



House of Commons
Foreign Affairs Committee

The extension of offensive British military operations to Syria

Second Report of Session 2015–16



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relating to the report*

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The Foreign Affairs Committee

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Summary

For some months, the Government has indicated that it might seek to bring before the House proposals to extend into Syria participation by British aircraft in airstrikes as part of the Global Coalition to counter ISIL. At present, the UK is participating in airstrikes against ISIL targets in Iraq but provides only surveillance and intelligence air support in Syria. This report is to inform the Government, and the House, of key issues that we think must be addressed in considering any proposal to extend British airstrikes against ISIL into Syria.

We considered the possible benefits of extending airstrikes into Syria, noting that our witnesses told us that the move would be welcomed by our allies in the Coalition and the region as a sign of commitment to the fight against ISIL. However, our evidence suggested that there were five major areas of risk to consider:

Legal basis: Questions about the legality of the UK's earlier interventions in the Middle East have dogged its actions for over a decade, and the UK risks further reputational damage if the legal basis for airstrikes in Syria is not clear. The most clear legal basis would be a United Nations Security Council resolution authorising military action, but the Government's case appears likely to rest more on the collective self-defence of Iraq.

Military challenges: While our witnesses believed that a decision to extend airstrikes into Syria would be welcomed by Coalition allies, they did not consider that it would have anything other than a marginal effect. The UK accounts for a small percentage of airstrikes in Iraq and it was assumed that the total number of assets would remain steady but be used across a wider area. We were told that airstrikes would be unlikely to be effective without reliable allies on the ground to assist with targeting and to move in and take areas that had been attacked, and these would not be easy to find.

Political situation: The fact that there are few reliable counterparts on the ground is a reflection of the extraordinary complexity of the situation on the ground in Syria. Our witnesses described a chaotic and complicated political and military scene. After over four years of civil war, there are thousands of fighting forces in various coalitions and umbrella organisations, with unclear aspirations and shifting alliances. The complex nature of the situation makes it hard to guess the consequences of tackling just ISIL, or to predict what group would take their territory if they were defeated.

International actors: The situation in Syria is complicated still further by the multiple international actors involved on ground, to the extent that many observers now consider the civil war a proxy war as much as an internal conflict. These include Russia and Iran (on the Assad side), Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar, and the US (on the sides of various different parts of the opposition), creating what one witness called a "multi-layered conflict". The much more substantial Russian intervention on the side of the Assad regime that started at the end of September 2015 has complicated even further any proposed action in Syria by the UK.

Diplomatic capacity: Several of our witnesses suggested that by participating in military action against ISIL in Syria, the UK would actually compromise its diplomatic capability and its capacity to put pressure on its national and international partners to create a route to a solution to the inter-related problems of ISIL and the Syrian civil war.

In the face of a humanitarian and security catastrophe, there is a powerful sense that something must be done in Syria. We agree that it is a key British national interest to defeat ISIL and we consider this to be a necessary goal for the UK. However, we believe that there should be no extension of British military action into Syria unless there is a coherent international strategy that has a realistic chance of defeating ISIL and of ending the civil war in Syria. We consider that the focus on the extension of airstrikes against ISIL in Syria is a distraction from the much bigger and more important task of finding a resolution to the conflict in Syria and thereby removing one of the main facilitators of ISIL's rise. We were not persuaded by the Government's attempts to treat ISIL in Syria and the broader Syrian civil war as separate issues, and note that our witnesses called for a more joined-up strategy to tackle closely interlinked crises.

Finally, we set out seven points on which the Government should provide further explanation before asking the House to approve a motion authorising military action. We are not yet persuaded that it is possible for the Government to provide a satisfactory explanation of these points at present. Until it can, we recommend that it does not bring to the House a motion seeking the extension of British military action to Syria.

1 Introduction

1. For some months, the Government has indicated that it might seek to bring before the House proposals to extend into Syria participation by British aircraft in involvement in airstrikes as part of the Global Coalition to counter ISIL. While there is no legal requirement that the Government seek Parliamentary approval for military action, it is now a convention that it does so, wherever possible.¹ In July, the Defence Secretary told the new Parliament that Members should “consider carefully how best to tackle ISIL, an evil caliphate that does not respect state boundaries.”² In October, the Defence Secretary was quoted in the press stating that “ISIL is organised and directed in north-east Syria that is being targeted by America, French and Australian air forces. We are building the case for that. When we’ve got a consensus, we will go to Parliament and have the vote.”³

2. In the light of these developments, we held two evidence sessions on UK policy on Syria with a total of 15 witnesses: the first on 8 September 2015, and the second jointly with the Defence Committee on 8 October 2015. The latter session particularly focused on the possibility of UK involvement in airstrikes against ISIL in Syria. Although we have drawn upon the contribution made by colleagues on the Defence Committee to that joint session, this report represents the opinion of the Foreign Affairs Committee only. However, we note the views of the Chair of the Defence Committee as expressed in an article written in a personal capacity jointly with the former British Ambassador to Syria, Mr Peter Ford, on 21 October.⁴ We have also questioned the Foreign Secretary on the Government’s policy on ISIL and Syria on two occasions, most recently during his appearance before the Committee on 9 September 2015. The Committee has also launched in September 2015 a broader inquiry into the UK’s role in the fight against ISIL, for which it will soon begin taking evidence.

3. This short report does not attempt to rehearse all of the issues relevant to the debate. In anticipation of a motion requesting Parliamentary approval for airstrikes, its purpose is to inform the Government, and the House, of key issues that we think must be addressed in considering any proposal to extend British airstrikes against ISIL into Syria.

Background

4. In September 2014, the House agreed to a motion authorising airstrikes against ISIL in Iraq, on the basis that these would not be extended to Syria without further Parliamentary approval.⁵ The legacy of the Government’s unexpected failure to win a 2013 parliamentary vote on airstrikes in Syria against the Assad regime following its use of chemical weapons loomed large over that motion, as it does over the current debate. In September 2015,

1 In March 2011, Sir Gus O’Donnell, then Cabinet Secretary, wrote to the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee to acknowledge that a convention existed by which Parliament was given the opportunity to debate decisions to commit troops to armed conflict and, except in emergency situations, that debate would take place before they were committed. See Eighth Report from the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee, Session 2010-12, <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201012/cmselect/cmpolcon/923/923.pdf>. Advance Parliamentary approval for military action was sought on 18 March 2003, in relation to Iraq; on 29 August 2013, in relation to Syria; and on 26 September 2014, in relation to Iraq.

2 HC Deb, 2 July 2015, [col 1671](#)

3 “UK still seeking to conduct Syria airstrikes, says Michael Fallon”, The Guardian, 7 October 2015

4 “The arguments against bombing Syria are compelling”, The Guardian, 21 October 2015,

5 HC Deb, 26 September 2014, [Col 1255](#)

the Foreign Secretary revealed the Government's anxiety about bringing proposals for airstrikes in Syria to Parliament again:

We think there are arguments for it, but we are clear that we require parliamentary authority. We will only bring such a proposition to Parliament when we are confident that the circumstances and the evidence that we can bring forward in support of our request are likely to find favour in Parliament.⁶

2 The current anti-ISIL operation in Iraq and Syria

ISIL in Iraq and Syria

5. Formed as an offshoot of Al Qaeda but later disowned by the organisation, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, also known as Islamic State, Da'esh or ISIS) emerged as a serious force in 2012–13 and quickly became one of the world's most notorious and brutal radical jihadi organisations. Based in Raqqa, a city in northern Syria, ISIL initially capitalised on the chaos of the Syrian civil war to grow in strength and territory. It then embarked on a startlingly successful military campaign in the first half of 2014, taking control of swathes of territory in Syria and Iraq and declaring a caliphate under its control. It has imposed severe restrictions and punishments on the population in areas under its control, including persecution of individuals and ethnic/religious groups, ruthless forms of corporal punishment and mass executions.

6. Estimates of ISIL's size and number are controversial; US officials reportedly recently estimated that Coalition strikes had killed 20,000 fighters over the past year, but that its ability to recruit local and foreign fighters had meant that its numbers had remained relatively steady at around 20,000–30,000 fighters in Iraq and Syria.⁷ Other estimates vary substantially.⁸ Answering a recent Oral Question, the Foreign Secretary said that the Government estimated that there were around 10–13,000 active ISIL fighters in Iraq, but he did not give figures for Syria.⁹ What is clear is that ISIL is large enough to expand aggressively and to take control of strategically important territory, including the cities of Ramadi and Mosul in Iraq and Raqqa and Palmyra in Syria.

7. Analytical descriptions of ISIL as an organisation emphasise the multi-faceted nature of the relatively new group. They encompass its military aggression, jihadi ideology, political skill, and practical appeal to local forces and groups that are trying to survive, as well as lurid propaganda and attraction for distant individuals, and its aspirations for a form of statehood. One analysis says that ISIL has four principal manifestations, as “a guerrilla army, Sunni political movement, millenarian cult and administrator of territory”.¹⁰ Another has called it a “hybrid of insurgency, separatism, terrorism and criminality” with roots in both its immediate local environment and in broader regional conflicts and geopolitical battles.¹¹ This potent mix is backed up by the ability to take from state forces, and hold, strategic areas and major assets like military weaponry and oil fields, making ISIL a powerfully destabilising force in the region. Its battlefield success and adept propaganda has also inspired individuals across the region and in Europe to join the organisation, including some from the UK.

8. The Prime Minister told Parliament that ISIL was “an evil against which the whole of the world should unite.”¹² The British Government has designated ISIL “a clear national

7 “ISIL death toll at 20,000, but ‘stalemate’ continues”, USA Today, 12 October 2015

8 See, for example: “War with Isis: Islamic militants have army of 200,000, claims senior Kurdish leader”, Independent, 16 November 2014; and “Islamic State ‘has 50,000 fighters in Syria’”, Al Jazeera, 19 August 2014

9 HC Deb, 20 October 2015, [Col 812](#)

10 “ISIS: The Dubious Paradise of Apocalypse Now”, *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy*, June–July 2015

11 “There is no silver bullet’: Isis, al-Qaida and the myths of terrorism”, The Guardian, 19 August 2015

12 Prime Minister’s [speech at the UN General Assembly](#), 25 September 2014

threat to the UK, and a global threat to our international partners and the region,” and has said that the UK is working closely with allies to “drive back, dismantle and ultimately destroy ISIL [...] and what it stands for.”¹³ Our witnesses agreed that ISIL was a major threat to the UK, and one argued that the UK could not avoid involvement, even if it wished: “With Daesh, I do not think we are left with that option, because the fight will come to us, whether or not we want it to. You have to decide what you want to do and how you want to defeat it, but just coming back and having Fortress Britain is not going to be pretty”.¹⁴ Preventing further regional instability, indeed, re-establishing regional stability, and defeating the ideology underlying ISIL are plainly British national interests.

The Global Coalition to counter ISIL

9. ISIL’s capacity to conquer and hold territory, its destabilising effect in the region, and its ability to inspire deadly terrorist attacks elsewhere such as those in Tunisia and Turkey, as well as its extremist ideology and astonishingly brutal tactics, has elicited widespread condemnation and an international response. The Global Coalition to counter ISIL was formed in early September 2014 as a grouping of states, now numbering 65, which aims to “degrade, and ultimately destroy, ISIL through a comprehensive and sustained counterterrorism strategy”.¹⁵ It does this through targeted military action in Iraq and Syria; as well as work on tackling its financing, flows of fighters, propaganda, and humanitarian issues.

10. A main thrust of the Coalition’s efforts is a US-led campaign of air support and training in Iraq at the request of the Iraqi government, to support it in its fight against ISIL. Nine Coalition partners have provided air operations targeting ISIL in Iraq in support of Iraqi and Kurdish security forces, providing reconnaissance, surveillance, and attack capabilities.¹⁶ Members of the Coalition are also providing training to Iraqi and Kurdish security forces to build the ground capability to take on ISIL.¹⁷ The Coalition’s efforts have helped to “halt and hold” ISIL’s rapid advance across Iraq last year and the Government claims that 30% of territory captured by ISIL in Iraq has been reclaimed over the past year.¹⁸ Some experts have responded sceptically to this assertion, and other figures suggest about 10-15%.¹⁹ The Foreign Secretary told the House that it was a long-term plan:

We always said, at the beginning of the intervention last summer, that it would probably take three years to defeat ISIL militarily. I spoke to General John Allen, the US President’s special envoy on this subject, just a few weeks ago. His view is that that remains correct, and we still have another two years to go to a military solution in Iraq.²⁰

11. Airstrikes against ISIL targets in Iraq and Syria are a major part of the Coalition’s strategy. It has conducted almost 5,000 airstrikes in Iraq and over 2,500 airstrikes in Syria

13 Foreign and Commonwealth Office, [‘ISIL: UK Government Response’](#), accessed 28 October 2015

14 Q 90 [Quintana]

15 US Department of State, [“The Global Coalition to Counter ISIL”](#), accessed 28 October 2015

16 The nine are: United States, United Kingdom, France, Australia, the Netherlands, Jordan, Belgium (withdrawn), Denmark (withdrawn), Canada (whose new government has indicated that it plans to withdraw)

17 [“Operations against ISIL pass one-year mark”](#), MOD press release, 26 Sept 2015

18 HC Deb, 20 October 2015, [Written Question No. 11279](#)

19 See, for example, [“How ISIS Territory Has Changed Since the U.S. Bombing Campaign Began”](#), The Atlantic, 11 September 2015

20 HC Deb, 20 Oct 2015, [Col 812](#)

in its campaign to target and attack ISIL.²¹ Although 13 states have taken part,²² the US has conducted the overwhelming majority of airstrikes: almost 70% in Iraq and 95% in Syria.²³ US Central Command, which coordinates Coalition airstrikes against ISIL, has stated that, as of 8 October 2015, Coalition military action had destroyed or damaged over 13,500 ISIL targets in Iraq and Syria.²⁴

UK contribution

12. The UK was a founding member of the Coalition and an active participant in its work. It co-leads the Coalition's working group on ISIL's propaganda and it claims to be the second biggest contributor after the US to the military campaign. The UK has deployed eight Tornados and an unconfirmed number of armed and surveillance Reaper RPAS (drones) to support the coalition. It has contributed around 800 personnel, taking part in training and support such as a counter-IED programme, as well as providing weaponry and ammunition. In September 2015, the Government announced that the UK had conducted more than 300 strikes, flown almost a third of Coalition surveillance flights, and trained over 2,000 local troops.²⁵

13. While the US and some other Coalition partners have conducted airstrikes against ISIL targets in Syria since September 2014, the UK has restricted its participation in coalition airstrikes to Iraq, though it flies surveillance and intelligence missions in Syria to contribute to the Coalition's campaign there. The UK has, however, conducted a single airstrike in Syria in August 2015 against a British national that it considered a "direct threat" to the UK.²⁶ British pilots embedded with US and Canadian forces appear to have also flown missions in Syria.²⁷

21 ["Special Report: Operation Inherent Resolve"](#), US Department of Defence, 20 October 2015, accessed 26 October 2015

22 Airstrikes in Iraq: US, UK, Australia, Belgium (withdrawn), Canada (expected to withdraw), Denmark (withdrawn), France, Jordan, The Netherlands (9). Airstrikes in Syria: US, Australia, Bahrain, Canada (expected to withdraw), France, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, UAE (9). Total of 13 states overall.

23 Source: Statistics calculated from data on ["Special Report: Operation Inherent Resolve"](#), US Department of Defence, 20 October 2015, accessed 26 October 2015

24 ["Special Report: Operation Inherent Resolve"](#), US Department of Defence, 20 October 2015, accessed 26 October 2015. See also: HC Deb, 12 October 2015, [Written Question No. 11279](#)

25 ["Operations against ISIL pass one-year mark"](#), MOD press release, 26 Sept 2015

26 Two British nationals were killed in the strike, Ruhul Amin and Reyaad Khan. Reyaad Khan was the target of the strike. A further British national, Junaid Hussain, was killed in an American airstrike on 24 August. See Prime Minister's statement, HC Deb, 7 September 2015, [col 23](#)

27 See, for example, ["Syria air strikes conducted by UK military pilots"](#), BBC News Online, 17 July 2015

3 The extension of British anti-ISIL airstrikes into Syria

Possible diplomatic and military benefits of extending airstrikes to Syria

14. Government ministers have for some months extended the argument that the current policy of conducting airstrikes in Iraq but not Syria is not logical and impedes the effectiveness of the mission. Their arguments have focused almost exclusively on military efficiency. The Foreign Secretary told us:

there is a military incoherence to carrying out a campaign of air strikes against an enemy on the ground in Iraq whose supply lines originate in the neighbouring country, but being unable to attack those supply lines and control centres in the neighbouring country. There may well be political arguments about that—indeed, there are political arguments, and these were rehearsed in Parliament on 29 August 2013—but, from a military point of view, it is incoherent. It is a single theatre of conflict, and the supply lines run from al-Raqqa, in Syria, into Iraq, where they sustain the ISIL/Daesh forces that are attacking Iraqi forces.²⁸

15. He has since told the House that “We are already flying reconnaissance missions over Syria, but our Reapers now have to fly over Syria unarmed looking for situations, which they then relay back to call in other allies to carry out strikes. That is not the most efficient way to carry out operations.”²⁹ Our military expert witnesses confirmed that the extension to Syria of the British mandate to conduct airstrikes would be welcomed by our allies in the coalition. It would provide greater flexibility for Coalition commanders as well as the use of another base in Cyprus.³⁰

16. It was also noted that the extension of airstrikes would help the UK to be seen as a ‘good ally’ to the US and its partners in the region (or rather, remove the current diplomatic embarrassment of it appearing not to be fully committed to the coalition plan).³¹ Lieutenant General Sir Simon Mayall (retired), felt that symbolic support was a valuable thing at present, and told us that the UK’s non-participation in Syria “sends a strong message to our allies in the Gulf, to the Russians, and to our American friends who have certain concerns about the UK willingness to commit”.³² He compared this to Russia’s actions, which he considered were “very strongly sending a message to a number of listeners in the region about the reliability of Russia as an ally, even for those who don’t like the people he is allied to.”³³ We note in this regard that senior figures in Iraq and the Kurdistan Regional Government have since reportedly caused disquiet in the US and elsewhere by requesting Russian assistance against ISIL.³⁴

28 Oral evidence taken on [9 September 2015](#), HC 381, Q32

29 HC Deb, 20 Oct 2015, [Col 808](#)

30 See Q 57 [Mayall] and Qq58-59 [Quintana]

31 See Qs 57 & 65 [Mayall] and Professor Michael Clarke ([SYR0004](#))

32 Q 65

33 Q 56

34 See, for example: “[Iraq leans towards Russia in war on Islamic State](#)”, Reuters, 7 October 2015; and “[Syrian Kurds alarm US with closer ties to Putin](#)”, The Times, 22 October 2015

Possible diplomatic, political and military risks of extending airstrikes into Syria

Legal basis

17. Questions about the legality of the UK's earlier interventions in the Middle East have dogged its actions for over a decade, and the UK risks further reputational damage if the legal basis for airstrikes in Syria is not clear. International law allows the use of force in three circumstances: invitation, UN Security Council authorisation, and self-defence. Humanitarian intervention, as was used by the Government to justify intervention in Kosovo in 1999, is emerging as a fourth justification but is not yet fully established.³⁵

18. The evidence we received indicated that the legal basis for military action against ISIL in Syria is more complicated than in Iraq, where it was undertaken at the invitation of the Iraqi government. The Assad regime has not invited airstrikes by the Coalition, though it has so far tolerated those conducted by the Coalition against ISIL on its territory. Even if the Assad regime were to request them, in 2012 the UK Government recognised the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces as “the sole legitimate representative of the Syrian people”.³⁶ There is no consensus, and the permanent five members of the UN Security Council are divided, as Russia and China do not agree.

19. In the absence of an invitation, legality could be most clearly established through a UN Security Council Resolution authorising military action. The impasse between the West and Russia over Syria makes this an extremely difficult goal, because it demands some form of consensus between the permanent members. **Though difficult, this requirement for agreement makes a UN Security Council Resolution desirable for more than simply legal reasons, as it would require negotiation between all parties and compromise to achieve an agreed response.**

20. The third legal basis for the use of force is self-defence, as set out in Article 51 of the UN Charter. This confirms an inherent right to individual or collective self-defence. In the case of Syria, Coalition members who are taking action in Syria are doing so on the basis of collective self-defence of Iraq. The Foreign Secretary implied but did not state clearly that he considered this might also be the legal basis for airstrikes by the UK. He said:

The Coalition forces that are operating in Syria are doing so on the basis of collective self-defence of Iraq and the challenge that the Iraqi Government are facing from ISIL and its base in Syria.³⁷

He added that “The logic of extending our mandate to cover ISIL targets in Syria would be very clearly a logic in support of the mandate we have in Iraq for the collective self-defence of that country.”³⁸

35 The UK has set out its view of the three requirements for humanitarian intervention in Syria (that is, strong evidence of extreme and large-scale humanitarian distress; no practicable alternative to the use of force; and that the proposed use of force is necessary, proportionate, and the minimum necessary) but these are not yet accepted by the international community as a valid justification for using force in the absence of Security Council authorisation.

36 HC Deb, 20 Nov 2012, [Col 445](#)

37 Q 50

38 Q 52

21. The UK government has used both individual and collective forms of self-defence as legal justification for action in Syria already. It justified its drone strike against a target in Syria in August 2015 to Parliament as an act of individual self-defence of the UK, but in a letter to the UN Security Council, it argued both that it was “a necessary and proportionate exercise of the individual right of self-defence of the United Kingdom” and that “action against ISIL in Syria is lawful in the collective self-defence of Iraq.”³⁹ We asked Marc Weller, Professor of International Law and International Constitutional Studies, University of Cambridge, about the legal justification for airstrikes in Syria, and he struck a cautious tone. He noted that the French statement to the UN Security Council justifying its intention to join airstrikes in Syria was “ambiguous”, in that it did not make clear if it was referring to self-defence on behalf of Iraq or for itself. He considered that the latter:

stretches our understanding of self-defence a little bit. When you want to involve self-defence in the sense that you, as one state, are defending yourself against the actions of another state, or perhaps the actions of a non-state actor based in another state, you have to demonstrate quite specifically that there exists an instant, overwhelming necessity, leaving no choice of means and no moment of deliberation—in other words, an imminent armed attack is going to happen against you unless you act now. The United Kingdom successfully made that argument in relation to the operation that took place in August, when it argued that there was a terrorist cell engaged directly in an activity that would lead inevitably to an attack on the United Kingdom. France has not made such a specific case as yet, as far as I have seen.⁴⁰

Former Attorney General, the Rt Hon. Dominic Grieve QC MP, however, was more positive about the potential case for justifying airstrikes:

Is it possible for me as a lawyer to see a legal basis on which you could attack IS in Syria? The answer must be yes. If IS is threatening the national security and the lives of people in the United Kingdom and is operating in ungoverned space, and if the Government have gone through a checklist to decide that what they want to do is necessary and proportionate, and there is no other way of dealing with the problem other than using lethal force, those provide perfectly clear grounds in international law why air strikes could be used.⁴¹

Military risks

22. In military terms, we noted that although our witnesses believed that a decision to extend airstrikes into Syria would be welcomed by Coalition allies, some said that it would not have anything other than a marginal effect.⁴² The experts told us that it would not be likely to involve extra aircraft but would simply re-focus existing assets;⁴³ that the UK was already contributing valuable surveillance in Syria; and that the ability to conduct airstrikes as well would not have a decisive effect.⁴⁴ Sir Simon Mayall concurred, adding:

39 [Letter from the Permanent Representative of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to the United Nations addressed to the President of the Security Council, 7 September 2015](#)

40 Q 63

41 Q 46

42 See Q 53 [Clarke], Q 122 [Lain]

43 Q 63 [Quintana]

44 See Q 58 [Mayall and Quintana], Q 122 [Ehteshami and Lain], Q 53 [Clarke]

There are not that many of them, actually. This is not an air campaign anything remotely like the scale of 1991 or 2003. We need to be very clear about this. This is not a war-winning air campaign, by any stretch of the imagination.⁴⁵

23. As a result, several witnesses concluded that there was little reason for the UK to change its policy.⁴⁶ Julien Barnes-Dacey was strongly against the proposal and told us that the airstrikes make the threat from ISIS worse because they “feed a sense of radicalisation”:

Sunnis say, “Look, the West is not helping us against Assad, but they are fighting ISIS.” [...] We become direct parties, all the while contributing nothing meaningful, in terms of military numbers or capability. I really fail to see how air strikes against ISIS will not do more harm than good.⁴⁷

24. Our witnesses also highlighted the need for allies on the ground when conducting airstrikes, and the limitations of any action without them, which was termed “the heart of our problem”.⁴⁸ We were told that allies on the ground were necessary both to offer information on targeting, as the Kurds have done in northern areas of Syria, and also in order to re-take the territories if and when they are vacated by ISIL. The US campaign to train and equip Syrian rebels to fight ISIL has notoriously met little success and was abandoned last month when the US announced that it would instead focus on providing weapons and ammunition to existing groups, and instructing some rebel leaders on how to call in airstrikes.⁴⁹

25. We note also that the former Deputy Prime Minister, the Rt Hon. Nick Clegg, has recently said that the lack of a “coherent ground campaign in Syria to which air strikes could usefully contribute” was the reason that the Government did not pursue military action against Syria in September 2014, and that he did not consider that to have changed.⁵⁰ We were concerned by the limited response when we asked the Foreign Secretary about the need for allies on the ground to carry out land operations. He said that “it will require boots on the ground to roll back ISIL on the ground and we have always recognised that fact”,⁵¹ but when we pushed him to commit to providing information on this point before any motion was put before Parliament, he refused:

Stephen Gethins: So will you bring something forward to Parliament before we finally approve—on the question of boots on the ground and in training?

Mr Hammond: No, I can’t commit to bringing something forward to tell you where or how this campaign will play out in the long run. At the moment we are attacking an enemy in Iraq. If we formed the judgment that that air-based military operation would be more efficacious if we were able to attack ISIL targets in Syria as well, we will ask Parliament for authority to do that. That is all that I can say at this stage.⁵²

45 Q 64

46 See Q 122 [Lain], Q 131 [Turkmani], Q 121 [Ehteshami], Q41 [Rogan]

47 Q 41

48 Q 79 [Mayall]

49 [Obama Administration Ends Effort to Train Syrians to Combat ISIS](#), The New York Times, 9 October 2015

50 [‘Nick Clegg: Britain should stick to diplomacy if it really wants to help Syria’](#), Evening Standard, 8 October 2015,

51 Q 69

52 Q 71

Political and diplomatic risks

26. The fact that there are few reliable counterparts on the ground is a reflection of the extraordinary complexity of the situation on the ground in Syria. Our witnesses described a chaotic and complicated political and military scene: After over four years of civil war, there are thousands of fighting forces in various coalitions and umbrella organisations, with unclear aspirations and shifting alliances.⁵³ We were told that there was interchange between the many groups, as fighters from groups as diverse as al Nusra and the Free Syrian Army were now joining ISIL,⁵⁴ and also that there was “genuine bad blood” between them all.⁵⁵ All witnesses agreed that radical Islamist forces now dominate among fighting groups, including those linked to Al Qaeda such as Al Nusra and Al Sham. One witness described how the lengthy fighting had resulted in a “squeezing of the middle ground and radicalisation among the jihadi groups”.⁵⁶ Another described bleakly how “at this point everyone involved in the war in Syria is, to a certain extent, involved in a project of ethnic cleansing - whether it is the regime, some of the Sunni groups or the Kurds [...] unfortunately very few of the middle ground are able to withstand that pressure.”⁵⁷ When asked recently to estimate the strength of the Free Syrian Army, which had been backed by the West, the Foreign Secretary answered by estimating that the “non-ISIL, non-al-Nusra part of the opposition” (which presumably includes but is not limited to the FSA) “probably” has a fighting strength of about 80,000 soldiers deployed across the country,⁵⁸ but witnesses told us that there were few “moderates” left and that the FSA was now “very weak”.⁵⁹ There appeared to be little chance of a legitimate and functioning ally emerging from the chaos soon. The complex nature of the situation makes it hard to guess the consequences of tackling just ISIL, or to predict what group would take their territory if they were defeated.

27. The situation in Syria is complicated still further by the multiple international actors involved, to the extent that many observers now consider it a proxy war as much as an internal conflict.⁶⁰ These include Russia and Iran (on the Assad side), Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar, and the US (on the sides of various different parts of the opposition), creating what one witness called a “multi-layered conflict”.⁶¹ Our witnesses described how these actors have conflicting strategic interests, and are prolonging and exacerbating the conflict. Julien Barnes-Dacey described Syria as a theatre for three regional wars: an Iran-Saudi conflict; an intra-Sunni conflict of Saudis and Qataris; and the Turkey-PKK conflict.⁶² Professor Hinnebusch, Professor of International Relations and Middle East Politics and Director for the Centre of Syrian Studies, University of St Andrews, added that the rise of ISIL, rather than galvanising the international and Syrian actors to work together to oppose it (and perhaps to assist the international Coalition in fighting it), has created a “counter tendency” in which various sides “seem to believe that they can use

53 See also Aymenn Jawad Al Tamimi ([SYR0005](#))

54 See Q 164 [Abdurrahman] and Q 8 [Cockburn]

55 Q 16 [Harkin]

56 Q 106 [Ehteshami]

57 Q 32 [Barnes-Dacey]

58 HC Deb, 20 Oct 2015, [Col 814](#)

59 Q 2 [Cockburn]

60 See, for example, ‘[Syria: Proxy war, not civil war](#)’, Middle East Monitor, 14 March 2015; ‘[We Ask Experts: Has The Situation In Syria Become A Proxy War?](#)’, NPR.org, 17 October 2015

61 Q 65 [Mayall]

62 Q 32

ISIS for their own purposes, or exploit ISIS's existence as a bogeyman to get support for themselves."⁶³

28. The much more substantial Russian intervention on the side of the Assad regime that started at the end of September 2015 has complicated even further any proposed action in Syria by the UK. On 30 September, Russia began to conduct airstrikes in Syria in support of the Assad regime. It has also begun to provide more substantial military support on the ground, as has Iran. The Russian Government states that its efforts are aimed at fighting terrorist groups in Syria, including but not limited to ISIL, but the US has claimed that airstrikes have been largely aimed at groups fighting Assad, including groups affiliated with the FSA that have received support from the US.⁶⁴ Although international opinion is mixed about the long-term implications of the intervention by Russia, in the short term it has appeared to limit the options available to others. We note fears expressed by our witnesses that

Clearly, there is a genuine issue when we have Russians flying in airspace on a particular agenda and the US-led Coalition flying in the same airspace on a different agenda.⁶⁵

Sensibly, Russia and the US have agreed on de-confliction measures to limit the danger of their aircraft becoming involved in hostilities, but fears persist as multiple air forces are now pursuing different agendas in Syria. It also appears to have dampened discussions about potential no-fly areas or safe zones, which would be even harder to agree and enforce.

29. Finally, several of our witnesses also suggested that by participating in military action against ISIL in Syria, the UK would actually compromise its diplomatic capability and its capacity to put pressure on its national and international partners to create a route to a solution to the inter-related problems of ISIL and the Syrian civil war. Dr Rim Turkmani and Ammar Waqqaf, presenting different Syrian perspectives, both called for the UK and EU to lead a diplomatic initiative, telling us that the UK is in a good position to do so precisely because it is not part of the "polarisation" at the international (between the US and Russia) and regional (between Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Iran) levels,⁶⁶ and because "it hasn't yet prejudiced its position" in Syria.⁶⁷

30. We consider that the UK's provision of humanitarian assistance to Syrian refugees has further strengthened its diplomatic position and moral authority for such negotiations. The Syrian civilian population has suffered enormously from the civil war and from the rise of ISIL: over 250,000 people have been killed and over one million injured. The UN has estimated that 6.5 million people have been internally displaced and that 4.2 million have fled the country.⁶⁸ The UK has allocated over £1.1 billion (of which over £652 million has been spent) since 2012 to partners such as the United Nations, NGOs and the Red Cross to help meet the immediate needs of vulnerable people in Syria and of refugees in the region. It has also allocated £9.5 million to support local capacity and build longer term stability. The aims of the UK's funding in Syria include meeting the needs of vulnerable

63 Q 30; See also Q 96 [Ehteshami], Q35 [Rogan]

64 See, for example, 'Russian Airstrike in Syria Targeted CIA-Backed Rebels, U.S. Officials Say', Wall Street Journal, 30 September 2015. See also RUSI Analysis 'Russia's War Plan in Syria', 2 October 2015, and Q 151 [Abdurrahman]

65 Q 75 [Mayall]; see also Q 75 [Quintana]

66 Q 141 [Turkmani]

67 Q 144 [Waqqaf]

68 UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 'Syrian Arab Republic: Key figures' accessed 28 October 2015

groups, and also strengthening “the moderate opposition’s capacity to provide governance and basic services and thereby provide an alternative to extremist groups such as ISIL and to the Assad regime.”⁶⁹ We welcome the Government’s commitment to alleviating the suffering of the civilian population and urge the Government to continue providing this vital assistance.

69 DFID, [“Syria Crisis Response Summary”](#), 23 September 2015

4 Conclusion: A coherent strategy?

31. An apparent principle of the Government's current approach is to separate the question of the Syrian civil war from the question of the threat from ISIL. The planned action apparently focuses exclusively on the latter. In September 2015, Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond told us:

If we seek Parliament's approval to engage in targeting ISIL forces in Syria, it will be as an adjunct to the operation we are already carrying out in Iraq. It will not be in order to play a role in the Syrian civil war. These are two different issues. Of course, ISIL is involved in both. [...]I do not envisage that we would want British air strikes to get involved in complex three-way fights in north-western Syria where regime forces and other Syrian forces are involved.⁷⁰

32. We asked the Foreign Secretary whether ISIL could be defeated without a resolution to the civil war. He told us that it could: "If we are able to attack ISIL across its theatre of operation, from northern Syria, through eastern Syria, into Iraq, it is possible to defeat ISIL in that theatre, as a separate issue from the broader Syrian civil war."⁷¹ However, where the Government appeared to see merit in drawing a line between what it considers to be separate issues, our witnesses complained about a lack of joined-up strategy to tackle closely interlinked crises. That point was made by witnesses who agreed with the extension of airstrikes. For example, Sir Simon Mayall, stated that "I would like to see it, as I think we all would, linked to a much firmer strategic set of policy assumptions and a plan - political, diplomatic, humanitarian, as well as military."⁷² That argument was also advanced by witnesses who opposed airstrikes. For example, Dr Rim Turkmani called for the UK and others to "go back to the drawing board" and create a new strategy based on "legitimate state building", because ISIL "lives on" the chaos caused by the collapse of state control in Syria.⁷³

33. In the face of a humanitarian and security catastrophe, there is a powerful sense that something must be done in Syria. We agree that it is a key British national interest to defeat ISIL. We agree with the Prime Minister that defeating the ideology that underlies ISIL may be the work of decades. We believe that the defeat of ISIL itself means the conventional military defeat and elimination of the so-called caliphate so that no territory would be controlled and administered in the name of a caliphate in Syria and Iraq. We consider this to be a necessary goal for the UK. However, **we believe that there should be no extension of British military action into Syria unless there is a coherent international strategy that has a realistic chance of defeating ISIL and of ending the civil war in Syria. In the absence of such a strategy, taking action to meet the desire to do something is still incoherent.**

34. **We consider that the focus on the extension of airstrikes against ISIL in Syria is a distraction from the much bigger and more important task of finding a resolution to the conflict in Syria and thereby removing one of the main facilitators of ISIL's rise.** There was consensus among our witnesses that the UK should use its diplomatic weight to exert pressure on the parties in the conflict, and their international sponsors. We note that

⁷⁰ Oral evidence taken on [9 September 2015](#), HC 381, Q 63

⁷¹ Oral evidence taken on [9 September 2015](#), HC 381, Q 35

⁷² Q 56

⁷³ Q 133

many more of our witnesses called on the UK to lead a renewed diplomatic initiative rather than conduct airstrikes. Several considered that the Russian intervention had opened up a new opportunity to bring parties to the negotiating table. This appears to be happening now, and we note talks in Vienna on 30 October 2015 which now include Iran.⁷⁴ The Foreign Secretary told us that to relent in its pressure on Assad would act as a “recruiting sergeant” for ISIL.⁷⁵ **We are not persuaded that talks involving all parties would be any more of an incentive for people to join ISIL than allowing the continuation of the chaos and conflict.**

74 See, for example, “[Syria’s external protagonists search for ‘course out of hell’](#)”, Financial Times, 29 October 2015; “[After a U.S. Shift, Iran Has a Seat at Talks on War in Syria](#)”, The New York Times, 28 October 2015

75 Oral evidence taken on [9 September 2015](#), HC 381, Q 38; see also HC Deb 7 September 2015, [c33](#) [Prime Minister]

5 Enabling the House to reach a decision

35. *The Government should explain the following points before asking the House of Commons to approve a substantive motion authorising military action:*

- a) *On an international strategy:*
 - i) *How the proposal would improve the chances of success of the international coalition's campaign against ISIL;*
 - ii) *How the proposed action would contribute to the formation and agreement of a transition plan for Syria;*
 - iii) *In the absence of a UN Security Council Resolution, how the Government would address the political, legal, and military risks arising from not having such a resolution;*
 - iv) *Whether the proposed action has the agreement of the key regional players (Turkey; Iran; Saudi Arabia; Iraq); if not, whether the Government will seek this before any intervention;*
 - v) *Which ground forces will take, hold, and administer territories captured from ISIL in Syria.*
- b) *On the military imperative:*
 - i) *What the overall objective is of the military campaign; whether it expects that it will be a "war-winning" campaign; if so, who would provide war-winning capabilities for the forces; and what the Government expects will be the result of extending airstrikes to Syria.*
 - ii) *What extra capacity the UK would contribute to the Coalition's actions in Syria.*

36. *We are persuaded that it is not yet possible for the Government to give a satisfactory explanation on the points listed above. Until it is possible for the Government to address these points we recommend that it does not bring to the House a motion seeking the extension of British military action to Syria.*

Conclusions and recommendations

Possible diplomatic, political and military risks of extending airstrikes into Syria

1. Though difficult, this requirement for agreement makes a UN Security Council Resolution desirable for more than simply legal reasons, as it would require negotiation between all parties and compromise to achieve an agreed response. (Paragraph 19)

Conclusion: A coherent strategy?

2. We believe that there should be no extension of British military action into Syria unless there is a coherent international strategy that has a realistic chance of defeating ISIL and of ending the civil war in Syria. In the absence of such a strategy, taking action to meet the desire to do something is still incoherent. (Paragraph 33)
3. We consider that the focus on the extension of airstrikes against ISIL in Syria is a distraction from the much bigger and more important task of finding a resolution to the conflict in Syria and thereby removing one of the main facilitators of ISIL's rise. (Paragraph 34)
4. We are not persuaded that talks involving all parties would be any more of an incentive for people to join ISIL than allowing the continuation of the chaos and conflict. (Paragraph 34)

Enabling the House to reach a decision

5. The Government should explain the following points before asking the House of Commons to approve a substantive motion authorising military action:
 - a) On an international strategy:
 - i) How the proposal would improve the chances of success of the international coalition's campaign against ISIL;
 - ii) How the proposed action would contribute to the formation and agreement of a transition plan for Syria;
 - iii) In the absence of a UN Security Council Resolution, how the Government would address the political, legal, and military risks arising from not having such a resolution;
 - iv) Whether the proposed action has the agreement of the key regional players (Turkey; Iran; Saudi Arabia; Iraq); if not, whether the Government will seek this before any intervention;
 - v) Which ground forces will take, hold, and administer territories captured from ISIL in Syria.

- b) On the military imperative:
 - i) What the overall objective is of the military campaign; whether it expects that it will be a “war-winning” campaign; if so, who would provide war-winning capabilities for the forces; and what the Government expects will be the result of extending airstrikes to Syria.
 - ii) What extra capacity the UK would contribute to the Coalition’s actions in Syria. (Paragraph 35)
- 6. We are persuaded that it is not yet possible for the Government to give a satisfactory explanation on the points listed above. Until it is possible for the Government to address these points we recommend that it does not bring to the House a motion seeking the extension of British military action to Syria. (Paragraph 36)

Formal Minutes

Thursday 29 October 2015

Members present:

Crispin Blunt, in the Chair

Mr John Baron

Daniel Kawczynski

Ann Clwyd

Andrew Rosindell

Mike Gapes

Stephen Gethins

Draft Report (*The extension of offensive British military operations to Syria*), proposed by the Chair, brought up and read.

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

Paragraphs 1 and 2 read and agreed to.

Paragraph 3 read.

Amendment proposed, in line 1, after “debate.” to insert “It does not consider the reasons for the peaceful protests in Syria in 2011. It does not look at the way in which the Assad regime brutally suppressed those protests and then began bombing civilian areas. It does not consider the reasons for the inadequate international response to the deteriorating situation in Syria. It does not look at the reasons why the United States, the United Kingdom or regional allies failed to intervene to protect the civilian population. It does not consider the case for and against establishing safe havens, humanitarian corridors or a No Fly zone as was done by John Major’s government in Iraq in 1991. It does not consider the causes of, or responsibility for, the 250,000 Syrians so far killed, and the half of the population forced to leave their homes in the last four years, 7 million internally displaced and 4 million as refugees, in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, the Kurdistan region of Iraq, or now in Europe and elsewhere. It does not look at the role of regional actors including Hizbollah, Iran or Iraqi Shia militias fighting on behalf of the Assad regime. It does not consider the role of Turkey as a supporter of Sunni opponents to Assad, nor of its ongoing conflict with the Kurds. It does not look at the reasons for the recent decision by Russia to intervene forcefully and with airstrikes against all groups opposed to the Assad regime, including some which are supported by the USA.”—(*Mike Gapes.*)

Question put, That the Amendment be made.

The Committee divided.

Ayes, 2
Mike Gapes
Ann Clwyd

Noes, 4
Mr John Baron
Stephen Gethins
Daniel Kawczynski
Andrew Rosindell

Question accordingly negatived.

Paragraph agreed to.

Paragraphs 4 to 18 agreed to.

Paragraph 19 read.

Amendment proposed, in line 4, to leave out from “members.” to the end of the paragraph and add “Although a United Nations Security Council Resolution might be desirable for more than simply legal reasons, as it would require negotiation between all parties and compromise to achieve it, such a UN resolution is extremely unlikely.”—(*Mike Gapes.*)

Question put, That the Amendment be made.

The Committee divided.

Ayes, 2
Mike Gapes
Ann Clwyd

Noes, 4
Mr John Baron
Stephen Gethins
Daniel Kawczynski
Andrew Rosindell

Question accordingly negatived.

Paragraph agreed to.

Paragraphs 20 to 32 read and agreed to.

Paragraph 33 read.

Amendment proposed, in line 7, to leave out from “However,” to the end of the paragraph and add “although we would support extension of British military action against Daesh into Syria, we believe there is also an urgent need for a coherent international strategy that has a realistic chance of both defeating ISIL/Daesh and also of ending the civil war in Syria.”—(*Mike Gapes.*)

Question put, That the Amendment be made.

The Committee divided.

Ayes, 2
Mike Gapes
Ann Clwyd

Noes, 4
Mr John Baron
Stephen Gethins
Daniel Kawczynski
Andrew Rosindell

Question accordingly negatived.

Paragraph agreed to.

Paragraph 34 read.

Amendment proposed, in line 2, to leave out “finding a” and insert “ending the humanitarian catastrophe, reducing the flow of refugees and internally displaced people, establishing safe areas, no fly zones and international protection within Syria, and finding a longer term”—(*Mike Gapes.*)

Question put, That the Amendment be made.

The Committee divided.

Ayes, 2
Mike Gapes
Ann Clwyd

Noes, 4
Mr John Baron
Stephen Gethins
Daniel Kawczynski
Andrew Rosindell

Question accordingly negatived.

Paragraph agreed to.

Paragraph 35 agreed to.

Paragraph 36 read.

Amendment proposed, to leave out the paragraph.—(*Mike Gapes.*)

Question put, That the Amendment be made.

The Committee divided.

Ayes, 2
Mike Gapes
Ann Clwyd

Noes, 4
Mr John Baron
Stephen Gethins
Daniel Kawczynski
Andrew Rosindell

Question accordingly negatived.

Paragraph agreed to.

Summary read and agreed to.

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 the following written evidence be reported to the House for publication on the internet:

Letter from the Committee Chair to Professor Michael Clarke, dated 15 September 2015

Note from Professor Michael Clarke answering questions from the Committee, dated 26 October 2015

Background briefing on main factions in Syria, supplied by Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi on 7 September 2015

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

[Adjourned till Tuesday 3 November at 2.30 pm

Witnesses

The following witnesses gave evidence. Transcripts can be viewed on the Committee's inquiry page at www.parliament.uk/facom.

Tuesday 8 September 2015

Question number

Patrick Cockburn, Middle East correspondent, The Independent, and **James Harkin**, freelance reporter [Q1-29](#)

Julien Barnes-Dacey, Senior Policy Fellow, Middle East and North Africa programme, European Council on Foreign Relations, **Professor Raymond Hinnebusch**, Professor of International Relations and Middle East Politics and Director of the Centre for Syrian Studies, University of St Andrews, and **Professor Eugene Rogan**, Director of the Middle East Centre, St Anthony's College, University of Oxford [Q30-44](#)

Professor Michael Clarke, Director, Royal United Services Institute, and **Rt Hon Dominic Grieve QC MP**, former Attorney General [Q45-54](#)

Thursday 8 October 2015

Lieutenant General Sir Simon Mayall, former Senior Defence Adviser for Middle East, Ministry of Defence, **Elizabeth Quintana**, Director, Military Services Department, Royal United Services Institute, and **Professor Marc Weller**, Professor of International Law and International Constitutional Studies, University of Cambridge [Q55-91](#)

Sarah Lain, Research Fellow, Royal United Services Institute, and **Professor Anoush Ehteshami**, Professor of International Relations, Durham University [Q92-128](#)

Ammar Waqqaf, British Syrian Society, and **Dr Rim Turkmani**, Senior Research Fellow, London School of Economics and Political Science [Q129-146](#)

Rami Abdurrahman, Director, Syrian Observatory for Human Rights [Q147-164](#)

Published written evidence

The following written evidence was received and can be viewed on the Committee's inquiry web page at www.parliament.uk/facom. SYR numbers are generated by the evidence processing system and so may not be complete.

- 1 Ammar Waqqaf ([SYR0002](#))
- 2 Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi ([SYR0005](#))
- 3 Professor Michael Clarke ([SYR0004](#))
- 4 Professor Marc Weller ([SYR0001](#))
- 5 Syrian Observatory For Human Rights ([SYR0003](#))

List of Reports from the Committee during the current Parliament

All publications from the Committee are available on the Committee's website at www.parliament.uk/facom.

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

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