



House of Commons
Defence Committee

**The situation in Iraq
and Syria and the
response to al–Dawla
al–Islamiya fi al–Iraq
al–Sham (DAESH):
Government Response
to the Committee's
Seventh Report of
Session 2014–15**

**Twelfth Special Report of Session
2014–15**

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The Defence Committee

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Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee are James Rhys (Clerk), Leoni Kurt (Second Clerk), Eleanor Scarnell (Committee Specialist), Ian Thomson (Committee Specialist), Christine Randall (Senior Committee Assistant), Alison Pratt and Carolyn Bowes (Committee Assistants).

Contacts

All correspondence should be addressed to the Clerk of the Defence Committee, House of Commons, London SW1A 0AA. The telephone number for general enquiries is 020 7219 5745; the Committee's email address is defcom@parliament.uk. Media inquiries should be addressed to Alex Paterson on 020 7219 1589.

Twelfth Special Report

The Defence Committee published its Seventh Report of Session 2014–15 on *The situation in Iraq and Syria and the response to al-Dawla al-Islamiya fi al-Iraq al-Sham (DAESH)* (HC 690) on 5 February 2015. The Government's response was received on 17 March 2015 and is appended to this report.

Appendix: Government response

We note the report on the situation in Iraq and Syria and the response to al-Dawla al-Islamiya fi al-Iraq al-Sham (DAESH); Seventh Report of Session 2014–15, published on 5 February 2015.

The Government endorses the Committee's conclusions that: the UK is right to seek to respond actively to the threat posed by ISIL; that it is necessary to develop a clear understanding of the situation as a basis for our actions; that we must play a full role in developing an international strategy; and that the strategy must adopt a comprehensive approach.

The Government, however, rejects the Committee's conclusions that the UK's contribution has been 'strikingly modest'¹ since the September 2014 vote. The UK has been and remains at the forefront of the international diplomatic and military effort to support the Iraqi Government and moderate Syrian Opposition to defeat ISIL.

Militarily, we have played a major role since the beginning of operations but unfortunately the Committee's conclusions are based on out of date or inaccurate information which fails to recognise this.

In August 2014, UK C130s conducted 7 humanitarian aid drops onto the Sinjar mountains to provide relief to displaced Yazidis.

In September 2014, the UK began strike operations against ISIL in Iraq. We have increased our efforts to match coalition requirements as they have evolved and as our resources have become available. This has included the deployment of an additional two Tornado GR4s to Cyprus, bringing the total to eight, and additional assets such as RIVET JOINT, E3-D Sentry and REAPER remotely-piloted aircraft. The Committee stated the UK has only conducted 6% of strikes. This is based on figures for Iraq and Syria and the Committee will be aware that we only have parliamentary permission to conduct strikes in Iraq. As of 16 March 2015, we have conducted 190 strikes against targets in Iraq, second only, to the United States. We are one of the few nations that deploys such advanced strike, Intelligence, Surveillance Targeting, Acquisition and Reconnaissance (ISTAR) capabilities,

¹ 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)*, HC 690, page 4

as well as air-to-air refuelling. Our coalition partners have acknowledged the beneficial effect these contributions are having to the campaign.

In addition to ISTAR and strike capabilities, we have provided equipment and training to Iraq and are contributing to the coalition's Building Partner Capacity (BPC) programme. We have trained over 1,000 Peshmerga in Infantry and Heavy Machine Gun skills. We have supported the delivery of nearly 400 tonnes of equipment and ammunition. As a world leader in countering improvised explosive devices (C-IED) we are leading the coordination and development of the coalition's C-IED training programme, including through the provision of C-IED training at the BPC site in Erbil, which has now begun. We also intend to make a substantial contribution to the planned US-led programme to train Syrian moderates at regional training centres. The UK now has approximately 500 military personnel supporting operations against ISIL, including over 140 in Iraq.

The Government's contribution to the stability of Iraq has extended beyond its military efforts.

Diplomatically, on 22 January 2015, the Foreign Secretary hosted the London Conference, co-chaired with US Secretary of State John Kerry during which 21 members of the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL met and created Working Groups to address not just military efforts, but the flow of foreign fighters, countering ISIL's finances, countering ISIL's messaging, and assisting the Government of Iraq's stabilisation planning.

We are contributing £39.5 million in humanitarian support to respond to the significant humanitarian needs in Iraq. We welcome the steps Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi has taken towards political reconciliation and economic reform. Effective Sunni engagement—both regionally and domestically—will be crucial for the success of Prime Minister Abadi's government, and the fight against ISIL. Prime Minister Abadi has made good initial progress on improving relations with Iraq's neighbours and we will continue to press for the necessary economic and political reform, and encourage Iraq's Sunni neighbours to engage with and support Prime Minister Abadi.

Further detailed responses to the Committee's recommendations and conclusions are laid out below.

1. It is our considered view, that the UK are right to wish to respond actively to the threat and horrors represented by DAESH and the current instability in Iraq. Failing to do so, would mark a substantial departure from the UK's long-term security partnership with both the United States and its partners in the Middle East. It would heighten perceptions that the UK has stepped back from its international role and could risk undermining wider commitment to the US-led coalition, possibly weakening the effort against DAESH. It would also make it harder for the UK to influence political developments thereafter. Furthermore, it would undermine the UK's national security interests through destabilisation of the region, and through DAESH's sponsorship of terrorist attacks and training of British foreign fighters in military tactics which could be used upon the UK public following their return home. We, therefore, believe that the

UK should actively look for more ways to contribute constructively to the stability of Iraq. (Paragraph 83)

The Government welcomes the report's recognition that the UK should respond to the threat ISIL poses. The Government also agrees that international and regional partners expect the UK to play a leading international role and that our contribution to military operations enhances our influence in political developments. If ISIL is to be defeated in Iraq, it will be important that the military campaign is supported by comprehensive stabilisation planning, addressing security, governance and provision of basic services.

2. The first priority is for the UK to develop a clear assessment of the situation on the ground, and to be able to provide a clearly formulated strategy and campaign plan. We were shocked by the inability or unwillingness of any of the Service Chiefs to provide a clear, and articulate statement of the UK's objectives or plan in Iraq. We were troubled by the lack of clarity over who owned the policy—and indeed whether such a policy existed. (Paragraph 86)

The Government rejects this assertion that the UK lacks a clear strategy for the fight against ISIL. This was set out in the Department's evidence to the Committee as follows:

"The Government is working closely with international partners to address the situation in Iraq and Syria and the threat posed by ISIL. The Government's first priority is to minimise the threat to UK security and UK interests in the Middle East by defeating ISIL, in conjunction with international coalition partners. We seek to achieve this by pursuing three objectives:

- i) Disrupting threats to the UK mainland and interests overseas;*
- ii) As part of an international coalition, defeating ISIL, including discrediting its violent ideology in Iraq and Syria; and*
- iii) Mitigating the impact of ISIL and other violent extremist groups on regional stability".*

A cross-Government ISIL Task Force was set up in September 2014 in order to develop the UK's anti-ISIL strategy and coordinate delivery of it across all Government Departments. The National Security Council (NSC) has overseen the UK's involvement, with weekly NSC (Officials) meetings to maintain progress.

The Department does not endorse the Committee's criticism of the Service Chiefs' evidence. This is based around an outdated understanding of their role within Defence. The Defence Operating Model set out a clear governance structure for how the Department formulates military strategy for Ministers. Responsibility for such advice to the Defence Secretary does not lie with the Service Chiefs but with the Director General Security Policy and the Deputy Chief of Defence Staff (Military Strategic Operations) through the Chief of Defence Staff.

3. We believe it is unacceptable for the United Kingdom simply to ‘sign-up’ to providing military support for a campaign plan entirely developed and owned by another coalition partner—in this case, apparently, the United States—without having any independent assessment or analysis of the assumptions, detail and viability of that campaign plan. (Paragraph 89)

The MOD agrees with the Committee's conclusion that it would be unacceptable to simply sign up to providing military support for a campaign plan entirely developed and owned by another coalition partner. We are not doing this.

As set out above, the UK has played a leading role in the Global coalition, including hosting the London conference on 22 January 2015. The coalition is focused on five lines of effort:

- Supporting military operations, capacity building, and training;
- Stopping the flow of foreign terrorist fighters;
- Cutting off ISIL's access to financing and funding;
- Addressing associated humanitarian relief and crises; and
- Exposing ISIL's true nature (ideological delegitimation).

The UK is playing a significant role in each strand and is jointly leading work on ideological delegitimation. The UK is fully engaged in the development of the coalition military campaign plan as it evolves and has contributed a number of military officers to the coalition's headquarters staff who are undertaking influential roles in the formulation and delivery of the coalition strategy and effect. This includes the Deputy Commander for the Coalition Joint Task Force, which commands the mission.

4. While Australia, Spain and Italy have committed troops to the new training package, the UK is yet to do so. Such a deployment—to a remote desert base for counter-IED training—does not involve UK troops in combat, provides useful skills to the Iraqi Forces, saves lives, and ensures that the UK retains some involvement in the overall mission and some ‘equity’ and influence in shaping future decisions. (Paragraph 94)

The Government agrees the importance of training and the particular requirement for C-IED training. The Defence Secretary stated the UK's intention to assist on further training to Iraqi forces in December 2014 and once the plans were developed with the Government of Iraq and the Coalition we confirmed our deployment. Regrettably the Committee has inaccurately and misleadingly compared the UK's commitment with that of other countries, for example by stating in the press release launching the report that there were 400 Australian military personnel outside of Kurdish regions compared to only 3 UK military personnel. This is inaccurate—there were not and are not 400 Australians in Iraq. In the report this is actually presented as Australia having “offered up” or “committed” 400 troops. This is a markedly different position. To date the Australians have deployed to Iraq a similar number to the UK's current deployment of 140 military personnel. As set out

above, the UK has already made a significant contribution to training Iraqi forces that are taking the fight to ISIL. The Defence Secretary announced to Parliament on 10 February 2015 that the UK will be the coalition lead for the C-IED element of the broader BPC programme, including deploying a team of up to 30 personnel to deliver C-IED training in Erbil and a team of 8 in Baghdad who are designing and coordinating the C-IED training across all the BPC sites. Those personnel are now in post. This effort is being supported with a gift from the UK of 1,000 VALLON metal detectors which is expected to equip 6 battalions and a number of specialist EOD units.

5. At the very least any training of the Iraqi Security Forces should be related to institutional reform. The Iraqi Security Forces have already been trained and equipped extravagantly and repeatedly in the past decade. To do so again, without first addressing the structural issues, would be a total waste of time and money. (Paragraph 96)

The Government agrees with the Committee's assessment that further military capacity building of the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) should be accompanied by institutional reform. The ISF has suffered from widespread corruption, low morale and overdependence on militia forces. The UK Government has promoted security sector reform in Iraq for a number of years. Since 2012, the UK has funded the UN Development Programme to facilitate the Office of the National Security Advisor in developing an Iraqi National Security Strategy and high level Security Sector Reform.

We welcome the significant reforms taken by Prime Minister al-Abadi since assuming office in August 2014. He has enhanced the democratic accountability of the ISF by strengthening the Iraqi Ministry of Defence and abolishing the office of the Commander in Chief set up by former Prime Minister Maliki. He has also replaced senior military figures with commanders that are more competent and tackled corruption among the security forces. The UK continues to discuss reform of the ISF with the Government of Iraq, and encourage the adoption of the proposed National Guard law that aims to incorporate militias and tribal forces into the security forces.

6. We recommend that once the Iraqi Security Forces and the Peshmerga show increased capability and are ready for major offensives against DAESH, the UK should be prepared to provide an increased level of support to those operations from the air. This in turn relies on the UK providing the planes and resources to be able to expand and maintain air support for the military campaign. (Paragraph 98)

The UK has already deployed a capable and enduring package of strike, ISTAR, air-to-air refuelling and transport aircraft to enhance the coalition's air capabilities and, as set out above, we have significantly increased those capabilities as the operation and the requirements evolved since the Committee's report. The coalition has and will continue to provide air support to the ISF offensive operations against ISIL.

7. Arguably, the most powerful contribution which the UK could make to the Peshmerga is in structural reform:

- **firstly, the unification of the Peshmerga in to a central, cohesive fighting force with a stated allegiance to the Kurdish Regional Government;**
- **secondly, the confirmation that Peshmerga fighters would be made available to be trained; and**
- **thirdly that the Peshmerga are willing to cooperate with the Iraqi Security Forces. If such commitments are set and adhered to, we believe that the UK Government is capable of providing much greater support to the Iraqi Government and for the Kurdish Regional Government than it has done to date. The level of that support should increase exponentially in terms of both gifting and sale of equipment and the number of UK troops provided for training, particularly in the area of command and control. (Paragraph 103)**

We endorse the Committee's conclusion regarding the importance of unification of Peshmerga forces. We have worked closely with the Government of Iraq, and Global Coalition, to understand the needs of the Kurdistan Security Forces (KSF) and ISF and identify where UK support can add most value. All the support provided to date has been provided or conducted with the approval of the Government of Iraq (GoI). We will continue to explore options for the provision of additional support to the GoI, including the KSF.

8. Special Forces operations will be of great use to the Iraqi Government and a counterterrorism strategy is highly relevant to the UK's national security. The UK Government must ensure, however, that such operations are not undermining any political strategy and are in accordance with the law. (Paragraph 107)

It is longstanding UK Government policy not to comment on any issues related to Special Forces.

9. We recommend that there be an increase in analytical capability in Iraq and at home, with the priority being placed on a member of staff to monitor the progress of the Sunni outreach programme on the ground. This is vital to ensure that the conditions which have led to the current situation are not recreated in the future. (Paragraph 111)

The Government agrees that political unity in Iraq is critical to Coalition efforts to defeat ISIL. The Government continues to support political initiatives by Prime Minister Abadi that promote inclusive politics and national reconciliation, of which engagement with the Sunni community is a key part. Through our diplomatic engagement in Iraq, the region and London, we are encouraging all parties to work together to advance national reconciliation and deliver the political reforms which we all want to see. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) is also in the process of deploying to Iraq additional staff to monitor and engage with Sunni outreach in support of the coordinated coalition effort.

10. We recommend that the UK Government radically increase their diplomatic and defence engagement with the key regional powers—particularly Turkey, Saudi Arabia

and Iran—to develop a much more detailed picture of the potential benefits and challenges of a regional solution. (Paragraph 116)

The Government agrees that regional relations, co-operation and leadership by the region have an extremely important role to play in efforts to counter ISIL. The Secretary of State has made three visits to the region in recent months, most recently between 2 to 4 March 2015 to meet with Saudi Arabian, Omani and Jordanian Ministers, as well as the Coalition Commander, Lieutenant General James Terry, based in Kuwait. Other Ministers and senior officials have also visited frequently.

The Government acknowledges the recommendation that there should be an increase in diplomatic engagement to focus on developing a detailed picture of the benefits and challenges of a regional solution. The UK has a long-standing friendship with many of the key regional powers, and we engaged with them at all levels through our wider defence presence and network in the region who are engaging continuously on issues of common interest, particularly the ISIL threat.

As previously stated in our evidence to the committee:

“To support the objective of reducing ISIL’s impact on regional stability, the UK has increased its commitment to Jordan’s capacity building programme with much of the focus centred on Urban Operations Training and the development of a Quick Reaction Force (QRF) headquarters. There is a permanent British Military Advisory Training Team of 20 personnel currently focusing support on the QRF as it is the part of the Jordanian Armed Forces most likely to be used against ISIL in the future. We are planning to spend about £1M to provide deployable infrastructure to the QRF to help it respond to internal and external threats ranging from humanitarian crises to stabilisation, terrorism and border security operations.

We have also increased support to Lebanon, which is confronted by several thousand ISIL fighters inside its borders in the mountains above Aarsal. Short-term training teams have been deployed to train Lebanese soldiers, create Land Border Regiments and help construct and equip border forts. This activity has helped the Lebanese Armed Forces gain influence over 30% of Lebanon’s previously ungoverned border with Syria. The UK is also providing a capacity-building programme including explosive-search working dogs, and working with the Lebanese Navy, Crime Scenes Investigation, Search and Rescue and Military Intelligence.”

11. The first step of the UK must be to develop a serious independent assessment of the situation on the ground in Iraq (including individual specialists posted immediately to Iraq to focus separately on the Sunni communities, the Iraqi Security Forces, the Peshmerga, the Shia militia, and DAESH). It must develop a much more complete picture of the current coalition strategy, and be in a position to assess its costs, benefits and risks and to use this understanding to influence that strategy, and ensure that it is more than simply a repeat of the 2007 ‘surge’ strategy conducted with a fraction of the resources. (Paragraph 123)

As set out above, the Government agrees the importance of developing a good understanding of the situation on the ground. However, the Committee’s conclusions

appear to be based on a fundamental misunderstanding of the UK's presence in Iraq and leading role in the international Coalition. The British Embassy in Baghdad, Consulate-General in Erbil and UK military personnel deployed to Iraq and across coalition headquarters contribute to the UK's understanding and analysis of the situation, enabling the UK to advise, assist and shape coalition strategy. Our relationships with key Iraqi political and military interlocutors, alongside our participation in the coalition, also contribute to the detailed information we need to be able to inform UK policy.

As well as the Sunni outreach officers described above, the FCO is in the process of deploying to Iraq additional staff to strengthen our capacity on political reform and reconciliation and outreach, respectively, in support of the coordinated coalition effort.

12. There is no demand from the Iraqi Government for combat troops; nor any question of the UK deploying such troops. But Iraqi forces continue to have significant requirements for air support and training in IED awareness and disposal. Both the Peshmerga and the Iraqi Security Forces are in need of structural reform, which the UK is in a position to support. In the absence of such reform, we question whether broader training is worthwhile. There is a pressing need to study, analyse, and reach out to Sunni communities, and integrate them into the fight against DAESH. It is essential that the Iraqi Government reins in the influence of the Shia militia. We fear, however, that Sunni reconciliation and the taming of the Shia militia may prove impossibly difficult. There is considerable scope for Special Forces operations provided that they are able to operate within the increasingly stringent legal constraints. And there is an urgent requirement for regional support for Iraq, both politically and militarily. (Paragraph 124)

The Government agrees the Iraqi government has significant requirements for air support and C-IED training. The UK contribution to the Coalition is set out above. The Government also agrees that political reconciliation will be difficult and that political unity in Iraq is critical to military efforts to defeat ISIL. The Government continues to support political initiatives by Prime Minister Abadi that promote inclusive politics and national reconciliation, of which engagement with the Sunni community is a key part. Through our diplomatic engagement in Iraq, the region and London, we are encouraging all parties to work together to advance national reconciliation and deliver the political reforms which we all want to see.

13. These are all areas in which the UK can assist. And they are an ideal opportunity for a broader 'comprehensive approach', bringing in the best of UK international development expertise, intelligence, Special Forces, and diplomacy; all with an aim of decreasing the probability of an ongoing civil war, and increasing the chances of a political settlement, however distant these objectives may be. (Paragraph 125)

14. Such activities would require only the deployment of a few hundred personnel, the cost would be relatively modest, and it would not entail the risks inherent in deploying UK troops in combat roles. These roles are also consistent with the scale of the £38 billion Defence budget, commensurate with its global presence, the expectations of Iraq

and the Kurdistan region of Iraq, its status as a P5 member of the Security Council, and its traditionally close relationship to the United States. (Paragraph 126)

15. We are not calling for combat troops, still less for an attempt to repeat the counterinsurgency and state-building agendas of Iraq in 2007. Any contemporary intervention must be far more focused and incremental. But this is not a reason for the UK to lurch from over-intervention to complete isolation. We face a situation in Iraq, where we have significant interests, history, and obligations, where our closest allies have requested our assistance, and where we have the expertise, and resources to influence the country in a positive direction. Given the deep polarisation and structural weaknesses of the Iraqi State, we wonder whether containment and suppression of DAESH would not be a more realistic goal than total elimination. There are, however, many highly constructive tasks we could be performing, which do not entail combat operations. The foreword to the 2010 SDSR begins with the lines “Our country has always had global responsibilities and global ambitions. We have a proud history of standing up for the values we believe in and we should have no less ambition for our country in the decades to come.” We question whether the UK actions in Iraq begin to match such ambitions. (Paragraph 127)

We agree with the Committee's recommendations that the Coalition must adopt a comprehensive approach, complementing military action with diplomatic and development and reform efforts, and that there are particular areas in which the UK can assist. The Coalition effort, and the UK contribution, is designed to address the full range of political, security, humanitarian and development challenges which we face in Iraq and to set them within a broad regional context. The UK is supporting Iraq at the request of the GoI and we will continue to assist them for as long as they have a need to counter ISIL. The Government agrees that the UK has significant interests in Iraq and that our contribution there should be commensurate with those interests and the UK's global responsibilities as a member of the UN Security Council. The Government continues to believe that we should meet such responsibilities and stand up for the values we believe in. We believe our contribution to Iraq matches those ambitions. We believe our key international partners, in allocating the UK the Deputy Commander post in the military coalition, and in recognising the UK chairmanship of the recent London conference, share that assessment.