army had been trained under UK troops as part of Operation SHADER,⁸² suggesting that 2,000 troops were trained in the first year, 6,000 were trained in the four months to January and a further 6,700 troops had been trained in the six months to July. This shows that there has been an increase in the provision of training towards the latter part of the operation. We have heard from interlocutors that UK Armed Forces are very effective when they train foreign forces as part of an ongoing programme. However, they are thought to be less effective when training for immediate operations.

61. The Secretary of State told us that UK training was highly valued by both the Iraqi and Kurdish troops. He also emphasised the importance of the UK providing a niche contribution:

We selected IED training right at the beginning as a specialism to offer. I think we have hit on one of the right pieces of niche training, simply because so many IEDs have been seeded by DAESH in the towns from which they have been driven.⁸³

Lieutenant General Carleton-Smith told us that the training was “progressing constructively and positively”.⁸⁴

Training in the wider Middle East

62. When we visited the region, we were highly impressed by the UK’s training effort in both Jordan and Lebanon. In Lebanon, the UK has funded a training programme (run by the Lebanese Armed Forces) intended to secure the border and this is considered to be working well. Our Lebanese interlocutors did, however, raise concerns with us about the lack of air support available to those securing the border. It was clear that UK air support, from RAF Akrotiri, was being solicited by the Lebanese Armed Forces as a defensive measure. The training provided by UK Short-Term Training Teams (STTTs) for the Jordanian Quick Response Force is also a credible investment and is morale-boosting for those involved, on both the UK and Jordanian side. Such collaboration is an excellent example of Defence Engagement. During our visit to Cyprus, we met UK armed forces personnel who had formed part of the training teams in Iraq. We were very impressed by the training package offered by the Second Battalion, Princess of Wales’s Royal Regiment and were told that the engagement had been professionally stimulating and rewarding.

78 Department of Defense [Press Briefing](#) by Colonel Steve Warren, spokesman, Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve via teleconference from Baghdad, Iraq, May 18, 2016

79 ‘[UK to increase training to Iraqi forces](#)’, Ministry of Defence, 12 March 2016

80 [UK considering further support to fight against Daesh](#), Ministry of Defence (via U.S. Central Command), 11 May 2015

81 ‘[Operations against ISIL pass one year mark](#)’, Ministry of Defence, 26 September 2015

82 PQ [23570](#) [Kurds: Military Aid] 29 January 2016; PQ [23569](#) [Iraq: Military Aid] 29 January 2016 [Operation SHADER is the British contribution to the Coalition against ISIS].

83 Q417

84 Q417

63. The UK had also deployed 86 military personnel to assist the US-led training of Syrian opposition forces regarded as moderates.⁸⁵ The US-led programme to train and equip Syrian rebels started in Spring 2015. The US had contributed 700 troops to the programme with Jordan, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar all contributing training grounds.⁸⁶ In July 2015, the first group of 54 US-trained Syrian rebels returned to Syria. Within days, they had been attacked by Jabhat al-Nusra with some killed and others kidnapped. On 23 September, the US Central Command spokesman said that of the 54: one was confirmed killed; one was being held captive; nine were back in the fight; 11 were available but not in Syria; 14 had returned to Syria but quit the US program and 18 were unaccounted for.⁸⁷ The number of nine ‘back in the fight’ was higher than the number given to Congress a week earlier by General Lloyd Austin, the US CENTCOM Commander who had stated that “four or five” of the 54 were still fighting.⁸⁸ At a Congressional hearing on 16 September 2015, the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy had confirmed that the train and equip programme was under review, with a number of different options being examined.⁸⁹ It was reported in October 2015 that the US administration had taken the step of changing the programme to equip, rather than train, the Syrian Arab Coalition.⁹⁰ Following the October 2015 announcement that the US programme would focus on enabling and assisting these groups (as opposed to training them), the MoD announced that its support would focus on providing “a range of civilian support to help save lives, bolster civil society, counter extremism, promote human rights and accountability, and lay the foundations for a more peaceful and democratic future”. The UK Government committed £55 million to this work in 2015.⁹¹

64. When asked about UK support for non-state actors in Syria, the Secretary of State told us:

We have supplied some training outside Syria itself, in camps in Jordan and Turkey. We have supplied some non-lethal equipment to enable them better to look after themselves, for example, in terms of battlefield medicine and some basic equipment that is not lethal, is not interfering with the civil war, just as we provided similar equipment to the Ukrainian army, for example, again not intervening directly in that conflict but helping them better look after themselves.⁹²

UK military action—Gifting of Equipment

65. Only gifts with a value exceeding £300,000 require a Departmental Minute to be laid before Parliament. A list of gifted equipment is also included in the annual report

85 PQ 4763 [Syria: Military Aid] 8 July 2015

86 Kathleen J. McInnis, [Coalition Contributions to Countering the Islamic State](#), Congressional Research Service, August 24, 2016

87 [US-allied Syrian rebel officer handed trucks and ammunition to al-Qaida affiliate](#), The Guardian, 23 September 2015

88 United States Senate Committee on Armed Services, [Hearing to receive testimony on U.S. military operations to counter the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant](#), 16 September 2015

89 United States Senate Committee on Armed Services, [Hearing to receive testimony on U.S. military operations to counter the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant](#), 16 September 2015

90 Obama Administration Ends Effort to Train Syrians to Combat ISIS, New York Times, 9 October 2015

91 ‘[Defence in the media](#)’, Ministry of Defence, 10 October 2015

92 Q39

on United Kingdom Strategic Export Controls—published in July—with details of the preceding year’s gifts. The 2014 annual report shows that the UK Government made the following gifts (in excess of £300,000) to the Governments of Iraq, Lebanon and Jordan.

Country	Recipient	Goods Descriptions	Goods Value £
Iraq	Government of Iraq	Metal Detectors	2,200,000.00
	Ministry of Peshmerga, Iraq	Heavy Machine Guns, Spares, Mortars, Binoculars, Body Armour, Protective Equipment	2,600,000.00
Jordan	Jordanian Armed Forces	Armoured Utility Vehicles	386,375.00
Lebanon	Lebanese Armed Forces	Vehicles and Associated Terrain Equipment, Personal Protective Equipment, including Body Armour, Helmets, Gloves, Belts, First Aid Kits, Camouflage Clothing and Protective Glasses	3,596,844.00
	Lebanese Armed Forces	Radio Masts, Antennas, and Antenna Mounting Brackets for Vehicles	531,824.00

United Kingdom [Strategic Export Controls Annual Report 2014](#)

66. During 2015, the MoD published three Departmental Minutes with details on the gifting of equipment:

Date	Country	Recipient	Goods Descriptions	Goods Value £
10 February 2015	Iraq	Government of Iraq	1,000 VALLON Counter-Improvised Explosive Device (C-IEO) metal detectors	500,000.00
12 March 2015	Lebanon	Lebanese Armed Forces	Protected Border Observation Posts and 2 Mobile Observation Platforms, Radio Equipment	3,056,974.90
22 June 2015	Iraq	Ministry of Peshmerga, Iraq	Medical Supplies (consisting of items such as tourniquets, bandage kits and dressings for wounds)	600,000.00

Date	Country	Recipient	Goods Descriptions	Goods Value £
12 October 2015	Jordan	JAF Quick Reaction Force	<p>Body Armour and Integral Load Carrying Solution.</p> <p>Sleeping Systems</p> <p>Drash Tentage for QRF HQ and Coy Command Posts</p> <p>Toyota Landcruiser (QRF Training Fleet Pool).</p> <p>Frequency Planning Software (For instance Spectra)</p> <p>Command and Information System Interoperability Gateway.</p> <p>Ruggedised Laptops.</p> <p>Encrypted SATCOM and VTC C2 solution.</p> <p>Phase 4 Infrastructure upgrade to Camp QRF</p> <p>GPS Units</p> <p>Deployable Medical Facility</p> <p>Deployed Power Generation Systems (Power Supply for Deployed HQ).</p> <p>Deployed Command Post Infrastructure.</p> <p>Projectors/Smart Screens/Map Boards</p>	2,407,450.00

Table produced by Committee staff from departmental minutes supplied by the MOD and FCO

67. In 2016, the following gifts of equipment have been made:

Date	Country	Recipient	Goods Descriptions	Goods Value £
12 January 2016	Lebanon	Lebanese Armed Forces	Personal Protective Equipment	967,450.00

Table produced by Committee staff from departmental minutes supplied by the MoD and FCO

68. In February 2016, Tom Hardie-Forsyth told us that the heavy machine guns which had been gifted to the Iraqi Peshmerga had been without ammunition “for months”.⁹³ In his Statement to the House on 24 May 2016, the Secretary of State said that the Government was planning to provide the Kurdish Regional Government with “more than £1 million worth of further ammunition to equip the Peshmerga” and that he hoped that the ammunition would be with the Peshmerga “in the next few weeks”.⁹⁴

69. In oral evidence, the Secretary of State confirmed that “a further package” to support the Peshmerga was being considered and that the ambition was for the additional ammunition for weapons previously gifted by the UK Government to be supplied in a matter of weeks⁹⁵. A departmental minute sent to us on 30 June detailed the intention to supply the Peshmerga with £1.4 million worth of heavy machine gun and sniper ammunition. This could be provided to the Peshmerga five days after the departmental minute was laid before Parliament, so long as no objections were made. A Government press release on 3 August 2016 announced that the UK had “recently delivered around £1.4 million worth of machine gun and sniper ammunition [to] the Kurdish Peshmerga”.⁹⁶

70. Although the UK Government has stated that it does not directly supply military aid to Syrian groups,⁹⁷ in February 2016, the then Minister for Armed Forces, Penny Mordaunt MP, told the House of Commons that:

In Syria, we have delivered over £4 million of life-saving equipment to moderate opposition groups including communications, medical and logistics equipment, and protection against chemical weapons attacks.⁹⁸

In an answer to a House of Lords written question in May 2016, it was noted that “the Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG)-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) receives support from the International Coalition in its efforts to combat DAESH in Northern Syria”.⁹⁹ Information detailing types of support received by the SDF was not provided by the Government, but the Ministry of Defence has confirmed that UK airstrikes in support of the group have been undertaken.¹⁰⁰

93 Q90

94 HC Deb, 24 May 2016, [col. 411](#)

95 Q417

96 [Defence Secretary praises strikes on Daesh stronghold](#), 3 August 2016, Ministry of Defence

97 PQ [4763](#) [Syria: Military Aid] 8 July 2015

98 PQ [25112](#) [Islamic State] 4 February 2016

99 PQ [HL8193](#) [Islamic State] 11 May 2016

100 Q397

Conclusion

71. Military progress has been made in the fight against DAESH, but the decision to have only local combat troops on the ground has meant that the Coalition is reliant on such troops to win the ground war. In Iraq, there is a greater level of integration with partners in the Iraqi Army and the Peshmerga. In Syria, there is not the same level of cooperation.¹⁰¹ This was confirmed to us by the Ministry of Defence:

Within Iraq, the presence of Iraqi Security Forces allows good quality intelligence to be gathered from units on the ground as well as from the air. A high percentage of RAF strikes have been against DAESH targets in, or just behind, the front line [...] There is a greater challenge in assembling the breadth of intelligence we would wish to have inside Syria, particularly on those aspects of DAESH's infrastructure where, following early Coalition missions, elements of its rear area operations have been dispersed and better hidden.¹⁰²

Major General (ret'd) Jonathan Shaw, former Colonel Commandant of The Parachute Regiment, was clear in his belief that the difference between the two ground forces was the reason that the “majority of territory” re-taken from DAESH had been in Iraq.¹⁰³

72. Unlike in Iraq, the UK is not gifting any Syrian forces (regime or opposition) lethal equipment¹⁰⁴ although, as noted above, non-lethal support is being provided to opposition groups. Some training by UK troops appears to have been provided to Syrian opposition forces, although it is unclear whether that training is ongoing. There have also been several unconfirmed reports of the presence of UK Special Forces. This means that the UK military operation in Syria is based predominantly on air power. In evidence to us, Dr Afzal Ashraf of RUSI and Major General Shaw told us that:

It is now becoming generally accepted that air power alone is incapable of defeating DAESH. DAESH has adapted to airstrikes and only occasionally presents targets that can be safely destroyed. Land forces are the key to exploiting the benefits of air power and to providing sustainable success. DAESH defined itself a state and a ‘caliphate’ only once it captured significant territory in both Iraq and Syria. Territory is central to DAESH's identity, to its concept of success and to its sources of funding—territory is DAESH's Centre of Gravity. Sustainable and significant denial of territory to DAESH will lead to its degradation and decline as a global threat.¹⁰⁵

73. Richard Atwood acknowledged that air power could “hinder movement, target convoys and do things to make life difficult for an armed movement”, but questioned its effectiveness in defeating DAESH. In particular, he argued that airstrikes alone would not be successful in breaking the connections that DAESH had with the communities under its areas of control. Nor would it be able to “create conditions in which political settlement is more likely”.¹⁰⁶

101 Q156; 161

102 Ministry of Defence ([UMO0006](#))

103 Q74

104 Q446

105 Dr Afzal Ashraf and Major General (ret'd) Jonathon Shaw ([UMO0008](#))

106 Q348

74. It is disappointing that the MoD has been unable to provide us with the full statistical analysis of UK airstrikes in Syria which we requested. Their inability to do so for understandable reasons, nonetheless may tend to undermine the Government's assertion that the bombing campaign in Syria is in support of credible moderate ground forces (apart from the Kurds) which was one of the key elements of its argument for extending the UK's campaign against DAESH to that country.

75. *If the Government is to continue to justify and validate its policy of airstrikes in Syria, it should provide the necessary detail on what is being targeted. We therefore recommend that the MoD put this information, as far as possible, into the public domain so that realistic judgements on the effectiveness of the UK's air operations in Syria can be made. At the very least, Government ministers ought to be made aware of such figures.*

76. In Iraq it is clear that air operations have been effective in reclaiming territory, despite the adaptation of DAESH tactics to counter that threat. This is because of their role in supporting identifiable local ground forces which are able to take and hold territory. The air operation in Syria is much smaller mainly because of a lack of partners on the ground, other than Kurdish forces, which can benefit from that support.

77. Also in Iraq, the UK training effort appears to be both effective and substantial. Over a third of troops trained by the Coalition have received this training from UK military personnel. The expansion of training offered by UK troops means that the UK now has a presence at all of the Iraqi training bases. In the gifting of equipment, the length of time that it has taken for the UK Government to re-supply Peshmerga forces with ammunition for machine-guns it previously supplied, is of great concern. *We recommend that, in future, the Government should ensure that its support to allies and partners is more consistent and timely.*

78. *We recommend that the Government should provide an assessment of how long it took the UK to get to the position where it was operating at strength within the Coalition and how long it can maintain that position.*

79. *We also recommend that the Government should provide clarification on the training of Syrian opposition fighters including the number of individuals it has trained, the number of UK military personnel currently engaged with such training, and most importantly the identity of the groups to which the trainees belonged.*

80. *It is clear that the UK is part of an International Coalition and that the strategy of that Coalition is subject to revision by those involved. However, the reasons for such revisions and the resultant changes in the UK effort ought to be explained. Whilst the discussion, for instance, about modifying the train-and-equip programme in Syria may have taken place in the United States, the UK Government has failed to set out why changes have been made and what impact they have had on UK personnel or those they have been training. The publication of information concerning the UK's military effort, whilst greater than in some previous operations, ought to demonstrate how UK military actions are supporting the wider strategy.*

4 Armed actors in Syria

81. There are a large number of armed actors engaged in the Syrian conflict, including Russian and Iranian troops in theatre, as well as Lebanese Hezbollah and Afghan and Iraqi Shia foreign fighters supporting the Assad regime.¹⁰⁷ Most recently, there have been Turkish military incursions, ostensibly against DAESH but most probably focused on the YPG. The international coalition has been supporting the YPG as one of its principal allies within Syria. In opposition to the Assad regime there are numerous opposition groups formed of both Syrian Kurds and Syrian Sunni Arabs. The Syrian Sunni Arab opposition groups have been described by the US-based Institute for the Study of War as ranging from “Moderate Secularists”, through “Political Islamists” to “Syrian Salafi Jihadists” and “Transnational Salafi Jihadists”.¹⁰⁸ A number of these groups are supported by members of the International Coalition, and there are avowed US Special Forces¹⁰⁹ and, allegedly, some UK Special Forces engaged in helping such opposition groups.¹¹⁰

The ethnic and political composition of the Syrian opposition and UK support for non-state actors

82. Central to the debate on UK air operations in Syria is the effectiveness of the operations in support of local ground forces. In his statement on 26 November 2015, the then Prime Minister told the House that whilst the situation in Syria was “complex,” he believed that there were around “70,000 Syrian opposition fighters, principally of the Free Syrian Army” with whom the UK could coordinate attacks. Mr Cameron defined that figure as fighters who did not belong to extremist groups, adding that they included “moderate armed Sunni Arabs who had defended territory north of Aleppo”; and the Southern Front of the Free Syrian Army which had “consolidated its control over significant areas and had worked to prevent terrorists from operating”. He also highlighted the Syrian Kurds who had “successfully defended Kurdish areas in northern Syria and retaken territory around the city of Kobane”.¹¹¹

83. However, Mr Cameron refused to publish a list of those groups constituting the estimated 70,000 moderate opposition fighters, and gave the following reason:

We would effectively be giving President Assad a list of the groups, the people and potentially the areas that he should be targeting. That is not my approach.¹¹²

84. On 4 July 2016, we wrote to the Secretary of State requesting a list of those “main armed opposition moderate groups” which UK airstrikes were intended to support. He also refused to provide this information, stating that:

It would not be to the benefit of these non-extremist opposition fighters if we were to make their details public to DAESH and the Syrian regime. My Right Honourable Friend the Minister of State for the Armed Forces

107 [‘Palmyra is a major turning point in Syria’s Civil War’](#) Al Jazeera, 29 March 2016

108 Institute for the Study of War, [Syrian Armed Oppositions Powerbrokers](#), March 2016, pp. 9 & 12

109 [‘Obama sends more Special Forces to Syria in fight against IS’](#), Reuters, 26 April 2016

110 [‘UK special forces take frontline role in Syria’](#), The Times, 6 June 2016

111 HC Deb, 26 November 2015, [col. 1489](#)

112 Oral evidence taken before the [Liaison Committee](#) on 12 January 2016, HC (2015–16) 712, Q16 [Dr Lewis]

provided two written answers on 22 April 2016 (33816 and 33889) which noted our assessment that non-extremist opposition numbers had held up despite recent pressure and that numbers in groups fighting DAESH were likely to have increased.¹¹³

85. This reluctance to identify the groups for fear of helping Assad has not prevented academics and experts outside of government researching and publishing lists of such groups. However, we fully accept that there may be significant differences between the Joint Intelligence Committee’s list of moderate Syrian opposition groups and those published by academics and experts. We also accept that the Government may consider itself to have a duty of care, not only towards both members of the groups it is supporting but also towards any UK Special Forces troops who are assisting those groups.

86. Charles Lister, when at the Brookings Institute, produced his own analysis of what he regards as moderate opposition fighters. When we asked him whether he thought that any of the names on his list would be unknown to the Assad regime, he replied that “Assad knows about the groups, but obviously defines them in a very different way”. He argued that Russia also had this information and that “all the groups together know what each of them represents, who their respective external backers are and what their political positions are”.¹¹⁴ His work—set out below—claims that the following groups would contribute around 65,000 of the stated 70,000 moderate opposition:

Grouping	Areas of Operation	Manpower
Southern Front (58 factions)	Deraa, Quneitra, Damascus	25,000
Northern Free Syrian Army (14 factions)	Homs, Hama, Idlib, Aleppo	20,000
Tajamu Fastaqm Kama Umrat	Aleppo	1,000
Thuwar al-sham	Aleppo	1,000
Jabhat al-Asala wal Tanmiya	Qalamoun, Homs, Hama, Aleppo	5,000
Al-Jabhat al-Shamiya	Aleppo	2,500
Kataib Nour al-Din al-Zinki	Aleppo	1,500
Faylaq al-Rahman	Damascus	2,000
Faylaq al-Sham	Homs, Hama, Idlib, Aleppo	4,000
Al-Ittihad al-Islami Ajnad al-Sham	Damascus	3,000

Source: ‘Yes, there are 70,000 moderate opposition fighters in Syria. Here’s what we know about them’ The Spectator, 25 November 2015

Mr Lister went on to argue that, in addition, there were “roughly 25–30 additional factions that would fall under this ‘moderate’ label” which combined, represented “a further 10,000 fighters”.¹¹⁵

87. The Institute for the Study of War has also carried out an analysis of the opposition groups. Its Report noted that groups affiliated to the Free Syrian Army were “natural American allies”. However, it cautioned that:

113 MoD Written Evidence 9 July 2016 [See Appendix 3]

114 Q247

115 ‘Yes, there are 70,000 moderate opposition fighters in Syria. Here’s what we know about them’ The Spectator, 25 November 2015

Alone, the moderates are an insufficient ally, even if the US could unite them. The US therefore must consider the remainder of the armed groups on the battlefield in order to develop a plan to leverage local forces in a reinvigorated campaign to destroy both ISIS and Al Qaeda in Syria.¹¹⁶

88. The composition of the groups referred to, and whether Islamist groups actually constitute part of what the Mr Cameron labelled the “moderate opposition”, has been a key focus of our inquiry. Questioned about the complexion of the armed Syrian opposition, the Secretary of State replied in a Written Answer on 19 October 2015:

There are a number of moderate opposition forces focused on fighting the Assad regime. Many are also fighting ISIL in areas of strategic importance, for example north of Aleppo. The vast majority of these opposition groups are Islamist”.¹¹⁷

In a similar vein, the then Prime Minister told the Liaison Committee, on 12 January 2016, that some of the groups he had identified were Islamist and would not necessarily share the same interpretation of democracy as elected Westminster parliamentarians:

Are all of these people impeccable democrats who would share the view of democracy that you and I have?—no. Some of them do belong to Islamist groups and some of them belong to relatively hard-line Islamist groups. None the less, that is the best estimate of the people that we have potentially to work with.¹¹⁸

89. A number of our witnesses challenged the use of the term ‘moderate’. Dr Afzal Ashraf of RUSI told us that “every single group I have come across, with one possible exception, has a name that alludes to an Islamist ideology”. While he noted that some had been described to him as a “cuddly form of Islamist”, and despite such groups offering the opportunity for cooperation in the short term, he believed that “in the long term you will suffer”. As examples he highlighted Jamaat-e-Islami’s offspring, which he argued were “creating increasing havoc in Pakistan and Bangladesh”, and the Muslim Brotherhood’s offspring, which previously “have led to the formation of al-Qaeda and DAESH”.¹¹⁹

90. Peter Ford, the former UK Ambassador to Syria went further. He described the existence of moderate opposition groups in Syria as “largely a figment of the imagination”.¹²⁰ It is recognised that the figure quoted by the then Prime Minister came from the Joint Intelligence Committee who would be likely to have greater and more timely information than Mr Ford. Dr Frederick Kagan also argued that “virtually all the opposition is Islamist, one way or another, at this point”. He said that in terms of assessing the opposition forces, the distinction lay between Salafi jihadi groups (for example Jabhat al-Nusra, DAESH, and Ahrar al-Sham) and political Islamist groups¹²¹ tied to the Muslim Brotherhood; the latter being “the likeliest source of acceptable allies that we could work with”.¹²²

116 Institute for the Study of War, [Syrian Armed Oppositions Powerbrokers](#), March 2016, p. 7

117 PQ [12468](#) [Islamic State] 26 October 2015

118 Oral evidence taken before the [Liaison Committee](#) on 12 January 2016, HC (2015–16) 712, Q15 [Dr Lewis]

119 Q74

120 Q128

121 The Institute for the Study of War defines political Islamist groups as “groups that desire a Sharia-based constitution but do not demand that Sharia courts form the basis of governance in a post-Assad Syrian state.”

122 Q220

91. Anthony Loyd also recommended caution:

I challenge anybody, even the most seasoned observer, to look at the Salafi groups on the ground, among the largely Islamist rebel movement, and work out which of them in post-conflict Syria might be good to minorities and have favourable relations with the West, which would be bad to minorities and have an aggressive relationship with the West, who would be with al-Qaeda, or against al-Qaeda, and so on. It is very difficult to work out. Suffice it to say that the majority of the rebel movement is Islamist, whatever that means—Islamist.¹²³

92. By contrast, both General Keane¹²⁴ and Charles Lister believed that there were genuinely moderate opposition fighters in Syria. Charles Lister explained that the groups he had identified had “committed both publicly and privately” to an “outright rejection of any ethnic, sect or gender-based discrimination and a desire for full, representative Government”. Furthermore, he argued that the “vast majority” of these groups were “desperate for engagement with the West,” and that, despite the fact that many of them might appear to be Islamists, Western states needed to “get behind the simple image to understand fundamentally what they want”.¹²⁵ Lieutenant General (retd) Sir Simon Mayall cautioned that:

I am afraid that there is a lot of nose-holding to be done [...] to get a remotely decent outcome in Syria.¹²⁶

93. Dr Lina Khatib provided us with a measure of common ground. She stressed the view that the political process in Geneva was enforcing a degree of pragmatism upon groups which had different ideologies. This delivered the benefit of closer working between moderates and political Islamists to the extent that the “hard-liners” were being marginalised. According to Dr Khatib, this had resulted in a more harmonious opposition body with a strong military component and one which offered a better alternative to the Assad regime than the hard-liners.¹²⁷

94. However, Dr Khatib warned that without military support, the benefits of this cooperation between moderate forces could be lost:

If the Syrian rebels that are moderate are not adequately supported, they are going to disintegrate and their members are going to join Islamist groups.¹²⁸

That outcome would only serve to bolster the Assad strategy to eliminate moderate forces which in turn would offer Assad the opportunity to appeal to the international community on the basis of his regime being the only viable alternative to the Islamists.¹²⁹ However, this has, arguably, happened to a considerable extent already.

123 Q366

124 Q217; 220; 225

125 Q246

126 Q198

127 Q277

128 Q277

129 Q277

95. In oral evidence, the Secretary of State argued that while debate could be held about the “precise definitions of what is a moderate Muslim, what is an Islamist and what is somebody beyond the pale” the key test was whether or not the groups were “prepared to live within a plural political settlement that can in the end be democratic and take Syria towards elections”.¹³⁰ Dominic Wilson, Director of Operational Policy at the Ministry of Defence also commented:

We are clear that, within the 70,000, there is a rump of non-extremist opposition, which we could imagine buying into a broader political settlement in Syria. That is not to say that all of them are exactly the same. There is a range of them, but essentially they are what we view as non-extremist. [...] On the question of moderates or Islamists, it comes down to non-extremists who we believe we can work with, and who we believe will be committed to an enduring political settlement in Syria when it comes.¹³¹

96. Lieutenant General Carleton-Smith, however, emphasised the difficulty in assessing and labelling these groups:

At this stage in a very brutal and bloody struggle, a degree of pragmatism characterises the approach of a kaleidoscope of multifaceted organisations that are fighting for their lives, their freedom and their families. Therefore, in the local tactical circumstances in which so many of these individuals and small pockets of organisations find themselves, all sorts of compromises and marriages of necessity are made to survive. Whether they are more or less extreme, I would expect that they all demonstrate a kaleidoscope of loyalties, interests and objectives, some of which converge and some of which are distinct.¹³²

97. Concerns were also raised with us regarding the ethnic make-up of groups supported by the UK. When Lieutenant General (retd) Sir Simon Mayall, former British Army officer and Defence Senior Adviser (Middle East) came before us in February 2016, he told us that:

I have to say that, outside [of] the Kurds—I defer to people in the JIC or whatever about the state of play in the south—I find it difficult to see any really significant, joined-up numbers of people we would put in the “moderate opposition” category in the area where, largely, the major fighting is going on, between Palmyra and Raqqa, and the Euphrates across to the Syrian highlands.¹³³

This was supported by a number of witnesses who labelled the Syrian Kurds as the most effective force fighting DAESH in Syria.¹³⁴ However, witnesses also stressed the imperative that Sunni Arabs should recapture areas taken by DAESH. Major General Shaw told us that “there needs to be some form of Sunni army—some army that has credibility with the local populace”,¹³⁵ while Lieutenant General Mayall agreed and noted that:

130 Q402–4

131 Q403; 406

132 Q406

133 Q177

134 Q74; 159; 175; 218; 238; 356; 357; 361

135 Q74

We have had this awful ambivalence from many of the other Sunni countries in the region, who loathe ISIS and everything it stands for, but see ISIS as Muslim, Sunni and Arab—against the Persian, Shi'a and Russian.¹³⁶

Dr Kagan reiterated this point, emphasising that the “solution to the problem will be Sunni partners”.¹³⁷ He suggested that by allying ourselves with the Syrian Kurds (amongst others) the International Coalition were “well on the path collectively towards persuading the Sunnis that we are their mortal enemies and that we seek to assist those who wish to exterminate them”.¹³⁸

98. Charles Lister raised concerns about the potential for conflict between the YPG (the main Syrian Kurdish fighting forces) and other opposition groups in Syria:

I fear, as a Syria analyst, that we may be watching a new political—not an ethnic—conflict now breaking out in northern Syria that could well outlast the conflict between the opposition and the regime. I cannot understate the hostility between the opposition and the Kurdish YPG, but I must underline that it is a political hostility, not an ethnic one. Vast numbers of Kurds and Christians, and even some Alawites, are fighting for the opposition in northern Syria, and I think that is often ignored. Most of the armed groups in Aleppo—opposition groups who are backed by the CIA—who are currently fighting the YPG have Kurds in their senior command. So it is important that this is not seen as an ethnic conflict; it is a political one about what is right for Syria's political future.¹³⁹

He also highlighted his belief that the YPG may not be the most effective force against DAESH, telling us that:

In the second half of 2013 and the first half of 2014, DAESH posed a much more immediate threat to the Syrian opposition. Within this context, what did the opposition do? It declared a unilateral and united war against DAESH across northern and eastern Syria. Within only 8–10 weeks, opposition forces had forced DAESH to withdraw from a combined 4.5 governorates. Please take note of this: DAESH was defeated and forced out of 4.5 governorates in 8–10 weeks by Syria's opposition, without any foreign support, air strikes or additional equipment. Conversely, our current favored anti-DAESH partners—the Kurdish YPG-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)—have defeated DAESH in approximately a combined $\frac{2}{3}$ of a governorate in 21 months, with the full support of the U.S. air force and embedded special operations forces on the ground.¹⁴⁰

99. A further complication with the Coalition's engagement with the YPG is the fact that it is regarded as an extension of the militant Turkish–Kurdish separatist group, the PKK, and therefore has an impact on Turkey's role in Syria. Charles Lister argued that Turkey's role in the conflict had been problematic. However, he believed that Turkey is right to have concerns about the YPG:

136 Q180

137 Q219

138 Q219

139 Q257

140 Charles Lister ([UMO0009](#))

The Kurdish YPG, which has been our favoured partner in the north-east of Syria, is indisputably the Syrian wing of the PKK. Whatever other interpretation you might read, the YPG was established by Abdullah Öcalan's brother—Abdullah Öcalan was a founding member, and is today the leader, of the PKK—and five famed PKK commanders. The PKK is seen, rightly or wrongly, as an existential threat to the Turkish state. Turkey has watched the Syrian wing of this existential threat receiving assistance, training and political backing from the West for the last 18 or 20 months, and it has created a very significant threat. Half of YPG casualties in the last 18 months were Turkish, so these are not all Syrians who are fighting for our cause against ISIS in Syria.¹⁴¹

100. Turkey does have a good relationship with the Kurdish Regional Government of Iraq, but this in turn has strained its relationship with the Government in Baghdad. When we visited Baghdad, we were told of Turkish troops entering Iraq in December 2015, without the permission of the Iraqi Government. Despite frequent requests from the Iraqi Government, Turkish troops were still (as of September 2016)¹⁴² on Iraqi territory.

101. Towards the end of August, Turkey sent combat troops into Syria in order to challenge DAESH-held positions on its border. The Institute for the Study of War noted that the operation, Operation Euphrates Shield, was a turning point in American-Turkish relations in the war against DAESH and highlighted that it was likely to be equally aimed at preventing the expansion of Kurdish control along the border. As a result of the Turkish operation, the US ordered the Syrian Kurdish People's Defense Forces (YPG) to withdraw to the east bank of the Euphrates River in order to avoid a conflict between Turkish and Kurdish forces in Syria.¹⁴³

102. Following the operation, which pushed DAESH back from the Turkish border, Turkey has announced its intention to create a 'safe zone' on the Turkish/Syrian border which would be secured by the Turkish-backed rebel groups and repopulated with Syrian refugees who have fled to Turkey since the Syrian conflict began. Turkey has requested US air support for the 'safe zone' and it is estimated that Turkish support would require "Turkish military and financial backing for the rebels for the rest of the conflict. [...] As well as] a force of at least 35,000 fighters and constant support from Turkish artillery and special forces."¹⁴⁴ Such an effort would constitute a further significant increase in Turkish involvement in the Syrian conflict. The Institute for the Study of War highlighted the implication that Operation Euphrates Shield could have on any operation to retake Raqqa:

The recapture of Jarablus and ongoing operations to clear remaining ISIS-held portions of the border west of Jarablus have set the desired conditions for an offensive to retake Raqqa city by eliminating ISIS's final supply line from Turkey. The YPG's decision thus far to avoid open war with the Turkish forces indicates that the U.S. may be able to refocus the YPG on the planned Raqqa offensive [...] A prolonged clash between the SDF and the joint Turkish/Syrian opposition force would derail planned operations to retake Raqqa City. Turkey may now offer its own military support and

141 Q257

142 [What is Turkish army really doing in Iraq?](#), AI Monitor, 6 September 2016

143 [Turkish Incursion in Northern Syria Signals Turning Point in Anti-ISIS Fight](#), The Institute for the Study of War, August 30, 2016

144 ['Turkey seeks to establish 'safe zone' along Syrian border'](#), Financial Times, 6 September 2016

that of Turkish-backed opposition forces for an operation in Raqqa as an alternative to the SDF, positioning Turkey as a major power player in northern Syria.¹⁴⁵

103. When we sought examples from the Secretary of State of UK support for non-Kurdish forces in Syria, he referred to UK airstrikes in support of the Syrian Defence Forces. When it was put to the Secretary of State that the Syrian Democratic Forces were majority-Kurdish forces, he suggested that he would question such a description.¹⁴⁶ However, Lieutenant General Carleton-Smith referred to the Syrian Democratic Forces as having “a tactical ambition, in the first instance, to secure its traditional northern Syrian Kurdish cantons”.¹⁴⁷ The Government has also previously referred to the Syrian Democratic Forces as the “the Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG)-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)” in a written answer in the House of Lords.¹⁴⁸

104. When we asked the Secretary of State about whether he thought Kurdish troops would be able to hold Raqqa (a predominantly Sunni area), he told us that he wished to see:

Raqqa return to a legitimate authority in Syria. You say that there are all these different factions that have been doing the fighting. They have been, but they are now starting to do the talking—they are now meeting as part of the forum that we have started slowly to convene—to work Syria towards a new political settlement that is genuinely representative of all opinion in Syria, that does not contain Assad and that can start building the institutions that Syria will need, not least its own moderate Syrian forces.¹⁴⁹

He later informed the Committee that he believed that such an outcome was clearly possible:

That is why we are working in the International Syrian Support Group to bring about a better alternative. Syria has had elections before; Iraq has had elections; Afghanistan has had elections. There is no reason why we could not lead Syria, in the fullness of time, after this appalling war, towards a settlement where it has the kind of plural democratic Government that Iraq has.¹⁵⁰

105. The Government’s case for extending UK military operations to Syria was based on a strategy of supporting the 70,000 moderate opposition forces identified by the then Prime Minister, David Cameron. We have sought to test this figure in terms of both numbers and orientation. We understand why the Government have been unable to provide a list of the groups, since that would risk providing useful intelligence to the Assad regime. However, we have relied upon outside organisations who have published such lists and most, if not all, the individual groups have as a result, already been identified. That information is in the public domain which means that the groups will already be known to the Assad regime.

145 [Turkish Incursion in Northern Syria Signals Turning Point in Anti-ISIS Fight](#), The Institute for the Study of War, August 30, 2016

146 Q398

147 Q398

148 PQ [HL8193](#) [Islamic State] 11 May 2016

149 Q399

150 Q438

The threat posed by Jabhat al-Nusra

106. In evidence, both Tim Marshall and Anthony Loyd highlighted their concern that the International Coalition’s focus on DAESH may allow the al-Qaeda off-shoot Jabhat al-Nusra to strengthen its role within the Syrian opposition:

Tim Marshall: The UK should also be doing a lot of homework about Jabhat al-Nusra. Once ISIS is defeated, they will spring up elsewhere as ISIS mark 2, but Jabhat al-Nusra is much deeper inside the opposition movement, and I hope that the people who look at these things are up to speed with Jabhat al-Nusra, because it is a longer-term threat to Syria than ISIS.

Anthony Loyd: Jabhat will be a far longer-term entity in Syria, I agree.¹⁵¹

Tom Hardie-Forsyth also agreed, telling us that when DAESH had been defeated Jabhat al-Nusra, and organisations like it “will still be there, because they are older, bolder and cleverer in the end, and we’ll have to deal with that when the time comes”.¹⁵²

107. A recent report by the Institute for the Study of War analysed the threat posed by Jabhat al-Nusra suggesting that it is a threat of “similar magnitude” to DAESH and that it was a “sophisticated, intelligent, strategic actor in the region and continues to enjoy a dangerous freedom to operate in Syria”. Despite a similarity in aims, Jabhat al-Nusra is pursuing an Islamic ‘caliphate’ through a “distinct, more patient methodology that is highly threatening despite its low signature” which consists of “fomenting a religious and social revolution by embedding itself within an indigenous insurgency”. The Report stated that Jabhat al-Nusra had:

A flow of foreign fighters and contributes asymmetric “special forces” capabilities to opposition forces, securing prominent victories for rebel campaigns through its contributions to wider military efforts. The significance of this contribution increased in late 2013 and throughout 2014, as a lack of international engagement in Syria increased the relative importance of JN’s contribution to the fighting.¹⁵³

108. Furthermore, recent reports have suggested that al-Qaeda is considering creating an emirate in Syria. An emirate would differ from the Islamic State ‘caliphate’ in the scale of its ambition, in that a Jabhat al-Nusra emirate would not claim to be a government for all the world’s Muslims. Charles Lister highlighted the implications of the creation of an al-Qaeda emirate in Syria:

The formalization of Nusra Front’s power in northern Syria would harden the group’s stance toward Syria’s moderate opposition. Proclaiming an emirate would require the group to assert overwhelming control—including the imposition of a strict interpretation of sharia—in the territories over which it would be asserting sovereignty. In all likelihood, incidents of

151 Q357

152 Q110

153 Institute for the Study of War, [Jabhat al Nusra in Syria](#), December 2014, p 11

capital punishment would dramatically increase, civilian freedoms would be restricted, and Nusra Front's tolerance of non-religious, nationalist, and civil opposition bodies would decline.¹⁵⁴

109. Charles Lister has suggested that the proclamation of an emirate would also have international implications. The existence of an al-Qaeda emirate combined with a “revitalized al-Qaeda central leadership in northern Syria would represent a confidence boost for the jihadi organization's global brand” allowing al-Qaeda to “present itself as the smart, methodical, and persistent jihadi movement that, in contrast to the Islamic State, had adopted a strategy more aligned with everyday Sunni Muslims”. The relative proximity to Europe (when compared to bases in Yemen and Afghanistan) means that an al-Qaeda emirate in Syria would pose a greater threat of attacks instigated in Syria and carried out in the West. However, Charles Lister noted that the proclamation of an emirate has also faced opposition within Jabhat al-Nusra:

Nusra Front seems to have slowed its emirate plans, at least temporarily, during Syria's recent cessation of hostilities. That had allowed Syrian Islamist opposition groups to express their hostility to the group's emirate plans. Some even raised the idea that Nusra Front should break its ties to al-Qaeda in order to further integrate into the mainstream “revolutionary opposition.”¹⁵⁵

110. At the end of July 2016, the leader of Jabhat al-Nusra, Abu Mohammed al-Julani announced its rebranding as Jabhat Fateh al-Sham—the Front for the Conquest of Syria and the Levant. It was also severing its links with al-Qaeda, in a split supported by both terrorist organisations.¹⁵⁶ Although the US responded by stating there to be no reason to change its view of Jabhat al-Nusra, severing its al-Qaeda link may increase its involvement with and influence within the armed Syrian opposition.¹⁵⁷

111. When we raised concerns about the threat posed by Jabhat al-Nusra, Lieutenant General Carleton-Smith told us that

The Nusra Front is one of the very most extreme, hard-line Salafi jihadi groups. [...] It has its stronghold in Idlib province. It is certainly a spoiler in the political process in Syria and might represent a Petri dish that becomes a threat to UK national security. It has refused to sign the cessation of hostilities agreement, but it's probably not an homogeneous group at the moment. A significant proportion are Syrian-focused, and they provide a wider wrapping to those much more specifically AQ-aligned elements that might harbour ambitions to use Syria as a springboard for international terrorist attack planning. The ratios between the Syrian elements and the external-facing elements probably vary region to region. There is potentially a small element of British foreign fighters associated with it; the specifics remain unclear.¹⁵⁸

154 [‘Al Qaeda Is About to Establish an Emirate in Northern Syria’](#), Foreign Policy, 4 May 2016

155 [‘Al Qaeda Is About to Establish an Emirate in Northern Syria’](#), Foreign Policy, 4 May 2016

156 [Syrian Nusra Front announces split from al-Qaeda](#), BBC News Online, 29 July 2016

157 [Al-Nusra Front cuts ties with al-Qaida and renames itself](#), The Guardian, 28 July 2016

158 Q427

112. Lieutenant General Carleton-Smith informed us that the UK was not currently carrying out airstrikes against Jabhat al-Nusra, but should it be deemed to be a threat to UK national security then the UK would be able to target it.¹⁵⁹ In the long term, he suggested that:

When one gets to a scenario where there is an enduring and enforceable ceasefire that sets the conditions for a political conversation and transition, the assumption is that a political framework, supported by a security apparatus—including with the international community’s contribution—is afforded sufficient resilience and capacity to be able to target that specific threat, which would only survive if it was left with the space to do so.¹⁶⁰

113. **As with the DAESH affiliates, the threat posed by Jabhat al-Nusra must be monitored by the Government. The danger posed by an organisation which has been one of al-Qaeda’s most successful affiliates may well be limited to Syria at present but the potential for it to carry out terrorist attacks globally may increasingly become a reality. Its recent rebranding and formal separation from al-Qaeda, may increase its influence over other elements of Islamist armed opposition in Syria, narrowing the political options for the future still further.**

114. *We recommend that the Government should set out how it is monitoring the threat posed by Jabhat al-Nusra/Jabhat Fatah al-Sham and how it intends to counter that threat.*

Russian and Assad regime efforts to combat DAESH

115. The Assad regime and its supporters have largely concentrated on fighting those forces trying to overthrow it. Despite Russia citing DAESH as a reason for engaging in airstrikes, we have been told that the vast majority of its targets have been opposition groups unaffiliated with DAESH.¹⁶¹

116. However, the US-Russia brokered ‘cessation of hostilities’ in Syria, which started on 27 February 2016, resulted in an increase in military action against DAESH not just by the opposition,¹⁶² but also by the Syrian Armed Forces and the regime’s allies. On 27 March, the Syrian Armed Forces—supported by Russia, Iran, the Lebanese Hezbollah, and Iraqi and Afghan Shia foreign fighters—retook Palmyra.¹⁶³ This was the first time that the Assad regime had regained any territory from DAESH.¹⁶⁴

117. The operation against DAESH by the Syrian regime and its Russian allies continued into April. On 13 May, the Institute for the Study of War analysed Russian actions against DAESH:

Russian airstrikes escalated against [DAESH] positions throughout Syria to include areas in Homs, Deir ez-Zour, and Raqqa, following [DAESH’s] resumption of large-scale operations against pro-regime forces in central

159 Q427

160 Q429

161 Q225; 277

162 Q246

163 ‘Palmyra is a major turning point in Syria’s Civil War’ Al Jazeera, 29 March 2016

164 Palmyra had been controlled by DAESH since May 2015

Homs on May 3. These operations have been primarily focused on seizing strategic gas fields that serve as the regime's primary source of natural gas for areas in western Syria.¹⁶⁵

The Institute for the Study of War also noted that DAESH operations posed a threat to Russia's own military contingent in Central Homs, including its military base in Palmyra and its reported rotary wing deployment.¹⁶⁶

118. One explanation given for this is that, without the need to defend itself against the opposition, the Assad regime is able to focus on the threat posed by DAESH. Colonel Steve Warren, Operation Inherent Resolve spokesman, told reporters on 20 April that before the cessation of hostilities some 80% of Russian airstrikes were against the opposition. Since then, "more than 70% of their strikes were against [DAESH]".¹⁶⁷

119. During other periods of the cessation of hostilities, the Assad regime's operations and Russian airstrikes have appeared to refocus on the opposition. On 28 May 2016, the Institute for the Study of War reported that despite the International Syria Support Group's agreement to new measures to reinforce a nationwide cessation of hostilities:

Russian airstrikes continued to primarily target opposition forces in north-western Syria from May 13–26, rather than terrorist organizations such as ISIS. ISW was only able to assess one Russian airstrike against ISIS for the two-week period from May 13–26 with low confidence, despite continued ISIS operations throughout Syria.¹⁶⁸

120. When we questioned Lieutenant General Carleton-Smith he accepted that the cessation of hostilities may have allowed the Assad regime and Russia to focus on attacking DAESH. However, he explained that their efforts targeted areas where they had been

confronting competition for the strategic natural resource of the country and where the regime and Russia's own strategic interests have been threatened by DAESH, not as a net contributor to the wider international effort to defeat DAESH.¹⁶⁹

121. Several of our witnesses argued that cooperation with Russia would be necessary in order to defeat DAESH and to end the civil war.¹⁷⁰ It was felt that, in return for the relaxation of sanctions¹⁷¹ or the guarantee of their military footprint in Syria,¹⁷² Russia might be willing to encourage Assad to step down, albeit in favour of another figure who was similarly acceptable to them. However, not all of our witnesses agreed.¹⁷³ Lieutenant General Mayall questioned whether it was possible to work with Russia, given the necessity of participating in a collective decision-making process within the International Coalition. He also questioned whether the Russians would be willing to attack DAESH in Syria in cooperation with the International Coalition:

165 [Russian Airstrikes in Syria: April 19 - May 12](#), 2016, Institute for the Study of War, 13 May 2016

166 [Russian Airstrikes in Syria: April 19 - May 12](#), 2016, Institute for the Study of War, 13 May 2016

167 Department of Defense [Press Briefing](#) by Colonel Steve Warren, Operation Inherent Resolve spokesman via Teleconference from Baghdad, Iraq, April 20, 2016

168 [Russian Airstrikes in Syria: April 30 – May 26](#), 2016, Institute for the Study of War, 28 May 2016

169 Q437

170 Q122; 174; 380

171 Q175; 305; 371

172 Q232–3; 371

173 Q222; 380

It is a question of whether we collectively have the cohesion to engage Russia. Again, holding our nose—I am afraid that there is a lot of nose-holding to be done, even to get a remotely decent outcome in Syria—it will be interesting to know where the Russians see the next move. Having established that line, I am not entirely sure that the Russians necessarily want to drive on to Raqqa, but they might collectively want to.¹⁷⁴

Any cooperation with Russia would probably be further complicated by the Russian view that opposition groups fighting the Assad regime are terrorist groups, a much broader definition than members of the International Coalition would accept.¹⁷⁵

122. When we questioned the Secretary of State on the possibility of a co-operative arrangement between Russia and the International Coalition, he told us:

It is perfectly possible and proper for us to engage with Russia where we have interests in common while maintaining our very sharp disagreement with and condemnation of what Russia has been doing in the Crimea and Ukraine. We have engaged with Russia. Russia was a key part of bringing about the settlement in Iran on nuclear power, has been engaged in the Syrian peace process and is now beginning to get involved in the Libyan talks as well. We continue to urge Russia to play a role and use its influence constructively towards a future settlement in Syria.

[...]

There are arrangements in place to de-conflict the airspace to ensure that there are sufficient gaps between aircraft and so on—but there is not cooperation or coordination of targeting. We are very clear about that. Russia is not part of the Coalition effort.¹⁷⁶

The Secretary of State was also clear that he believed that it was within the gift of Russia “to bring this indiscriminate killing and shelling to an end, to use its influence constructively and to respect the ceasefire”.¹⁷⁷ He added that whilst cooperation with Russia might seem attractive, it could leave forces regarded as moderate “at the mercy of the regime”.¹⁷⁸

123. The Russians are a key actor in the Syrian theatre and, in the past six months, the Assad regime and its supporters have begun to tackle DAESH in its Syrian locations. Military cooperation with Russia may be the only way in which DAESH can finally be suppressed or defeated in Syria. However, active cooperation could take place only with the agreement of the International Coalition—including, as it does, some regional powers which are wholly opposed to the Assad regime.

174 Q198

175 Q237; [Russia proposes U.N. blacklist two Syrian opposition groups](#). Reuters, 28 April 2016

176 Q431–3

177 Q436

178 Q437

Conclusion

124. The decision to extend UK military operations into Syria was the subject of extensive debate due to political and military factors rendering the potential for effective military intervention there far more problematic than that in Iraq. At the start of the debate, on 2 December 2015, David Cameron told the House that:

The situation in Syria is incredibly complex. I am not overstating the contribution our incredible servicemen and women can make; nor am I ignoring the risks of military action or pretending that military action is any more than one part of the answer.¹⁷⁹

Having responded to the Foreign Affairs Committee report ‘The extension of offensive British military operations to Syria’¹⁸⁰ several days earlier, he listed the concerns that had been raised in previous Parliamentary debates:

I believe the key questions that have been raised are these: first, could acting in this way actually increase the risk to our security by making an attack on Britain more likely? Secondly, does Britain really have the capability to make a significant difference? Thirdly [...] why do we not just increase our level of airstrikes in Iraq to free up capacity among other members of the Coalition so that they can carry out more airstrikes in Syria? Fourthly, will there really be the ground forces needed to make this operation a success? Fifthly, what is the strategy for defeating ISIL and securing a lasting political settlement in Syria? Sixthly, is there a proper reconstruction and post-conflict stabilisation plan for Syria?¹⁸¹

125. The complexity of the civil war and the numerous and fractured opposition groups (a number of whom are avowed Salafi jihadist groups) means that—apart from Kurdish forces—it is certainly difficult to identify credible partners on the ground. There is little agreement, even amongst experts, on the extent to which armed opposition groups in Syria can properly be described as ‘moderate’ rather than Islamist. By contrast, the UK Government’s partner in Iraq is the Iraqi Government and we are supporting the Iraqi Security Forces and the Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga.

126. Two years into the military campaign to counter the threat from DAESH, we are seeing the impact of the UK effort in the International Coalition. Whilst the military effort in Iraq is bearing fruit, that is much less certain in Syria. We believe this is partly due to the aspirations of the UK Government in respect of each country. The goals in Iraq are to remove territory from DAESH, to strengthen the Iraqi Government and to maintain Iraq as a unitary state. The goals in Syria are not only to defeat DAESH, but also to help bring into being a Government which will be neither authoritarian and repressive, on the one hand, nor Islamist and extreme, on the other. These goals cannot be accomplished by military means alone. We discuss the wider strategy and the importance of the political aspect of the fight to counter DAESH in the next section.

179 HC Deb 2 December 2015, [col. 324](#)

180 Foreign Affairs Committee, Second Report of Session 2015–16, [The extension of offensive British military operations to Syria](#), HC 457

181 HC Deb, 2 December 2015, [col. 328](#)

5 UK strategy in the Middle East and the wider strategy against extremism

127. In his statement to the House on 24 May 2016, the Secretary of State for Defence set out the UK's strategy to counter DAESH. The military aspect of the strategy was clear: airstrikes in Iraq and Syria alongside training and capacity-building in the Iraqi Security Forces.¹⁸² However, he acknowledged that DAESH could not be defeated by military operations alone and that a wider strategy would be necessary. Such a strategy would have four pillars:

- “First, on counter-ideology, the UK has led the creation of a Coalition communications cell to undermine DAESH’s failing proposition that it is winning militarily, that it is building a viable state, and that it represents the only true form of Islam.”¹⁸³
- “Secondly, we are supporting political reform and reconciliation in Iraq, and the ending of the civil war in Syria and the transition of Assad from power. [...] In Syria, long-term success means a political settlement which delivers a Government who can represent all Syrians and with whom we can work to tackle DAESH.”¹⁸⁴
- “Thirdly, the UK is playing a full role, alongside our partners, in addressing the humanitarian crisis in Syria.”¹⁸⁵
- “Fourthly, we are stemming the flow of foreign fighters through better international coordination.”¹⁸⁶

Although comprehensive, it is concerning that the Secretary of State did not include countering the finance of DAESH as a key pillar of the strategy.

128. In written evidence, the Ministry of Defence readily acknowledged that airstrikes alone would not defeat DAESH and that partners on the ground were a vital component of the campaign:

Airstrikes are only one component in a military strategy which must be accompanied by a political solution to deliver long-term peace and security to the region. In Iraq, Prime Minister Abadi’s government provides a partner with whom the Coalition can work politically and militarily. The situation in Syria is more complex, with a multi-faceted civil war underway and a government which has lost all legitimacy, with which we cannot cooperate.¹⁸⁷

129. Dr Ashraf and Major General Shaw argued that while DAESH’s physical ‘caliphate’ could be destroyed “relatively easily”, the problem lay in the availability of suitable ground forces:

182 HC Deb, 24 May 2016, [col. 411](#)
 183 HC Deb, 24 May 2016, [col. 411](#)
 184 HC Deb, 24 May 2016, [col. 412](#)
 185 HC Deb, 24 May 2016, [col. 412](#)
 186 HC Deb, 24 May 2016, [col. 412](#)
 187 Ministry of Defence ([UMO0006](#))

In Iraq, the Army and recognised paramilitary forces such as the Peshmerga, can be given the necessary increased support to capture and hold territory... In Syria the issue of ground troops is more politically sensitive. The current reliance on the supposedly moderate rebels is problematic for a number of reasons...Western ground troops could provide the most militarily effective force to take ground. They would not find it easy to maintain the population's support for holding it for more than a few days.¹⁸⁸

130. Tom Hardie-Forsyth agreed, telling us that “the best boots on the ground are local boots on the ground, properly supported by us”.¹⁸⁹ There are few historical examples of aerial bombardment alone producing decisive results, apart from the atomic bombing of Japan. During the 2 December 2015 debate on Syria in the House of Commons, former Foreign Secretary Rt Hon Dame Margaret Beckett MP reminded the House that:

There are those, not opposed in principle to action, who doubt the efficacy of what is proposed: Coalition action which rests almost wholly on bombing, they say, will have little effect. Well, tell that to the Kosovans, and do not forget that if there had not been any bombing in Kosovo perhaps 1 million Albanian Muslim refugees would be seeking refuge in Europe.¹⁹⁰

131. In oral evidence, the Secretary of State drew on lessons learnt from previous interventions to conclude that local ground forces were vital to the success of the strategy:

I think we have learned that when you are dealing with insurgency and terrorism, in the end it has to be done by local forces. Simply putting Western boots or British boots on the ground is not the total answer, as we have learned fairly painfully in successive wars.¹⁹¹

Lieutenant General Carleton-Smith recalled the Afghan campaign as an example:

We also determined that to get to the root of the problem, we had insufficient boots on the ground and, therefore, that the key metric was mass, but then discovered that mass was subordinate to legitimacy. If there were reservations locally about one's very presence, one was not necessarily a net contributor. We deduced from that that we needed an indigenous proxy—a legitimate element—with which to engage. It is easier in the countries where that exists, and it is that much more difficult in countries where one has to create it.¹⁹²

The potential for the failure of the current strategy

The pace of the strategy and political reform

132. The Coalition's reliance on local partners simultaneously to carry out ground operations and political reforms has raised concerns in terms of both pace and effectiveness. As Michael Eisenstadt explained:

188 Dr Afzal Ashraf and Major General (ret'd) Jonathon Shaw ([UMO0008](#))

189 Q102

190 HC Deb, 2 Dec 2015, [col. 363](#)

191 Q441

192 Q441

The bottom line is—I think it needs to be stressed—our strategy is contingent on the politics of our allies, and ultimately our ability to convert battlefield success to political accomplishments depends on our allies.¹⁹³

133. When we visited Iraq, a number of our interlocutors said that the progress of the military campaign was outweighing the progress of the political campaign. This view was reinforced in later evidence sessions. Richard Atwood argued that military operations should be “slowed to give a chance for the political strategy to catch up”. He explained:

We root the rise of Islamic State in the recent history of Iraq and Syria—particularly Iraq. We go back to the Iraq invasion and the policies adopted in the aftermath of that invasion that left many Sunnis marginalised. But as important as that [...] was the aftermath of the awakening [...] in which many Sunni tribesmen rose up against al-Qaeda with the expectation that they would receive a greater stake in the Iraqi state. That did not happen, as many of you know, during Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki’s second term.¹⁹⁴

He stressed the importance of having “a clear plan to avoid reprisals afterwards”, together with a strategy for what would follow any victory over DAESH in terms of governance and security. Whilst he recognised the importance of military operations as part of the strategy for Iraq and Syria, he was concerned that the political strategy was not keeping up with the military strategy.¹⁹⁵

134. Dominic Wilson also recognised that this was not happening:

The military campaign is being successful, but arguably the politics and the stabilisation effort more generally are lagging some way behind.¹⁹⁶

When we asked the Secretary of State, he agreed that military progress had to be matched by a political process, citing this as being the primary lesson from the Libya campaign.¹⁹⁷ He gave examples of the work the Government was doing to improve the situation in Iraq:

We are looking to see what we can do to help the economy of Iraq, which has obviously suffered quite significantly from the drop in the oil price. The Chancellor discussed a package of assistance through the World Bank when he was at the G7 last week, and we continue to urge political reform in Baghdad. Our diplomats have played an important role in trying to bring Baghdad and Irbil closer together and to encourage the return of the Kurdish MPs to Baghdad. We continue to emphasise to Prime Minister Abadi that this is not going to last unless he can properly bind in the tribes of Anbar and unless he can provide a degree of reassurance to the Sunni population that they are not going to be exposed again to any of the kind of malevolence that they experienced under the previous regime.¹⁹⁸

193 Q237

194 Q313

195 Q316

196 Q420

197 Q387

198 Q419

Concerns about human rights abuses by UK-supported forces

135. There have been concerns raised about Western-supported actors on the ground in both Syria and Iraq. In February 2015, a report by Human Rights Watch suggested the Kurdish Regional Government was trying to incorporate areas into Kurdish autonomous territory by refusing access to displaced Arabs whilst allowing Kurds to return and, in some cases occupying the homes of Arabs who had left as a result of the fighting.¹⁹⁹ Patrick Cockburn referenced a recent report of the Iraqi Army committing human rights abuses by detaining over a thousand young men in inadequate facilities.²⁰⁰ The detention of thousands of minority Sunnis imprisoned on blanket terrorism charges and held for years without trial was a motivation behind protests that broke out in Anbar more than three years ago.²⁰¹

136. When questioned about the potential human rights abuses by UK-trained and supported forces, the Secretary of State and Lieutenant General Carleton-Smith emphasised that any UK-trained troops received formal training in international humanitarian law and the Law of Armed Conflict.²⁰² We were also told that any allegations of human rights abuses were investigated and that, if they were well-founded, “the Coalition removes material support provided to those organisations”.²⁰³

137. There are also concerns about human rights abuses by groups in Syria. Amnesty International have reported that the YPG have engaged in the use of child soldiers, forced displacement, demolition of homes, and the seizure and destruction of property: “In some cases, entire villages have been demolished, apparently in retaliation for the perceived support of their Arab or Turkmen residents for the group that calls itself the Islamic State (IS) or other non-state armed groups”.²⁰⁴

The danger posed by military success without political reform

138. At the start of the inquiry, Dr Afzal Ashraf warned us that:

We need to see this conflict in the wider context of governance and political systems. I recognise that that is straying way beyond the Chairman’s remit, but, certainly to understand our military strategy, that is the wider context that we must be thinking in terms of.²⁰⁵

The importance of good governance was also raised by Colonel (retd) Hamish de Bretton Gordon who hoped that, once the military aspect had produced peace on the ground, the UK Government would “start to build the local governance”.²⁰⁶ Dr Khatib agreed, telling the Committee that the UK could

199 Human Rights Watch, [Iraqi Kurdistan: Arabs Displaced, Cordoned Off, Detained](#), 25 February 2015

200 Q365

201 [‘Maliki’s Anbar Blunder’](#), Foreign Policy, 15 January 2014

202 Q407

203 Q408

204 [US-Backed Forces in Syria Accused of Human Rights Violations](#), Mother Jones, 9 November 2015

205 Q82

206 Q304

play an important role in military coordination, supporting civil society in Syria and supporting local governance initiatives. This is much needed. Regardless of what the solution looks like, supporting local governance is important for holding the country together.²⁰⁷

139. Dr Neil Quilliam also thought this was an area where the UK could have a real impact, noting that “DFID does a good job of this in and around some of the rebel-held areas in Syria, but also elsewhere around the region. It is lending support to local governance structures, bringing political authority to a much more local level”.²⁰⁸ Richard Atwood was concerned that this was not happening in Iraq where territory had been retaken but security and governance issues had failed to be addressed—resulting in the military strategy beginning to outpace the political strategy.²⁰⁹

140. The danger posed by the success of the military aspect of the strategy without the accompanying political reform was emphasised on several occasions. Major General Shaw told us:

The whole significance of the air campaign is what it does to the political campaign. [...] Military action has to be judged by its effects on the politics. If this is just a gesture to cover up our absence of political progress [...] this is failure.²¹⁰

141. Dr Quilliam stated that the military defeat of DAESH in Iraq may address the international side of the organisation, but:

The more local, Iraqi side of it—the former Ba’ath—can just melt away into the ether and wait. It is that longevity, that waiting game. If the West goes in, helps to rebuild, has a Marshall Plan and supports local governing structures, that may help to mitigate the symptoms returning that will allow DAESH to return, but that’s going to require a long-term investment and commitment.²¹¹

He explained that without a long-term commitment DAESH would be able to play a waiting game: “We can hide out here. We can return and take our ground again”.²¹²

142. Dr Khatib addressed the Syrian aspect, explaining why improvement in the political process was vital:

As the Iraq situation shows, the only meaningful way to fight DAESH is if you have buy-in from the local population. If Assad prevails and he alienates people even more by eliminating the opposition and empowering DAESH, where is he going to get the locals needed in order to fight DAESH? This is not going to happen. So the only meaningful way for any regime or Government in Syria to fight extremism is to engage the local population, especially the Sunni population. If this population has been pushed to embrace DAESH or it is still resentful against the regime, you are not going

207 Q306

208 Q306

209 Q316

210 Q86

211 Q296

212 Q310

to succeed...The only long-term way is to have engagement from the local population. So what Assad is doing—the strategy he has been using—may only work in the short term, but it carries the seeds for long-term instability of a more complex kind.²¹³

143. The Secretary of State shared these concerns. He told us:

To some extent you can combat the terrorism and push the insurgency back and defeat it militarily, but that is not going to be lasting unless you get a political settlement that genuinely has the trust and support of the local people where that insurgency was.²¹⁴

144. The argument that it must be a local force—not a Western one—which takes and holds territory has been borne out by previous experiences of intervention. Such a strategy (western air power and local ground troops) is reliant on political progress alongside military achievement. Whilst the progress in the military campaign to counter DAESH is beginning to gain momentum, the same cannot be said for the progress of political reform. A lack of political reform in Iraq, let alone Syria, may well undermine the military progress to date, removing the threat of DAESH only for it to be replaced by other groups posing similar or even greater threats.

145. The Government must set out exactly how it intends to help ensure that political reform is achieved and what action it is planning to take to keep it in step with the military campaign.

UK strategy in the Middle East

146. In evidence to us, Lieutenant General (ret'd) Sir Simon Mayall also criticised the lack of a UK Government strategy on the Gulf:

We have talked about a Gulf strategy for ages. Some of it is high-level political messaging and some of it would be that these are parts of the world where British military engagement is hugely effective—the Sandhurst bit and the exercises bit—let alone the fact that they are the base for all our operations in Iraq. I just think it is such an easy thing for the British Government to lend their weight to people in that region who feel under threat from Persia, under threat from Shi'as, under threat from anarchy, under threat from ISIS and under threat from al-Qaeda. It would be easy just to say, “No, no. We value your security. We also believe that your long-term stability requires you to diversify your economy and address women's rights and your human rights record.” We all know the more nervous you feel, the more you roll up like an armadillo. To my mind, the best way to get the sort of reforms in the Gulf that we believe are really important for long-term stability, and about which they are criticised daily in some of the papers, is to give them the security that they can continue to advance on their reform while we continue to defend them against the contagion of ISIS or the IRGC.²¹⁵

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147. This apparent lack of an integrated strategy is concerning given the high emphasis placed since 2010 on the formulation and determination of national security strategy and regional strategies. The 2010 SDSR explicitly promised to improve coordination and focus by: “producing integrated strategies through a Foreign and Commonwealth-led process for key countries and regions”.²¹⁶ The 2011 Building Stability Overseas Strategy undertook to create a Steering Group which would “carry out systematic reviews of UK activity in Watchlist countries to ensure that our overall approach to building stability is realistic, appropriately resourced, fully integrated and draws on the greatest possible support from international partners”²¹⁷ and to “produce integrated UK strategies for key countries and regions.”²¹⁸ Furthermore, the 2010 National Security Strategy promised to:

Focus and integrate diplomatic, intelligence, defence and other capabilities on preventing the threat of international military crises, while retaining the ability to respond should they nevertheless materialise.²¹⁹

The 2015 combined NSS and SDSR undertook to establish new policy-making and delivery Joint Units in 2016, including:

a Gulf Strategy Unit, hosted by the Cabinet Office, to co-ordinate UK engagement within the Gulf in order to deliver the NSC’s long-term strategy and maximise benefits to the UK.²²⁰

148. In evidence, the Secretary of State outlined the strategic importance of the Middle East and North Africa, emphasising the partnerships in the region which allow the UK Government to combat crime, terrorism and the challenge of migration. He also stressed the importance of secure energy supplies and the security of trade routes to the UK, citing the need for stability in the region as the primary reason that the UK has maintained a policy of defence engagement. He told us that:

The end state is a situation in the Middle East where these countries are stable again and we can rely on the trade routes, the energy supplies and the partnerships we need to keep this country safe, and in which elected and legitimate Governments are able to provide a future for their people that does not involve them emigrating.²²¹

149. The long-term strategy articulated by the Secretary of State—a stable, secure, democratic Middle East—is laudable, but it remains to be seen how the Government expects to achieve this. It is far from clear that the forces unleashed in the Arab uprisings are capable of transition, at this stage of societal development, into the sort of pluralist and tolerant democratic systems that conform to Western ideals. We recommend that the Government should deliver on its undertaking to develop a realistic strategy for the Gulf and should set out how it intends to work with partners, allies and international organisations to promote stability in the Middle East.

216 HM Government, *Securing Britain in an Age of Uncertainty: The Strategic Defence and Security Review*, Cm 7948, October 2010, p66

217 Ministry of Defence, *Building Stability Overseas Strategy*, July 2011, p20

218 Ministry of Defence, *Building Stability Overseas Strategy*, July 2011, p24

219 HM Government, *Securing Britain in an Age of Uncertainty: The Strategic Defence and Security Review*, Cm 7948, October 2010, p34

220 HM Government, *National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015*, Cm 9161, November 2015, p84

221 Q384

Conclusion

150. There are legitimate concerns that have been raised about the overall strategy to counter DAESH. There is potential for DAESH to be defeated territorially only for them (or another group) to continue to pose a threat to stability in the Middle East and the West in general. The importance of stability in the Middle East is clear. If the International Coalition (and therefore the UK) finds itself reduced to a binary choice between an Assad-style dictatorship or a revolutionary Islamist alternative, there will need to be a hard-headed evaluation of which of the unpalatable prospects poses the lesser threat to our national interests.

6 Changing the way we intervene

The effectiveness of past UK interventions

151. Both the purpose of intervention and how those interventions were carried out featured in evidence given to this inquiry. Issues about the importance of a political plan, an agreed end-state and how that was to be achieved were repeatedly raised, regarding the current intervention and also previous interventions in Iraq, in Libya and in Afghanistan.

The purpose of intervention

152. Major General Shaw suggested that in several cases an expectation that countries conformed to the ideals of Western liberalism and morality had been the underlying assumption of interventions which had resulted in failure. He warned that:

Morality is a dangerous tool through which to see the world, if that is the only tool through which you see the world. The purity of one's intent is not the same as the purity of one's outcome, and I think the outcomes can sometimes outweigh the purity of one's intent.²²²

Dr Ashraf also cautioned against ethical interventions but highlighted successful ones in Sierra Leone and Kosovo as proof that intervention can sometimes yield positive results. In response to this point, Major General Shaw told us that a military solution to a military threat was vital, but that issues arose when a military solution was used to try and resolve a difficult political situation, rather than a political process and political resolution.²²³

153. Michael Eisenstadt believed that a military solution could be used only to contain rather than solve these problems. Thus, the use of force should be judged on the merits of managing the situation rather than achieving a particular outcome.²²⁴ Lieutenant General Mayall was also clear that the Government should not adopt the attitude that intervention is invariably too difficult, but rather that intervention needs to be done differently. He suggested that lessons were not necessarily being learned in Whitehall from previous interventions.²²⁵

154. Asked about the Government's approach, the Secretary of State told us that lessons had indeed been learnt, such as: the importance of tackling corruption; the need to invest time and money in trying to change the political culture of countries and regions where freedom of speech and democracy had not been the norm; and the need to assist local forces in trying to change that landscape rather than using Western forces to do so.²²⁶

155. Lieutenant General Carleton-Smith also highlighted the duration of military campaigns as being one of the lessons learnt from previous interventions. He emphasised the importance of achieving the best practicable outcome before a campaign eventually runs out of political and public support:

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223 Q87

224 Q237

225 Q189

226 Q441

From the military perspective, we have learnt that a campaign is of finite duration, even if the problem endures, and there is therefore a limit to political tolerance for that duration. We need to use the time that we do have to best effect. I think we might reflect that on Afghanistan, we spent a near decade organising our inputs rather than being very clear about what our outputs are and ruthlessly focusing on those.²²⁷

156. He agreed with the Secretary of State on the question of local forces, again relating his experience in Afghanistan:

If there were reservations locally about one's very presence, one was not necessarily a net contributor. We deduced from that that we needed an indigenous proxy—a legitimate element—with which to engage. It is easier in the countries where that exists, and it is that much more difficult in countries where one has to create it.²²⁸

157. Dominic Wilson also suggested that interventions had changed from being a purely military tool to being a whole-of-Government effort. He thought that both the National Security Council and the civil service recognised that interventions were “truly inter-agency problems and we approach them in exactly that way. That is a necessary lesson that we have learnt over the years”.²²⁹

158. It is clear that recent interventions have required much more than mere military campaigns. There have been criticisms of levels of engagement in the political sphere in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Syria too. It is also clear that there is no single formula for success but that understanding the local political and cultural context, as well as the nature of the situation on the ground, is absolutely essential. We welcome the emergence of a new doctrine that extends thinking about intervention to include other actors such as aid agencies, NGOs and the private sector. The ‘whole-of-Government’ approach, epitomised by the National Security Council, is clearly an improvement on the management of previous interventions. However, despite that innovation, a number of concerns have been raised about interventions that have taken place since the National Security Council was created. This indicates that there are still flaws and weaknesses in the system. Some of these were identified in our predecessor Committee’s Report (HC 682) on ‘Decision-making in Defence Policy’, published in March 2015.

Committing to reconstruction and stabilisation

159. As well as the need for a strategy for the region, the Committee were told in Iraq that stabilisation and reconstruction were central to ensuring that the threat of DAESH was countered. Lise Grande of the UN Development Programme told the Committee that, without the return of internally displaced persons (IDPs) to the areas which had been retaken from DAESH, military successes would be hollow. However, the UNDP was underfunded despite its proven successes in using minimal amounts of funding to stabilise areas. The importance of stabilisation and the return of IDPs was also asserted by a number of witnesses in evidence to the Committee. Major General Shaw told us that the use of IEDs by DAESH to mine areas under its control was specifically designed

227 Q441

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229 Q441

to make land uninhabitable for those IDPs who wished to return. He emphasised that the prospect of that return, the prospect of life returning to normal after DAESH, was a necessary motivating factor in persuading local forces and people to fight against them. He underlined how important it was to have planning and financing in place for stabilisation and reconstruction.²³⁰

160. Colonel de Bretton Gordon agreed that humanitarian support such as reconstruction in areas retaken from DAESH was vital to give people hope and a chance for the future.²³¹ He also discussed the importance of a post-war strategy and described some of the other ways in which reconstruction could be achieved:

It has to be part of a comprehensive strategy. Hopefully what you are saying will come to fruition, but unless it is a comprehensive strategy in military, political, diplomatic and humanitarian terms, we are just going to repeat some of the mistakes that we have made elsewhere. When it comes to creating that peaceful coexistence within Syria, we need somebody to do it. I think there is a role for the UN. For the West or NATO to get involved—I would hope that those countries will be involved, and I hope the UK would lead and support UN-type action. Militarily, to bring about that sort of de-escalation—collecting weapons and everything else—I think the United Nations has a role to play, and I hope that the UK would front up and do the sort of things that we do incredibly well.²³²

161. The Secretary of State has recognised the importance of stabilisation as part of the counter-DAESH effort. In a quarterly update on the campaign against DAESH, he told the House on 24 May that:

Stabilisation is the key: after liberating a town or city, it is essential to offer the local population the security and stability they need to be able to return. We are co-operating with our partners, and a huge amount of work is being done on the stabilisation effort, which will be offered to each city and town as it is liberated. ...We have had some success in populations returning, particularly in Tikrit, to which the vast majority of the population has now returned. That is more difficult in Ramadi, simply because so many improvised explosive devices have been seeded right across the city. There are different circumstances in each of the particular areas.²³³

Earlier in his statement, the Secretary of State gave examples of how the UK was supporting stabilisation efforts:

We are helping to stabilise areas liberated from DAESH so that people can return to a safe environment. We have contributed to UN-led efforts to remove IEDs, to increase water availability to above pre-conflict levels in Tikrit, and to rebuild schools, police stations and electricity generators across Anbar and Nineveh provinces.²³⁴

230 Q74

231 Q313

232 Q287

233 HC Deb, 24 May 2016, [col. 419](#)

234 HC Deb, 24 May 2016, [col. 412](#)

162. The Secretary of State further discussed some of the challenges to stabilisation when he gave evidence to us on 26 May:

the key challenge [is] not just that they become peaceful, but that the population have the confidence to return—they largely flee, of course, when these towns are being liberated—that the essentials of life will be provided and, above all, that there will be security and local policing. We do that stabilisation work in conjunction with our colleagues in DFID. Of course, it also requires continuing political reform in Iraq, and we have continued to encourage the Iraqi Government to crack on with the reforms that are needed in terms of the National Guard, local policing and giving governors the devolved powers they need to be able to organise the essentials of life for their people.

Dominic Wilson agreed, emphasising that stabilisation was reliant on people having trust in the political system and that the services they need, including security, will be provided at both a local and national level.²³⁵ He told us that the UK could assist with this to a certain extent but echoed the importance of political reform in order to realise an acceptable end-state:

Clearly, the politics has to be solved by the Iraqis themselves and by the Iraqi Government. Local security has to be provided by local security forces that people can buy into, but some services can be provided externally. We are putting money into that ourselves, and DFID and the stabilisation unit that we have here in the UK are working very closely on that. As the Secretary of State says, the difficulty is the pace. The military campaign is being successful, but arguably the politics and the stabilisation effort more generally are lagging some way behind.²³⁶

163. The fact that witnesses repeatedly identified reactionary politics as a drag on overall outcomes, points to a pessimistic conclusion—that countries riven by intense tribal and religious divisions may take a very long time indeed to accept the basic principles of democracy and equal rights. If so, no amount of injected international aid will significantly accelerate the adoption of democratic norms and values as the basis of their political systems.

164. According to DFID figures published on 1 December 2015, since 2012 the UK has spent £20.6 million on stabilisation in Syria in the form of governance and service delivery support.²³⁷ This is out of a total of over £500 million spent on aid in Syria.²³⁸ £79.5 million has been spent on aid to Iraq. In a February 2016 response to a Parliamentary Question, DFID highlighted that £10 million allocated by the Conflict, Stabilisation and Security Fund to Iraq had been used to stabilise re-liberated areas.²³⁹ The Government's Development Tracker website also contains details of a £40 million project in Iraq which is aimed at responding to "urgent humanitarian needs in Iraq and build the capacity of the Iraqi and international system to respond to the humanitarian crisis, and support the

235 Q418

236 Q420

237 HM Government, [UK non-humanitarian support in Syria](#), December 2015

238 PQ [9055 9](#) [Syria: Overseas Aid] 29 June 2016

239 PQ [269 9](#) [Iraq: Reconstruction] 22 February 2016

development of recovery and stabilisation activities”.²⁴⁰ It can therefore be assumed that a proportion of this has been allocated to stabilisation. In contrast, the Ministry of Defence has estimated that the net additional cost of counter-DAESH operations between August 2014 and March 2016 is around £250 million.²⁴¹ At the most, the Government had (as of July) spent on stabilisation a fifth of the total it has spent on military action.

165. Stabilisation and reconstruction are central in the fight to counter DAESH, particularly in Iraq. We were impressed by both the calibre and the (relatively low) cost of the work carried out by the UNDP when we were in Iraq.

166. The disparity between military effort and that on stabilisation is concerning. Whilst stabilisation does not carry the same cost as a military operation, the low priority placed on stabilisation does not reassure us about Iraq’s long-term future. We recommend that the Government ensures that the diplomatic and development effort relates more closely to the size of the military effort, whilst recognising that not all societies have reached a stage of development for fully-fledged democratic institutions to command general assent.

Conclusion

167. The majority of the questions in this chapter are significant and wide-ranging. They could not be easily answered, especially in an inquiry that was looking at two specific interventions. However, they are questions that have repeatedly arisen during several inquiries carried out by us and our predecessor Committees. **We shall, therefore consider holding a further inquiry, especially in the light of the Chilcot Report, which will look at the way the UK intervenes—the decision-making process, the preparation and planning both for the military campaign and its aftermath, and the way that the UK Government ensures that it can maintain a solid commitment to a strategy which is comprehensive and achievable. Only in this way can we be confident that lessons learnt from previous interventions are understood before any future ones are contemplated.**

240 HM Government, [Iraq Emergency Humanitarian Assistance in 2015/16](#), accessed 9 August 2016

241 MoD Written Evidence, 9 June 2016 [See Appendix 3]

Conclusions and recommendations

DAESH and the threat posed by DAESH affiliates

1. Global terrorism trends indicate that, as in the case of al-Qaeda previously, pre-existing Islamist organisations will attach themselves to whichever militant network appears to be in the ascendant at any given time. (Paragraph 30)
2. The UK and Coalition's strategy to counter DAESH is predominately focused on Iraq and Syria; and relies on the removal of territory from DAESH in order to eliminate it. That is a necessary, but not sufficient, strategy. If DAESH transforms itself into an international movement or a network of affiliates—like al-Qaeda before it—which can survive the loss of territory, the UK Government approach will need to adapt. For example, if DAESH is defeated in the Middle East but then grows strong in Africa, the current strategy will require major revision. (Paragraph 31)
3. *We recommend that the Government should set out how the strategy will be flexible enough to cope with the various possible outcomes, and should explain what the differing options are. If the military action is successful but the overall strategy does not adapt, then DAESH will continue to pose a threat to stability and safety across the region and, indeed, much more widely.* (Paragraph 32)
4. At present the UK has as its primary focus the defeat of DAESH in Iraq. However, the rapid increase in DAESH-affiliated groups elsewhere should be a cause for grave concern, particularly where there are strong links between the DAESH leadership in Iraq and Syria and those groups. The danger posed by the majority of these DAESH-affiliated groups may be minimal at present, but the evidence presented to us suggests that, if unchecked, they could form yet another front in the battle against international Islamist terrorism. The International Community needs to work together to provide a holistic approach to counter violent Islamic extremism through improving education, governance and infrastructure in areas at risk as well as countering the funding and export of extreme Islamic views. This should be parallel and complimentary to any military action. (Paragraph 33)
5. *We recommend that, as part of an explanation of how it is countering the global threat from DAESH, the Government should provide more details of the military and capacity-building operations which are being undertaken to counter the DAESH affiliates.* (Paragraph 34)

The UK military effort

6. It is disappointing that the MoD has been unable to provide us with the full statistical analysis of UK airstrikes in Syria which we requested. Their inability to do so for understandable reasons, nonetheless may tend to undermine the Government's assertion that the bombing campaign in Syria is in support of credible moderate ground forces (apart from the Kurds) which was one of the key elements of its argument for extending the UK's campaign against DAESH to that country. (Paragraph 74)

7. *If the Government is to continue to justify and validate its policy of airstrikes in Syria, it should provide the necessary detail on what is being targeted. We therefore recommend that the MoD put this information, as far as possible, into the public domain so that realistic judgements on the effectiveness of the UK's air operations in Syria can be made. At the very least, Government ministers ought to be made aware of such figures. (Paragraph 75)*
8. In Iraq it is clear that air operations have been effective in reclaiming territory, despite the adaptation of DAESH tactics to counter that threat. This is because of their role in supporting identifiable local ground forces which are able to take and hold territory. The air operation in Syria is much smaller mainly because of a lack of partners on the ground, other than Kurdish forces, which can benefit from that support. (Paragraph 76)
9. Also in Iraq, the UK training effort appears to be both effective and substantial. Over a third of troops trained by the Coalition have received this training from UK military personnel. The expansion of training offered by UK troops means that the UK now has a presence at all of the Iraqi training bases. In the gifting of equipment, the length of time that it has taken for the UK Government to re-supply Peshmerga forces with ammunition for machine-guns it previously supplied, is of great concern. *We recommend that, in future, the Government should ensure that its support to allies and partners is more consistent and timely. (Paragraph 77)*
10. *We recommend that the Government should provide an assessment of how long it took the UK to get to the position where it was operating at strength within the Coalition and how long it can maintain that position. (Paragraph 78)*
11. *We also recommend that the Government should provide clarification on the training of Syrian opposition fighters including the number of individuals it has trained, the number of UK military personnel currently engaged with such training, and most importantly the identity of the groups to which the trainees belonged. (Paragraph 79)*
12. *It is clear that the UK is part of an International Coalition and that the strategy of that Coalition is subject to revision by those involved. However, the reasons for such revisions and the resultant changes in the UK effort ought to be explained. Whilst the discussion, for instance, about modifying the train-and-equip programme in Syria may have taken place in the United States, the UK Government has failed to set out why changes have been made and what impact they have had on UK personnel or those they have been training. The publication of information concerning the UK's military effort, whilst greater than in some previous operations, ought to demonstrate how UK military actions are supporting the wider strategy. (Paragraph 80)*

Armed actors in Syria

13. The Government's case for extending UK military operations to Syria was based on a strategy of supporting the 70,000 moderate opposition forces identified by the then Prime Minister, David Cameron. We have sought to test this figure in terms of both numbers and orientation. We understand why the Government have been unable to provide a list of the groups, since that would risk providing useful intelligence to the Assad regime. However, we have relied upon outside organisations who have

published such lists and most, if not all, the individual groups have as a result, already been identified. That information is in the public domain which means that the groups will already be known to the Assad regime. (Paragraph 105)

14. As with the DAESH affiliates, the threat posed by Jabhat al-Nusra must be monitored by the Government. The danger posed by an organisation which has been one of al-Qaeda's most successful affiliates may well be limited to Syria at present but the potential for it to carry out terrorist attacks globally may increasingly become a reality. Its recent rebranding and formal separation from al-Qaeda, may increase its influence over other elements of Islamist armed opposition in Syria, narrowing the political options for the future still further. (Paragraph 113)
15. *We recommend that the Government should set out how it is monitoring the threat posed by Jabhat al-Nusra/Jabhat Fatah al-Sham and how it intends to counter that threat.* (Paragraph 114)
16. The Russians are a key actor in the Syrian theatre and, in the past six months, the Assad regime and its supporters have begun to tackle DAESH in its Syrian locations. Military cooperation with Russia may be the only way in which DAESH can finally be suppressed or defeated in Syria. However, active cooperation could take place only with the agreement of the International Coalition—including, as it does, some regional powers which are wholly opposed to the Assad regime. (Paragraph 123)
17. Two years into the military campaign to counter the threat from DAESH, we are seeing the impact of the UK effort in the International Coalition. Whilst the military effort in Iraq is bearing fruit, that is much less certain in Syria. We believe this is partly due to the aspirations of the UK Government in respect of each country. The goals in Iraq are to remove territory from DAESH, to strengthen the Iraqi Government and to maintain Iraq as a unitary state. The goals in Syria are not only to defeat DAESH, but also to help bring into being a Government which will be neither authoritarian and repressive, on the one hand, nor Islamist and extreme, on the other. These goals cannot be accomplished by military means alone. We discuss the wider strategy and the importance of the political aspect of the fight to counter DAESH in the next section. (Paragraph 126)

UK strategy in the Middle East and the wider strategy against extremism

18. The argument that it must be a local force—not a Western one—which takes and holds territory has been borne out by previous experiences of intervention. Such a strategy (western air power and local ground troops) is reliant on political progress alongside military achievement. Whilst the progress in the military campaign to counter DAESH is beginning to gain momentum, the same cannot be said for the progress of political reform. A lack of political reform in Iraq, let alone Syria, may well undermine the military progress to date, removing the threat of DAESH only for it to be replaced by other groups posing similar or even greater threats. (Paragraph 144)

19. *The Government must set out exactly how it intends to help ensure that political reform is achieved and what action it is planning to take to keep it in step with the military campaign.* (Paragraph 145)
20. The long-term strategy articulated by the Secretary of State—a stable, secure, democratic Middle East—is laudable, but it remains to be seen how the Government expects to achieve this. It is far from clear that the forces unleashed in the Arab uprisings are capable of transition, at this stage of societal development, into the sort of pluralist and tolerant democratic systems that conform to Western ideals. *We recommend that the Government should deliver on its undertaking to develop a realistic strategy for the Gulf and should set out how it intends to work with partners, allies and international organisations to promote stability in the Middle East.* (Paragraph 149)
21. There are legitimate concerns that have been raised about the overall strategy to counter DAESH. There is potential for DAESH to be defeated territorially only for them (or another group) to continue to pose a threat to stability in the Middle East and the West in general. The importance of stability in the Middle East is clear. If the International Coalition (and therefore the UK) finds itself reduced to a binary choice between an Assad-style dictatorship or a revolutionary Islamist alternative, there will need to be a hard-headed evaluation of which of the unpalatable prospects poses the lesser threat to our national interests. (Paragraph 150)

Changing the way we intervene

22. It is clear that recent interventions have required much more than mere military campaigns. There have been criticisms of levels of engagement in the political sphere in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Syria too. It is also clear that there is no single formula for success but that understanding the local political and cultural context, as well as the nature of the situation on the ground, is absolutely essential. We welcome the emergence of a new doctrine that extends thinking about intervention to include other actors such as aid agencies, NGOs and the private sector. The ‘whole-of-Government’ approach, epitomised by the National Security Council, is clearly an improvement on the management of previous interventions. However, despite that innovation, a number of concerns have been raised about interventions that have taken place since the National Security Council was created. This indicates that there are still flaws and weaknesses in the system. Some of these were identified in our predecessor Committee’s Report (HC 682) on ‘Decision-making in Defence Policy’, published in March 2015. (Paragraph 158)
23. The fact that witnesses repeatedly identified reactionary politics as a drag on overall outcomes, points to a pessimistic conclusion—that countries riven by intense tribal and religious divisions may take a very long time indeed to accept the basic principles of democracy and equal rights. If so, no amount of injected international aid will significantly accelerate the adoption of democratic norms and values as the basis of their political systems. (Paragraph 163)
24. Stabilisation and reconstruction are central in the fight to counter DAESH, particularly in Iraq. We were impressed by both the calibre and the (relatively low) cost of the work carried out by the UNDP when we were in Iraq. (Paragraph 165)

25. *The disparity between military effort and that on stabilisation is concerning. Whilst stabilisation does not carry the same cost as a military operation, the low priority placed on stabilisation does not reassure us about Iraq's long-term future. We recommend that the Government ensures that the diplomatic and development effort relates more closely to the size of the military effort, whilst recognising that not all societies have reached a stage of development for fully-fledged democratic institutions to command general assent. (Paragraph 166)*
26. We shall, therefore consider holding a further inquiry, especially in the light of the Chilcot Report, which will look at the way the UK intervenes—the decision-making process, the preparation and planning both for the military campaign and its aftermath, and the way that the UK Government ensures that it can maintain a solid commitment to a strategy which is comprehensive and achievable. Only in this way can we be confident that lessons learnt from previous interventions are understood before any future ones are contemplated. (Paragraph 167)

Appendix 1: Tables showing airstrikes

Tables used in the report

UK Airstrikes in Iraq and Syria, December 2015—August 2016

Month	Iraq	Syria
December	75	11
January	79	20
February	54	6
March	64	3
April	67	5
May	65	3
June	72	5
July	39	5
August	35	7
Total	550	65

Source: MoD Written Evidence [See Appendix 3]

International Coalition airstrikes in Iraq and Syria during the period the UK was engaged

	Airstrikes in Iraq (between 27 September 2014 and 22 May 2016)	Airstrikes in Syria (between 1 December 2015 and 22 May 2016)
US	8287	939
Non-US	2721	77
UK	761	42 ²⁴²
UK as % of non-US strikes	28%	55%
UK as % of all strikes	7%	4%

Source: Table prepared by Committee staff using data provided by UK Government and US Department of Defense

Tables with information provided by the Ministry of Defence

UK airstrikes in both Syria and Iraq until the end of August 2016

Year	Month	Number of airstrikes in Iraq	Number of airstrikes in Syria
2014	AUG	0	N/A
	SEP	2	N/A
	OCT	8	N/A
	NOV	26	N/A
	DEC	26	N/A

²⁴² On 24 May, the Secretary of State announced that 43 airstrikes had been carried out in Syria. However, according to Gov.uk, one of these took place on 23 May and therefore outside the timeframe represented by the US DoD data. Later correspondence from the Ministry of Defence (which is shown in Appendix 3) appears to suggest that the number of UK airstrikes was greater than 42 in the period examined here but without exact dates for each of the airstrikes, it is not possible to update the data in this table.

Year	Month	Number of airstrikes in Iraq	Number of airstrikes in Syria
2015	JAN	28	N/A
	FEB	19	N/A
	MAR	29	N/A
	APR	26	N/A
	MAY	34	N/A
	JUN	28	N/A
	JUL	26	N/A
	AUG	29	N/A
	SEP	34	N/A
	OCT	17	N/A
	NOV	58	N/A
	DEC	75	11
2016	JAN	79	20
	FEB	54	6
	MAR	64	3
	APR	67	5
	MAY	65	3
	JUNE	72	5
	JULY	39	5
	AUGUST	35	7
Total		940	65

UK weapons releases vs targets in Syria up until August 2016

		Number of Airstrikes	Weapon Release Events									
			Infrastructure		Fielded Enemy Forces		Vehicles		Weapons, Ammunition and Materiel		IED	Other
Year	Month	Building/Structure	POL ²⁴³	EF ²⁴⁴ in Building	EF in Open	Moving	Static	Weapon Emplacement	Weapons Cache			
2015	DEC	11	0	21	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
2016	JAN	20	6	1	15	5	0	21	0	8	0	0
	FEB	6	1	0	2	4	0	4	0	2	0	0
	MAR	3	7	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
	APR	5	2	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0
	MAY	3	6	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
	JUNE	5	0	0	4	2	1	0	0	0	0	0
	JULY	5	0	0	2	7	0	0	0	0	0	0
	AUGUST	7	0	0	16	4	1	8	1	0	0	0
Total		65	22	22	39	24	3	34	2	10	0	0

243 Petrol, Oil, Lubricant

244 Enemy Forces

UK weapons releases vs targets in Iraq up until August 2016

Year	Month	Number of airstrikes	Weapon Release Events										
			Infrastructure		Fielded Enemy Forces		Vehicles		Weapons, Ammunition and Materiel				
			Building/Structure	POL ²⁴⁵	EF ²⁴⁶ in Building	EF in Open	Moving	Static	Weapon Emplacement	Weapons Cache	IED	Other	
2014	AUG	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	SEP	2	0	0	1	2	1	2	0	0	0	0	0
	OCT	8	14	0	4	3	2	4	0	0	0	0	0
	NOV	26	3	0	5	25	4	17	0	0	0	0	0
	DEC	26	9	0	0	15	1	29	0	0	0	0	1
2015	JAN	28	4	0	6	23	6	25	0	0	0	0	0
	FEB	19	5	0	0	11	1	10	0	0	4	0	0
	MAR	29	3	0	6	20	4	16	3	1	0	0	0
	APR	26	17	0	5	17	1	10	1	0	1	0	0
	MAY	34	9	0	12	7	6	10	4	4	1	0	0
	JUN	28	13	0	15	3	2	10	0	0	0	0	0
	JUL	26	9	0	9	4	3	7	5	0	4	0	0
	AUG	29	11	0	4	14	5	17	2	3	1	0	0
	SEP	34	2	0	17	15	7	8	4	2	5	0	0
	OCT	17	0	0	10	14	1	3	3	0	1	0	0
	NOV	58	0	0	27	30	1	11	10	6	5	0	0
	DEC	75	5	0	69	31	0	19	3	0	2	1	0

Year	Month	Number of airstrikes	Weapon Release Events									
			Infrastructure		Fielded Enemy Forces		Vehicles		Weapons, Ammunition and Materiel			
			Building/Structure	POL ²⁴⁵	EF ²⁴⁶ in Building	EF in Open	Moving	Static	Weapon Emplacement	Weapons Cache	IED	Other
2016	JAN	79	8	0	86	34	1	19	6	5	5	0
	FEB	54	4	0	44	24	0	10	9	5	2	1
	MAR	64	24	0	65	27	1	8	10	4	0	7
	APR	67	8	0	61	17	0	6	18	19	7	4
	MAY	65	14	0	41	16	4	11	20	28	5	2
2016	JUNE	72	22	0	81	45	7	23	18	2	0	3
	JULY	39	3	0	18	18	5	10	15	1	3	4
	AUGUST	35	7	0	17	13	1	9	18	0	0	1
Total		940	194	0	603	428	64	294	149	80	46	24

245 Petrol, Oil, Lubricant

246 Enemy Forces

UK Weapons released in Iraq and Syria by the UK up to end of August 2016

	Weapon Type	Number of weapons fired at targets in Iraq from September 2014	Number of weapons fired at targets in Syria from 2 December 2015
REAPER MQ9	Hellfire (AGM-114P)	109	0
	Hellfire (AGM 114R2)	319	45
	GBU-12	34	3
Tornado GR4	Dual Mode Seeker Brimstone	187	25
	Paveway IV (Mk1 & Mk2)	666	58
	Enhanced Paveway 3	4	0
	Enhanced Paveway 2	15	5
	Storm Shadow	4	0
Typhoon FGR4	Paveway IV (Mk2 only)	563	38
Total		1901	174

Appendix 2: Airstrike data from US Department of Defense website

Data published on 2 December 2015

As of 3:59 p.m. EST Dec. 1, the U.S. and Coalition have conducted a total of 8,573 strikes (5,639 Iraq / 2,934 Syria).

- U.S. has conducted 6,692 strikes in Iraq and Syria (3,916 Iraq / 2,776 Syria)
- Rest of Coalition has conducted 1,881 strikes in Iraq and Syria (1,723 Iraq / 158 Syria)

The countries that have participated in the strikes include:

- In Iraq: (1) Australia, (2) Belgium, (3) Canada, (4) Denmark, (5) France, (6) Jordan, (7) The Netherlands, & (8) UK
- In Syria: (1) Australia, (2) Bahrain, (3) Canada, (4) France, (5) Jordan, (6) Saudi Arabia, (7) Turkey & (8) UAE

As of Nov. 28, U.S. and partner nation aircraft have flown an estimated 59,015 sorties in support of operations in Iraq and Syria.

Data published on 23 May 2016

As of 4:59 p.m. EST May 22, the U.S. and Coalition have conducted a total of 12,453 strikes (8,503 Iraq / 3,950 Syria).

- U.S. has conducted 9,495 strikes in Iraq and Syria (5,780 Iraq / 3,715 Syria)
- Rest of Coalition has conducted 2,958 strikes in Iraq and Syria (2,723 Iraq / 235 Syria)

The countries that have participated in the strikes include:

- In Iraq: (1) Australia, (2) Belgium, (3) Canada, (4) Denmark, (5) France, (6) Jordan, (7) The Netherlands, and (8) UK
- In Syria: (1) Australia, (2) Bahrain, (3) Canada, (4) France, (5) Jordan, (6) The Netherlands, (7) Saudi Arabia, (8) Turkey (9) UAE and (10) UK

As of Apr. 16, U.S. and partner nation aircraft have flown an estimated 91,821 sorties in support of operations in Iraq and Syria.

Appendix 3: Correspondence between the Committee and the Secretary of State

9 June 2016: MoD to Chairman

HCDC INQUIRY INTO UK MILITARY OPERATIONS IN IRAQ AND SYRIA: FOLLOW-UP ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS RAISED AT THE EVIDENCE SESSION ON 26 MAY 2016

The costs of the military operations against DAESH

The net additional cost of military operations has been met from the HM Treasury Special Reserve and the Deployed Military Activity Pool. Ultimately, the cost will be determined by the length of the campaign and the nature and extent of the UK airstrike contribution. As an indicator, the net additional cost of military operations against DAESH in Iraq and Syria between August 2014 and 31 March 2016 is estimated to be around £250 million. The MOD Annual Report and Accounts for 2015–16 are still to be finalised, and thus this estimate remains subject to change until the Accounts are laid before Parliament prior to Summer recess.

The nature of the close air support provided by RAF aircraft to local forces on the ground in both Iraq and Syria

Following the Committee hearing, the Clerk to the Committee has refined the request for information and seeks a month by month breakdown of:

- the number of airstrikes in Iraq;
- the number of airstrikes in Syria;
- the number of air strikes in Iraq that count as close air support and a breakdown of which armed forces they were in support of,
- the number of air strikes in Syria that count as close air support and a breakdown of which armed forces they were in support of.

Updated information about our weapons releases in Iraq and Syria is provided at Annex 1 and 2. This is UK-verified data, set against each weapons release and provides a better overall picture than providing the number of airstrikes. The Committee will note that the information in the table is divided along the lines of the targets that the Department has provided previously.

Turning to the question of “Close Air Support”, while this is sometimes used as a narrative term in online statements, the data we hold does not classify missions in this way because it is not information we need in order to evaluate effectiveness. We need to know whether targets have been prosecuted accurately, in a manner consistent with the Rules of Engagement and the principles of the Law of Armed Conflict, and whether the action has had the desired military effect against the target.

In Iraq, Coalition air activity including UK activity is delivered in direct support of the Government of Iraq and the Kurdish Regional Government in the fight against DAESH.

In Syria, as I set out to the Committee, the situation on the ground is much more complex. Unlike Iraq, there is no unified Government that represents all of the people, and there is a variety of moderate and more extreme groups; the situation is further complicated by Russia's military deployment. As we mentioned in our evidence, this has meant taking some finely balanced decisions. To date UK strikes in Syria have focused on pre-planned strikes against key DAESH infrastructure including fortified areas, command and control buildings, weapon manufacturing and storage facilities, targeting DAESH's oil infrastructure, and downgrading their ability to finance their fighting capability. The Coalition as a whole has also targeted DAESH in northwest Syria, where they are engaged in combat with non-extremist Syrian opposition forces.

Annex 1 (to the Secretary of State's letter)

Weapons Releases vs Targets—Syria

		Weapon Release Events									
		Infrastructure		Fielded Enemy Forces		Vehicles		Weapons, Ammunition and Materiel			
Year	Month	Building/Structure	POL	EF in Building	EF in Open	Moving	Static	Weapon Emplacement	Weapons Cache	IED	Other
2015	DEC	0	21	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
2016	JAN	6	1	15	5	0	21	0	8	0	0
	FEB	1	0	2	4	0	4	0	2	0	0
	MAR	7	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
	APR	2	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0
	MAY	6	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0

Annex 2 (to the Secretary of State's letter)

Weapons Releases vs Targets—Iraq

Year	Month	Weapon Release Events										
		Infrastructure		Fielded Enemy Forces		Vehicles		Weapons, Ammunition and Materiel				
		Building/Structure	POL	EF in Building	EF in Open	Moving	Static	Weapon Emplacement	Weapons Cache	IED	Other	
2014	AUG	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	SEP	0	0	1	2	1	2	0	0	0	0	0
	OCT	14	0	4	3	2	4	0	0	0	0	0
	NOV	3	0	5	25	4	17	0	0	0	0	0
	DEC	9	0	0	15	1	29	0	0	0	0	1
2015	JAN	4	0	6	23	6	25	0	0	0	0	0
	FEB	5	0	0	11	1	10	0	0	4	0	0
	MAR	3	0	6	20	4	16	3	1	0	0	0
	APR	17	0	5	17	1	10	1	0	1	0	0
	MAY	9	0	12	7	6	10	4	4	1	0	0
	JUN	13	0	15	3	2	10	0	0	0	0	0
	JUL	9	0	9	4	3	7	5	0	4	0	0
	AUG	11	0	4	14	5	17	2	3	1	0	0
	SEP	2	0	17	15	7	8	4	2	5	0	0
	OCT	0	0	10	14	1	3	3	0	1	0	0
	NOV	0	0	27	30	1	11	10	6	5	0	0
	DEC	5	0	69	31	0	19	3	0	2	1	0
2016	JAN	8	0	86	34	1	19	6	5	5	0	0
	FEB	4	0	44	24	0	10	9	5	2	1	0
	MAR	24	0	65	27	1	8	10	4	0	7	0
	APR	7	0	60	17	0	10	18	19	7	0	0
	MAY	13	0	41	16	4	12	19	28	5	1	0

16 June 2016: Chairman to MoD

Thank you for the follow-up evidence which you provided on 9 June. Unfortunately, the evidence did not contain the information which you had agreed to provide us with when you gave evidence to the Committee on 26 May (Q395–7). Instead of numbers of airstrikes, we were given the number of weapon releases. We note that the Ministry of Defence has used different definitions of ‘airstrike’ during the military campaign in Iraq and Syria, but that it currently uses the Coalition method to determine airstrike numbers.²⁴⁷ In order to ensure that we have a good overall picture of the British military effort and its role in the coalition, we need to have comparable data to that published by the Coalition.

We have produced the attached pro-forma table to set out the information that we require. We presume that there is no “double-counting” in the table you previously provided, listing the categories of targets subjected to weapons releases. Please confirm that this is the case. If not, please resupply the previous data in a table with categories which do not overlap.

Similarly, when you supply the data for our pro-forma table on the numbers of airstrikes against each category of targets, please confirm that there is no overlap between these categories too.

We are also happy for you to clarify in writing where the UK is further supporting the Coalition in other ways (such as target acquisition).

It is not acceptable that you have failed to provide us with the numbers of airstrikes that were in support of opposition fighters on the ground. We do not believe that the Ministry of Defence holds data which includes the category of targets but not whether those targets were in support of ground forces. What we request is a list of which airstrikes were mounted in support of armed opposition fighters engaging the enemy in the target area.

As the information requested is straightforward to supply, we ask that you provide us with it by 5pm on Monday 20 June. If you are unable to provide us with this information in writing we may need to invite you to give further oral evidence on this inquiry.

247 See [FOI2015/07034](#), dated 2 September 2015

Number of UK airstrikes²⁴⁸ between December 2015 and May 2016

A: Number of airstrikes

B: Number of airstrikes in support of fighters on the ground

	Target	December		January				February				March				April				May				Total
		Iraq		Syria		Iraq		Syria		Iraq		Syria		Iraq		Syria		Iraq		Syria				
		A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B			
Infrastructure	Building/Structure																							
	Petrol, Oil, Lubricant infrastructure																							
Fielded Enemy Forces	EF in Building																							
	EF in Open																							
Vehicles	Moving																							
	Static																							
Weapons, Ammunition and Material	Weapon Emplacement																							
	Weapons Cache																							
	IED																							
	Other (Please Specify)																							
Total																								

248 An airstrike is defined for the purpose of this table as an attack on a single target in a single mission, whether by a single aircraft and munition or multiple aircraft and munitions. This conforms to the definition used by the international coalition.

20 June 2016: MoD to Chairman

Thank you for your letter of 16 June 2016 asking for a breakdown of information on the UK's contribution to the Coalition air campaign by air strikes rather than by weapon releases, and for information on which air strikes were in support of opposition fighters on the ground in Iraq and in Syria.

Your letter states that the Ministry of Defence currently uses the Coalition method to determine air strike numbers. Following my statement to the House last year (16 July 2015: Column 32WS), it would be more accurate to say that the Ministry of Defence is using Coalition-produced numbers for UK air strikes to ensure consistency with Coalition data. Unfortunately, this Coalition data is not categorised or available from the Coalition in the form you seek. This explains why we are also publishing UK data on weapon releases which can be broken down into greater detail and which provides a fuller picture of the RAF's contribution to the Coalition air campaign.

You also requested a breakdown of airstrikes that were mounted in support of armed opposition fighters engaging the enemy in the target area. Unfortunately we do not categorise the information we hold in this way. This is because it is not needed to assess whether the result has had the desired military effect or to confirm that the target has been prosecuted accurately and in a legal and proportionate manner. An alternative categorisation would require a re-evaluation of each individual Mission Report—and its associated material, including the weapons system's video—to assess the purpose of the mission and its weapons release. As an indication of the magnitude of this task, there are currently over 3,000 pieces of archived information as background to the 819 strikes the RAF had undertaken as at 27 May. This would be a lengthy exercise of no operational value to my Department and which would divert resources from critical work supporting counter-DAESH operations.

I can, however, confirm that there is no “double-counting” in any of the data that has been provided. It may help your analysis to have some further information on the categories set out in my previous memorandum:

Under “Infrastructure”, the “POL” category (petrol, oil and lubricants) is generally exclusively interdiction, because our strikes against oilfields have a long-term, strategic value in reducing DAESH's income from oil. But strikes against DAESH's major command and control HQs under the “Building/Structure” category—around Raqqa and Mosul, for example - have value in shaping future ground operations in the longer term.

The majority of “Fielded Enemy Forces” targets are likely to be on or near the front line where local ground forces are engaged or about to be engaged against DAESH.

“Vehicles” might include an armed pick-up truck, on its way into an operation, or already engaged but could also include a crane or rig on its way to repair a damaged oil well that we have previously targeted, which would be considered to be a component of strategic interdiction.

Strikes against “Weapons, Ammunition and Materiel” are likely to be in the context of front line operations but the distance from the frontline and the timing of future operations would also be relevant.

“IEDs” are also likely to be attacked because of the immediate threat they pose to advancing forces.

I hope that this sets out the background more clearly and assists the Committee in its inquiry.

4 July 2016: Chairman to MoD

I write in response to your letter dated 20 June 2016. The information you supplied did not address the Committee’s questions in sufficient detail. Therefore, I am writing to request the following information which is set in numbered points below. I should make clear that this information is key to our inquiry into UK military operations in Iraq and Syria.

1. You have helpfully previously provided us with data on the numbers of each make of weapon released in Iraq and Syria until the end of April 2016. We would therefore request that you provide us with the number of each of the different types (broken down by make) of weapons released in a) Iraq and b) Syria for May and June 2016.
2. You have previously published monthly totals of airstrikes in Iraq (under the previous definition and the Coalition definition) up to the end of June 2015 (see table 1) We are requesting that you update this data from for each month from July 2015 until the end of June 2016. If you are not willing to do so, please could you give your reasons?
3. You have also published monthly totals of airstrikes in Syria from December 2015 to 30 May 2016 (see table 2). We are requesting that you update this data to include 31 May and June 2016. For the sake of consistency, it would be helpful if this information could be presented in the same form as the information in table 1. Again, if you are not willing to do so, please could you give your reasons?
4. In your response dated 20 June 2016, you stated that it would be too time-consuming for the MoD to provide details of all UK airstrikes in direct support of opposition forces fighting on the ground. Table 2 states that the UK had conducted 48 airstrikes in Syria. We do not believe that it would be an onerous burden to provide this information on those 48 airstrikes and request that you provide that information. Thus, on the basis of the breakdown of weapons releases you have already supplied, it seems improbable that airstrikes would have been mounted in direct support of moderate forces on the ground in more than a limited proportion of these 48 airstrikes - primarily those which you describe as being carried out against enemy forces in buildings and in the open. Again, if you are unwilling to provide that information, we will expect an explanation. This information would help address the concern that little if any bombing is being carried out in close support of armed groups fighting DAESH in Syria beyond that in support of Kurdish-led forces such as the Syrian Democratic Forces.
5. The Committee also would like a list of the main armed opposition moderate groups—apart from the Kurds—who we are supporting in the bombing campaign in Syria. If you are not willing to do so, please could you give your reasons?

I would be grateful if you could provide us with the information by Monday 11 July.

Table 1: UK airstrikes in Iraq²⁴⁹

	Monthly Strikes–UK Method	Cumulative Total–UK Method	Monthly Strikes–Coalition Method	Cumulative Total–Coalition Method
September - 2014	2	2	2	2
October - 2014	15	17	8	10
November - 2014	40	57	26	36
December - 2014	33	90	26	62
January - 2015	46	136	28	90
February - 2015	24	160	19	109
March - 2015	42	202	29	138
April - 2015	34	236	26	164
May - 2015	37	273	34	198
June - 2015	30	308	28	226

Table 2: Number of UK airstrikes in Syria

Month	Number of Strikes
December - 2015	11
January - 2016	20
February - 2016	6
March - 2016	3
April - 2016	5
May (as of 30 May) - 2016	3

These strike numbers are constantly reviewed and updated by the Coalition to ensure records are as complete and accurate as possible. As such, there may be minor changes in future statements regarding such statistics.

9 July 2016: MoD to Chairman

Thank you for your letter of 4 July.

In answer to your first question, the table at Annex A updates the information about weapons releases in Iraq and Syria for the months of May and June 2016. Your second and third questions request monthly data on RAF strikes in Iraq from July 2015 to end June 2016 based on the Coalition method of calculating strikes and on the former UK methodology. As explained in my letter of 20 June and in the Written Ministerial Statement from which your Table 1 is drawn, we decided last year that it would be preferable for consistency to use Coalition produced information. Updated information on this basis is in the tables at Annex B. We do not hold any data calculated by the UK methodology since June 2015 and consider that there would be no operational value in retrospectively producing it.

You also requested that we should categorise the strikes conducted in Syria to break out those mounted in direct support of opposition forces fighting on the ground. As I explained previously, we do not hold information in this form and there is no operational benefit to

249 HC Deb, 16 July 2015, [col. 31WS](#)

the opportunity cost of diverting Departmental resources to this work; however, as you have indicated, the information we have provided in relation to weapon releases, when taken with the additional information on the various categories of target provided in my last letter to you, should allow conclusions to be drawn on the broad order contribution of RAF aircraft against different types of target in Syria.

In relation to UK air support to forces engaged in the counter-DAESH fight in Syria, I would stress that neither the UK nor the Coalition is undertaking a generalised bombing campaign in Syria in support of moderate armed opposition groups. Rather the Coalition, including the RAF, is giving targeted air support to specific counter-DAESH offensives, in particular in northwest Syria where the Syrian Democratic Forces are engaged around Manbij and where other opposition forces have been seeking to push eastwards from the area of Azaaz and Mar' a. The Coalition Air Operations Centre allocates targets across Iraq and Syria on a case by case basis according to operational need and the availability and suitability of different Coalition aircraft and weapon systems. In each case, the option chosen balances a range of factors. The availability of RAF aircraft and weapon systems to contribute to the counter-DAESH fight, both strategic and tactical and across both theatres, provides important additional flexibility to the Coalition enabling it to prosecute the overall counter-DAESH campaign more effectively.

Finally, you ask for a list of the “main armed opposition moderate groups - apart from the Kurds- who we are supporting in Syria”. As you are aware, the Prime Minister set out last year our estimate that there were around 70,000 Syrian opposition fighters on the ground who do not belong to extremist groups. Many of these were linked to the Free Syrian Army. It should be noted that information on individual groups was drawn in large part from intelligence. It would not be to the benefit of these non-extremist opposition fighters if we were to make their details public to DAESH and the Syrian regime. My Right Honourable Friend the Minister of State for the Armed Forces provided two written answers on 22 April 2016 (33816 and 33889) which noted our assessment that non-extremist opposition numbers had held up despite recent pressure and that numbers in groups fighting DAESH were likely to have increased.

Annex A—Weapon Releases in Iraq and Syria

Weapon Type Released	May 2016			June 2016		
	Iraq	Syria	Total	Iraq	Syria	Total
Hellfire	13	1	14	49	4	53
DMS Brimstone	11	0	11	10	0	10
Enhanced Paveway 3	0	0	0	0	0	0
Paveway IV	118	2	120	110	6	116
Enhanced Paveway 2	0	5	5	15	0	15
GBU-12	1	0	1	11	0	11
Storm Shadow	0	0	0	4	0	4
Total	143	8	151	319	10	329

Annex B—Number of Airstrikes

Iraq

Month	Number of UK strikes
July 2015	26
August 2015	29
September 2015	34
October 2015	17
November 2015	58
December 2015	75
January 2016	79
February 2016	54
March 2016	64
April 2016	67
May 2016	65
June 2016	72

Syria

Date	Number of UK strikes
December 2015	11
January 2016	20
February 2016	6
March 2016	3
April 2016	5
May 2016	3
June 2016	5

These strike numbers are constantly reviewed and updated by the Coalition to ensure records are as complete and accurate as possible. As such, there may be minor changes in future statements regarding such statistics.

8 August 2016: Chairman to MoD

Thank you for the follow up evidence which you have previously provided to our inquiry into UK military operations in Iraq and Syria. It has been helpful in allowing us to evaluate the UK's military effort to counter DAESH. Before we publish our report, we wish to ensure that we have the most up to date figures available.

We have produced the attached tables to set out the information that we require, based on the information that you have previously provided to us. We would like to have the information for June and July by 30 August. Due to our report publication timetable, we require the information for August by 5 September. I apologise for the short time frame but it is unavoidable.

Syria												
Year	Month	Number of Airstrike	Weapon Release Events									
			Infrastructure		Fielded Enemy Forces		Vehicles		Weapons, Ammunition and Materiel			
			Building/Structure	POL ²⁵⁰	EF ²⁵¹ in Building	EF in Open	Moving	Static	Weapon Emplacement	Weapons Cache	IED	Other
2016	JUNE											
	JULY											
	AUGUST											
Total												

Iraq												
Year	Month	Number of airstrikes	Weapon Release Events									
			Infrastructure		Fielded Enemy Forces		Vehicles		Weapons, Ammunition and Materiel			
			Building/Structure	POL	EF in Building	EF in Open	Moving	Static	Weapon Emplacement	Weapons Cache	IED	Other
2016	JUNE											
	JULY											
	AUGUST											
Total												

250 Petrol, Oil, Lubricant

251 Enemy Forces

Weapon Type	Number of weapons fired at targets in Iraq from September 2014	Number of weapons fired at targets in Syria from 2 December 2015
Hellfire		
Dual Mode Seeker Brimstone		
Paveway IV		
Enhanced Paveway 3		
Enhanced Paveway 2		
GBU-12		
Storm Shadow		
Total		

25 August 2016: MoD to Chairman

Thank you for your letter dated 8th August 2016.

You asked for the latest data for our airstrikes in Iraq and Syria, to complement data we have provided to you previously.

The first part of the data you have requested—the data on weapons released by platform and weapon type—is to be found at Annex A. We will provide an update to include data for August 2016, as you have requested.

At Annex B, we are providing the updated figures for June and July 2016, relating to weapons released against target type. Again, we will update you on the data for August.

As always, the data is believed to be complete and correct at the time of issue. Our operational activity databases are frequently reviewed and any errors and omissions are corrected. It is therefore possible that future statements might not match this statement exactly. Naturally, our aim is to ensure that our records are as complete and correct as possible.

We hope to be able to comply with your request for the August data by 5th September.

Annex A**Weapons Releases by Platform and Weapons Type**

Aircraft	Weapon	Weapons released before 2/12/15		Weapons released after 2/12/15 to end July 16		Total
		Iraq	Syria	Iraq	Syria	
REAPER MQ9	AGM-114P	109	0	0	0	109
	AGM-114R2	165	0	129	31	325
	GBU12	14	0	19	3	36
Tornado GR4	PWIV Mk1	0	0	164	7	171
	PWIV Mk2	328	0	165	45	538
	EPW2	0	0	15	5	20
	EPW3	0	0	2	0	2
	DMSB	105	0	78	19	202
	StormShadow	0	0	4	0	4
Typhoon FGR4	PWIV Mk2	0	0	534	22	556
Total		721	0	1110	132	1963

Annex B

Weapons Released by Target Type

Iraq		Weapon Release Events									
Year	Month	Infrastructure		Fielded Enemy Forces		Vehicles		Weapons, Ammunition and Materiel			
		Building/ Structure	POL	EF in Building	EF in Open	Moving	Static	Weapon Emplacement	Weapons Cache	IED	Other
2016	JUNE	22	0	81	45	7	23	18	2	0	3
	JULY	3	0	18	18	5	10	15	1	3	4

Syria		Weapon Release Events									
Year	Month	Infrastructure		Fielded Enemy Forces		Vehicles		Weapons, Ammunition and Materiel			
		Building/ Structure	POL	EF in Building	EF in Open	Moving	Static	Weapon Emplacement	Weapons Cache	IED	Other
2016	JUNE	0	0	4	2	1	0	0	0	0	0
	JULY	0	0	2	7	0	0	0	0	0	0

5 September 2016: MoD to Chairman

In your letter dated 8th August 2016, you asked for the latest data for our airstrikes and weapons releases in Iraq and Syria, to complement data we have provided to you previously. Having provided the information for June and July in my letter of 23rd August, I write to now to provide an update.

The first part of the data you have requested—weapons released by platform and weapon type—is to be found at Annex A, updated to include August 2016.

At Annex B1, the updated figures relating to weapons released against target type are provided for Iraq - and for Syria at Annex B2. For completeness, the figures for the entire operation since 2014 have been included.

You had also included a column in the tables at Annex B relating to numbers of airstrikes by month. We are now providing this information for June, July and August in the table at Annex C. We have provided this information separately because numbers of airstrikes cannot be compared directly with weapons releases. It is possible that a weapons release might not result in a strike; conversely, a numbers of weapons releases can result in a single strike.

As always, the data is believed to be complete and correct at the time of issue. Our operational activity databases are frequently reviewed and any errors and omissions are corrected. It is therefore possible that future statements might not match this statement exactly. Naturally, our aim is to ensure that our records are as complete and correct as possible.

Annex A

Weapons Releases by Platform and Weapons Type

Aircraft	Weapon	Weapons released before 2/12/15		Weapons released after and including 2/12/15 to end August 16		Total
		Iraq	Syria	Iraq	Syria	
REAPER MQ9	AGM-114P	109	0	0	0	109
	AGM-114R2	166	0	153	45	364
	GBU12	14	0	20	3	37
Tornado GR4	PWIV Mk1	0	0	173	13	186
	PWIV Mk2	328	0	165	45	538
	EPW2	0	0	15	5	20
	EPW3	0	0	4	0	4
	DMSB	105	0	82	25	212
	StormShadow	0	0	4	0	4
Typhoon FGR4	PWIV Mk2	0	0	563	38	601

Annex B1

IRAQ		Weapon Release Events Against										
Year	Month	Infrastructure		Fielded Enemy Forces		Vehicles		Weapons, Ammunition and Materiel			Other	
		Building/Structure	POL	EF in Building	EF in Open	Moving	Static	Weapon Emplacement	Weapons Cache	IED		
2014	AUG	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	SEP	0	0	1	2	1	2	0	0	0	0	0
	OCT	14	0	4	3	2	4	0	0	0	0	0
	NOV	3	0	5	25	4	17	0	0	0	0	0
	DEC	9	0	0	15	1	29	0	0	0	0	1
	JAN	4	0	6	23	6	25	0	0	0	0	0
	FEB	5	0	0	11	1	10	0	0	0	4	0
	MAR	3	0	6	20	4	16	3	1	0	0	0
	APR	17	0	5	17	1	10	1	0	0	1	0
	MAY	9	0	12	7	6	10	4	4	1	0	0
	JUN	13	0	15	3	2	10	0	0	0	0	0
	JUL	9	0	9	4	3	7	5	0	4	0	0
AUG	11	0	4	14	5	17	2	3	1	0	0	
SEP	2	0	17	15	7	8	4	2	5	0	0	
OCT	0	0	10	14	1	3	3	0	1	0	0	
NOV	0	0	27	30	1	11	10	6	5	0	0	
DEC	5	0	69	31	0	19	3	0	2	1	1	
2016	JAN	8	0	86	34	1	19	6	5	5	0	0
	FEB	4	0	44	24	0	10	9	5	2	1	1
	MAR	24	0	65	27	1	8	10	4	0	7	7
	APR	8	0	61	17	0	6	18	19	7	4	4
	MAY	14	0	41	16	4	11	20	28	5	2	2
	JUN	22	0	81	45	7	23	18	2	0	3	3
	JUL	3	0	18	18	5	10	15	1	3	4	4
	AUG	7	0	17	13	1	9	18	0	0	1	1

Annex B2

SYRIA		Weapon Release Events Against									
		Infrastructure		Fielded Enemy Forces		Vehicles		Weapons, Ammunition and Materiel			
Year	Month	Building/Structure	POL	EF in Building	EF in Open	Moving	Static	Weapon Emplacement	Weapons Cache	IED	Other
2015	DEC	0	21	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
2016	JAN	6	1	15	5	0	21	0	8	0	0
	FEB	1	0	2	4	0	4	0	2	0	0
	MAR	7	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
	APR	2	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0
	MAY	6	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
	JUN	0	0	4	2	1	0	0	0	0	0
	JUL	0	0	2	7	0	0	0	0	0	0
	AUG	0	0	16	4	1	8	1	0	0	0

Annex C

Numbers of UK Airstrikes

	June 2016	July 2016	August 2016	Totals
Iraq	72	39	35	146
Syria	5	5	7	17
Total	77	44	42	163

Formal Minutes

Tuesday 13 September 2016

Members present:

Dr Julian Lewis, in the Chair

Douglas Chapman	Ruth Smeeth
James Gray	John Spellar
Johnny Mercer	Bob Stewart
Jim Shannon	Phil Wilson

Draft Report (*UK military operations in Syria and Iraq*), proposed by the Chair, brought up and read.

Ordered, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 52 read and agreed to.

Paragraph 53 read, as follows:

During the course of this inquiry we wrote to the Secretary of State seeking clarification on the UK bombing campaign in Syria and Iraq. In particular, we wanted details of the numbers of airstrikes and targets, and of how many airstrikes were in direct support of forces fighting on the ground. This information is of great importance if we are to evaluate accurately, the effectiveness of the United Kingdom's operations in both countries. Obtaining that information has not been straightforward and the Secretary of State's responses have been incomplete and unsatisfactory. The full correspondence is set out in Appendix 3. In relation to the number of airstrikes carried out in direct support of opposition forces on the ground in both Syria and Iraq, the Secretary of State responded:

Unfortunately we do not categorise the information we hold in this way. This is because it is not needed to assess whether the result has had the desired military effect or to confirm that the target has been prosecuted accurately and in a legal and proportionate manner. An alternative categorisation would require a re-evaluation of each individual Mission Report—and its associated material, including the weapons system's video—to assess the purpose of the mission and its weapons release. As an indication of the magnitude of this task, there are currently over 3,000 pieces of archived information as background to the 819 strikes the RAF had undertaken as at 27 May. This would be a lengthy exercise of no operational value to my Department and which would divert resources from critical work supporting counter-DAESH operations.²⁵²

Motion made and Question put, That the paragraph stand part of the Report.

The Committee divided.

Ayes, 2	Noes, 5
Douglas Chapman	James Gray
Jim Shannon	Ruth Smeeth
	John Spellar
	Bob Stewart
	Phil Wilson

Paragraphs 54 to 75 (now paragraphs 53 to 74) read and agreed to.

Paragraph 76 (now paragraph 75) read, as follows:

If the Government is to continue to justify and validate its policy of airstrikes in Syria, it must provide the necessary detail on what is being targeted and how those airstrikes directly support moderate forces on the ground which actually have a prospect of taking control. We therefore recommend that the MoD put this information into the public domain so that realistic judgements on the effectiveness of the UK's air operations in Syria can be made.

Motion made, to leave out paragraph 76 (now paragraph 75) and insert the following new paragraph:

If the Government is to continue to justify and validate its policy of airstrikes in Syria, it should provide the necessary detail on what is being targeted. We therefore recommend that the MoD put this information, as far as possible, into the public domain so that realistic judgements on the effectiveness of the UK's air operations in Syria can be made. At the very least, Government ministers ought to be made aware of such figures.—(*Phil Wilson.*)

The Committee divided.

Ayes, 6	Noes, 1
Douglas Chapman	Jim Shannon
James Gray	
Ruth Smeeth	
John Spellar	
Bob Stewart	
Phil Wilson	

Paragraphs 77 to 85 (now paragraphs 76 to 84) agreed to.

Paragraph 86 (now paragraph 85), read as follows:

This reluctance to identify the groups for fear of helping Assad has not prevented academics and experts outside of government researching and publishing lists of such groups. For example, Charles Lister, when at the Brookings Institute, produced his own analysis of what he regards as moderate opposition fighters. When we asked him whether he thought that any of the names on his list would be unknown to the Assad regime, he replied

that “Assad knows about the groups, but obviously defines them in a very different way”. He argued that Russia also had this information and that “all the groups together know what each of them represents, who their respective external backers are and what their political positions are”.²⁵³ His work—set out below—claims that the following groups would contribute around 65,000 of the stated 70,000 moderate opposition:

Grouping	Areas of Operation	Manpower
Southern Front (58 factions)	Deraa, Quneitra, Danascus	25,000
Northern Free Syrian Army (14 factions)	Homs, Hama, Idlib, Aleppo	20,000
Tajamu Fastaqm Kama Umrat	Aleppo	1,000
Thuwar al-sham	Aleppo	1,000
Jabhat al-Asala wal Tanmiya	Qalamoun, Homs, Hama, Aleepo	5,000
Al-Jabhat al-Shamiya	Aleppo	2,500
Kataib Nour al-Din al-Zinki	Aleppo	1,500
Faylaq al-Rahman	Damascus	2,000
Faylaq al-Sham	Homs, Hama, Idlib, Aleppo	4,000
Al-Ittihad al-Islami Ajnad al-Sham	Damascus	3,000

Mr Lister went on to argue that, in addition, there were “roughly 25–30 additional factions that would fall under this ‘moderate’ label” which combined, represented “a further 10,000 fighters”.²⁵⁴

Amendment proposed, in lines 2 to 3 to delete “For example,” and insert “However, we fully accept that there may be significant differences between the Joint Intelligence Committee’s list of moderate Syrian opposition groups and those published by academics and experts. We also accept that the Government may consider itself to have a duty of care, not only towards both members of the groups it is supporting but also towards any UK Special Forces troops who are assisting those groups.”—(*Phil Wilson*.)

The Committee divided.

Ayes, 6	Noes, 1
James Gray	Douglas Chapman
Jim Shannon	
Ruth Smeeth	
John Spellar	
Bob Stewart	
Phil Wilson	

Paragraph 86 (now paragraph 85), as amended, read, divided and agreed to (now paragraph 85 and 86).

Paragraphs 87 to 89 read and agreed to.

Paragraph 90 read, as follows:

253 Q247

254 [‘Yes, there are 70,000 moderate opposition fighters in Syria. Here’s what we know about them’](#) The Spectator, 25 November 2015

Peter Ford, the former UK Ambassador to Syria went further. He described the existence of moderate opposition groups in Syria as “largely a figment of the imagination”.²⁵⁵ Dr Frederick Kagan also argued that “virtually all the opposition is Islamist, one way or another, at this point”. He said that in terms of assessing the opposition forces, the distinction lay between Salafi jihadi groups (for example Jabhat al-Nusra, DAESH, and Ahrar al-Sham) and political Islamist groups²⁵⁶ tied to the Muslim Brotherhood; the latter being “the likeliest source of acceptable allies that we could work with”.²⁵⁷

Amendment proposed, in line 2, after “imagination.” insert “It is recognised that the figure quoted by the then Prime Minister came from the Joint Intelligence Committee who would be likely to have greater and more timely information than Mr Ford”.—(*James Gray*.)

The Committee divided.

Ayes, 5	Noes, 2
James Gray	Douglas Chapman
Ruth Smeeth	Jim Shannon
John Spellar	
Bob Stewart	
Phil Wilson	

Paragraphs 91 to 104 read and agreed to.

Paragraph 105, read as follows:

The Government’s case for extending UK military operations to Syria was based on a strategy of supporting the 70,000 moderate opposition forces identified by the then Prime Minister, David Cameron. We have sought to test this figure in terms of both numbers and orientation. Even if the Government’s assessment is accurate, its refusal to provide a list of the groups which we are supporting weakens the credibility of its position. Outside organisations have published such lists and most, if not all, the individual groups have already been identified. That information is in the public domain and therefore the groups will already be known to the Assad regime. It is therefore not credible for the Government to shelter behind security concerns as a reason not to publish the list of those groups itself, so that their ideological and political complexion can rigorously be assessed. Only then can it be known if a democratic, pluralist outcome in Syria, under such groups, is to any extent realistic.

Amendment proposed, in line 4, delete “Even if the Government’s assessment is accurate, its refusal to provide a list of the groups which we are supporting weakens the credibility of its position.” and insert “If the Government’s assessment is accurate, its refusal to provide a list of the groups which we are supporting may weaken the credibility of its position.”—(*Bob Stewart*.)

255 Q128

256 The Institute for the Study of War defines political Islamist groups as “groups that desire a Sharia-based constitution but do not demand that Sharia courts form the basis of governance in a post-Assad Syrian state.”

257 Q220

The Committee divided.

Ayes, 6	Noes, 1
James Gray	Douglas Chapman
Jim Shannon	
Ruth Smeeth	
John Spellar	
Bob Stewart	
Phil Wilson	

Another amendment proposed, in line 4, delete “Even if the Government’s assessment is accurate, its refusal to provide a list of the groups which we are supporting weakens the credibility of its position.”—(*Phil Wilson.*)

The Committee divided.

Ayes, 5	Noes, 2
James Gray	Douglas Chapman
Ruth Smeeth	Jim Shannon
John Spellar	
Bob Stewart	
Phil Wilson	

Another amendment proposed, in line 5, delete from “Outside” to the end of the paragraph and insert “We understand why the Government have been unable to provide a list of the groups, since that would risk providing useful intelligence to the Assad regime. However, we have relied upon outside organisations who have published such lists and most, if not all, the individual groups have as a result, already been identified. That information is in the public domain which means that the groups will already be known to the Assad regime.”—(*James Gray.*)

The Committee divided.

Ayes, 5	Noes, 2
James Gray	Douglas Chapman
Ruth Smeeth	Jim Shannon
John Spellar	
Bob Stewart	
Phil Wilson	

Paragraph 106 read, as follows:

There are inherent dangers in supporting non-state actors in a civil war. These dangers are increased by the complexity and the multi-faceted nature of the Syrian civil war. Whilst

the need to counter the threat from DAESH is great, supporting groups on the basis of their assurances that they will abide by a future democratic process that may limit their aspirations, borders on the naïve.

Amendment proposed, in line 5, at the end to add “and is a gamble”.—(*Douglas Chapman.*)

The Committee divided.

Ayes, 1	Noes, 6
Douglas Chapman	James Gray
	Jim Shannon
	Ruth Smeeth
	John Spellar
	Bob Stewart
	Phil Wilson

Another amendment proposed, in line 5, delete “, borders on the naïve” and insert “is a gamble”—(*Bob Stewart.*)

Amendment agreed to.

On the proposal of the Chair, and with the leave of the Committee, a single Question was put on paragraphs 106 and 107.

Paragraphs 106 and 107 read as follows:

106. There are inherent dangers in supporting non-state actors in a civil war. These dangers are increased by the complexity and the multi-faceted nature of the Syrian civil war. Whilst the need to counter the threat from DAESH is great, supporting groups on the basis of their assurances that they will abide by a future democratic process that may limit their aspirations is a gamble.

107. The UK Government must set out how it is engaging in Syria with the claimed 70,000 moderate fighters on the ground in an effective and cohesive manner. We further recommend that the Government should finally publish the names of what it regards to be the ‘moderate’ groups fighting on the ground in Syria, and identify those of them in support of which, apart from the Kurds, our airstrikes have been carried out.

Motion made, and Question put, That paragraphs 106 and 107 stand part of the Report.

The Committee divided.

Ayes, 2	Noes, 5
Douglas Chapman	James Gray
Jim Shannon	Ruth Smeeth
	John Spellar
	Bob Stewart
	Phil Wilson

Paragraphs 108 to 126 (now paragraphs 106 to 124) read and agreed to.

Paragraph 127 (now paragraph 125) read, as follows:

The complexity of the civil war and the numerous and fractured opposition groups (a number of whom are avowed Salafi jihadist groups) means that—apart from Kurdish forces—it is certainly difficult to identify credible partners on the ground. There is little agreement, even amongst experts, on the extent to which armed opposition groups in Syria can properly be described as ‘moderate’ rather than Islamist. By contrast, our partner in Iraq is the Iraqi Government and we are supporting the Iraqi Security Forces and the Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga. The 26 September 2014 debate on airstrikes in Iraq started at 10.35 with the vote called at 4.59pm, a duration of almost six and a half hours. The 2 December 2015 debate on Syria started at 11.40am with the first vote called at 10pm, a duration of almost ten and a half hours. The allocation of time for debate and the differing results of the parliamentary votes in favour of airstrikes in Iraq (524 ayes to 43 noes) and Syria (397 ayes to 223 noes) indicate the much greater contentiousness about engaging militarily in Syria than doing so in Iraq, the previous year.

Amendment proposed, in line 7, delete from “The 26 September 2014” to the end of the paragraph.—(*James Gray*.)

The Committee divided.

Ayes, 5	Noes, 2
James Gray	Douglas Chapman
Ruth Smeeth	Jim Shannon
John Spellar	
Bob Stewart	
Phil Wilson	

Paragraphs 128 to 169, (now paragraphs 126 to 167) read and agreed to.

Several papers were appended to the Report.

Resolved, That the Report be the Second Report of the Committee to the House.

Ordered, That the Chair make the Report to the House.

Ordered, That embargoed copies of the Report be made available, in accordance with the provisions of Standing Order No. 134.

[Adjourned till Tuesday 11 October 2016 at 10.45am

Witnesses

The following witnesses gave evidence. Transcripts can be viewed on the [inquiry publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

Tuesday 1 December 2015

Question number

Rt Hon Michael Fallon MP, Secretary of State for Defence, **Lieutenant General Gordon Messenger CB DSO*OBE**, Deputy Chief of Defence Staff (Military Strategy and Operations), **Air Marshal Stephen Hillier KCB CBE DFC RAF**, Deputy Chief of Defence Staff (Capability), and **Peter Watkins CBE**, Director General for Security Policy

[Q1–58](#)

Tuesday 19 January 2016

Dr Afzal Ashraf, Consultant Fellow, Royal United Services Institute, and **Major General (Retired) Jonathan Shaw CB CBE**

[Q59–88](#)

Tuesday 2 February 2016

Tom Hardie-Forsyth, adviser to the Kurdistan Regional Government

[Q89–120](#)

Peter Ford, former Ambassador to Syria

[Q121–148](#)

Tuesday 9 February 2016

Lieutenant General (Retired) Sir Simon Mayall KBE CB

[Q149–215](#)

Thursday 17 March 2016

General (Retired) Jack Keane, Chairman of the Board, Institute for the Study of War, and **Dr Frederick Kagan**, Resident Fellow, American Enterprise Institute

[Q216–235](#)

Michael Eisenstadt, Senior Fellow, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, and **Charles Lister**, Fellow, Middle East Institute

[Q236–260](#)

Tuesday 22 March 2016

Dr Lina Khatib, Senior Research Associate, Arab Reform Initiative, **Dr Neil Quilliam**, Acting Head, Middle East and North Africa Programme, Chatham House, and **Colonel (Retired) Hamish de Bretton-Gordon OBE**

[Q261–310](#)

Wednesday 13 April 2016

Richard Atwood, Director of Multilateral Affairs and Head of New York Office, International Crisis Group, and **Claudia Gazzini**, Senior Analyst, ICG

[Q311–354](#)

Wednesday 4 May 2016

Patrick Cockburn, The Independent, **Tim Marshall**, The What and The Why, and **Anthony Loyd**, The Times

[Q355–380](#)

Thursday 26 May 2016

Rt Hon Michael Fallon MP, Secretary of State for Defence, **Lieutenant General Mark Carleton-Smith CBE**, Deputy Chief of Defence Staff (Military Strategy and Operations) and **Dominic Wilson**, Director of Operational Policy, Ministry of Defence

[Q381–447](#)

Published written evidence

The following written evidence was received and can be viewed on the [inquiry publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

UMO numbers are generated by the evidence processing system and so may not be complete.

- 1 Charles Lister ([UMO0009](#))
- 2 Commander Nigel MacCartan-Ward DSC AFC ([UMO0001](#))
- 3 Dr Afzal Ashraf & Major General (Retired) Jonathan Shaw ([UMO0008](#))
- 4 Dr Anna Marie Brennan ([UMO0005](#))
- 5 Dr Goran Zangana ([UMO0002](#))
- 6 Ministry of Defence ([UMO0006](#))
- 7 Ministry of Defence ([UMO0010](#))
- 8 Ministry of Defence ([UMO0011](#))
- 9 Ministry of Defence ([UMO0012](#))
- 10 Ministry of Defence ([UMO0013](#))
- 11 Ministry of Defence ([UMO0014](#))
- 12 Oxford Research Group ([UMO0004](#))

List of Reports from the Committee during the current Parliament

All publications from the Committee are available on the [publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

The reference number of the Government's response to each Report is printed in brackets after the HC printing number.

Session 2015–16

First Report	Flexible response? An SDSR checklist of potential threats and vulnerabilities	HC 493 (HC 794)
Second Report	Shifting the goalposts? Defence expenditure and the 2% pledge	HC 494 (HC 465)
Third Report	Beyond endurance? Military exercises and the duty of care	HC 598 (HC 525)
Fourth Report	An acceptable risk? The use of Lariam for military personnel	HC 567 (HC 648)
First Special Report	Ministry of Defence Annual Report and Accounts 2013–14: Government response to the Committee's Eighth Report of Session 2014–15	HC 365
Second Special Report	Re-thinking defence to meet new threats: Government response to the Committee's Tenth Report of Session 2014–15	HC 366
Third Special Report	Decision-making in Defence Policy: Government response to the Committee's Eleventh Report of Session 2014–15	HC 367
Fourth Special Report	Flexible Response? An SDSR checklist of potential threats and vulnerabilities: Government Response to the Committee's First Report of Session 2015–16	HC 794

Session 2016–17

First Report	Russia: Implications for UK defence and security	HC 107 (HC 668)
First Special Report	Shifting the goalposts? Defence expenditure and the 2% pledge: Government Response to the Committee's Second Report of Session	HC 465
Second Special Report	Beyond endurance? Military exercises and the duty of care: Government Response to the Committee's Third Report of Session 2015–16	HC 525
Third Special Report	An acceptable risk? The use of Lariam for military personnel: Government Response to the Committee's Fourth Report Session 2015–16	HC 648
Fourth Special Report	Russia: Implications for UK defence and security: Government Response to the Committee's First Report of Session 2016–17	HC 668