



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)

Seventh Report of Session 2014–15

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to the report*

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Summary

A decade ago a jihadist state in Western Iraq and Eastern Syria would have been perceived as the worst possible scenario for the region—the sum of all our fears. As recently as the 2006–7 surge, the very possibility was considered sufficient to justify operations which consumed more than half a trillion US dollars, and involved the deployment of half a million coalition soldiers.

Now in 2015, the nightmare has been realised—and in an extreme form. Al-Dawla al-Islamiya fi al-Iraq al-Sham (DAESH) controls territory equivalent to the size of the UK, including the second largest city in Iraq. It has contributed to the displacement of millions of refugees and internally displaced people (IDPs), destabilising and threatening neighbouring states. It provides safe haven to an estimated 20,000 foreign fighters, many dedicated to an international terrorist campaign. Amedy Coulibaly, the terrorist who carried out an attack on a Jewish Supermarket in Paris on 9 January 2015 had declared his allegiance to DAESH in a video made public after his death.¹ Mehdi Nemmouche, who carried out an attack on the Jewish Museum on 24 May 2014 in Brussels, was found to have fought for DAESH in Syria.²

An international coalition has now committed itself to the destruction of DAESH—making it the leading international defence and security priority of the UK Government today. In the Prime Minister's words, there is a:

worldwide threat that is posed by this poisonous ideology of extremist Islamist terrorism. We have to recognise the scale of what we face in this country, but also, as we see, around the world. We must, with our allies, use everything we have in our power to defeat it. That means combating terrorism. It means defeating ISIL in Iraq and Syria.

[...]

[T]his is not a terrorist body that has found a willing host. It is a terrorist body that runs a state, has oil revenues, has weapons, has land, has money and all the rest of it. So we will not deal with the problem of the Islamist extremist terrorist narrative unless we quite aggressively deal with ISIL. So it is a priority.³

On 26 September 2014, the House of Commons voted to begin military operations in Iraq. But there is a significant gap between the rhetoric of Britain and its partners, and the reality of the campaign on the ground. In contrast to the vast international presence in 2007, the formal role of the international coalition is limited to air-strikes, the training of local security forces, 'capacity-building' of the Iraqi state, and an aspiration to create 'a regional solution,' presumably combined with special forces operations.

It will be very difficult to destroy DAESH. The Iraqi Government will be forced to try to recapture cities like Mosul and Fallujah, relying on inadequate forces. There are significant structural challenges within the Kurdish Peshmerga, and the Iraqi Security Forces are weak. The Iraqi Security Forces now lack the formidable resources or technology which were provided as recently as four years ago by the US military. The capacity, and (as a result of the drop in oil prices) the resources of the Iraqi state are limited. The Sunni population in the DAESH areas are deeply suspicious of Kurds, of the Shia-dominated Baghdad Government and—most significantly—of the Shia militia who are doing much of the fighting.

Even if the Iraqi state were nominally able to recapture cities like Mosul and Fallujah, it would struggle to secure those cities, let alone rebuild them, and win back the trust of the local population. If they fail to rebuild, DAESH will only re-emerge in a new form. Meanwhile, the insurgents continue to be surprisingly resilient: in terms of propaganda, international recruitment and local finance. They are able to exploit an open border for safe haven in Syria. Regional players—including Saudi Arabia, Iran, Qatar and Turkey—continue to be deeply suspicious of or even hostile towards each other and are supporting different sides in what increasingly resembles a proxy war in Syria. 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.

Despite its major role in Iraq from 2003–2007, the British Government has not focused on Iraq for some time. In 2009, it ceased to pay for Iraqi officers to undertake officer training at Sandhurst. In 2011, it closed the British Consulate General in Basra (despite Basra being the base of all UK military operations from 2003–2007 and the major oil-producing region of the country). In the spring of 2014, it seems that Iraq was a low priority for UK intelligence, there was no Defence section in Kurdistan, no DFID office in Iraq, and the political section of the British Embassy in Baghdad consisted of three relatively junior employees on comparatively short-term deployments.

Since the September 2014 vote of the House of Commons in favour of military air strikes in Iraq, the UK actions have remained strikingly modest. They have amounted to carrying out, on average, less than one air strike a day (in Iraq, not in Syria); presumably providing some Special Forces support; supplying a few weapons to the Kurds (most directly 40 heavy machine-guns) and some non-lethal equipment, and providing 48 trainers who operate on an approximate two–three month rotation. At the time of our visit to Baghdad—six months after the capture of Mosul—the entire UK military presence in Iraq, outside the Kurdish regions, amounted to three individuals. By comparison the Australians have offered up to

1 [Paris gunman Amedy Coulibaly declared allegiance to Isis](#), The Guardian, 12 January 2015

2 [French suspect in Brussels Jewish museum attack spent year in Syria](#), The Guardian, 1 June 2014

3 Oral evidence taken before the Liaison Committee, [16 December 2014](#), HC (2014-15) 887, Q1; Q65

400 troops, the Spanish 300 troops, and Italy 280. The US has authorised up to 3,100 personnel to be in Iraq.⁴

In testimony to the committee, UK officials, ministers, and officers have failed to set out a clear military strategy for Iraq, or a clear definition of the UK's role in the operations. We see no evidence of an energised policy debate, reviewing or arguing options for deeper engagement. Instead many questions of the 'mission', or strategy, appear to have been left either in a vacuum between Government departments or left to the international coalition (which appears to mean the US). We saw no evidence of the UK Government as a whole seeking to analyse, question, or change the coalition strategy, to which it is committed.

Given that DAESH is the most dramatic and significant threat to regional stability, and international security, to have emerged in the Middle East in decades, we are surprised and deeply concerned that the UK is not doing more. There is no demand from the Iraqi Government for combat troops; nor any question of the UK deploying such troops. But there is far more that the UK could do without engaging in direct combat operations. The UK military is still one of the largest and most capable forces in the world and its experience of Iraq is second only to that of the United States. It has many personnel with the knowledge, the energy, and the skills to engage with the Iraqi mission, and the withdrawal from Afghan operations should have freed up some capacity.

Many options are available. They include immediately meeting Iraq's specific request for UK trainers in counter-Improvised Explosive Device (IED) measures (made in November); providing staff and liaison officers to the US and Iraqi systems; contributing to Iraqi planning, the development of the mission and tactics; and, if necessary, providing more money and materiel to Iraqi Security Forces.

There are also opportunities for significantly increasing 'defence engagement'. This should include finding and making use of the many British citizens with deep experience of Iraq. Their role could include contributing to the understanding of the insurgency (the tribes, DAESH itself, and the broader battlefield); suggesting and facilitating solutions to win back the consent of the local population, and for the painfully difficult challenge of getting Sunni and Shia forces to work together under the Baghdad Government; and deterring the emergence of a proxy war among regional players. The UK should pursue a much 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. It also requires the UK Government to show greater co-ordination and integration across a number of departments, namely the MOD, the FCO and DFID, which has seemed lacking so far.

4 HL Deb, 15 Dec 2014, [col.52](#), HC Deb 15 Dec 2014, [col.1129](#)

These roles are consistent with the scale of the £38 billion defence budget, commensurate with our global presence, the expectations of Iraq and the Kurdistan region of Iraq, our status as a P5 member of the Security Council, and our traditionally close relationship to the United States. Failure to engage more closely would raise significant questions about the UK's ambitions and global role.

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 to UK troops in combat roles. Whilst we're conscious this would be an enduring commitment, extending over decades, given the extreme nature of the threat, and the importance that the UK Government attaches to resolving it, it seems very surprising that the UK Government is doing so little.

Conclusions and recommendations

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)
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)
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)
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)
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)
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)
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)

8. Special Forces operations will be of great use to the Iraqi Government and a counter-terrorism 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)
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)
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)
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)
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)

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 counter-insurgency 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)

1 Introduction

1. This inquiry, which we started in September 2014, has taken evidence from a number of witnesses on a variety of different aspects of the situation in Iraq and Syria. We would like to thank all of those who provided written evidence to the inquiry and to thank those who gave oral evidence to us. They were: Joost Hiltermann, Chief Operating Officer, International Crisis Group; Professor Toby Dodge, Director of the Middle East Centre, London School of Economics; Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, Shillman-Ginsburg Fellow at the Middle East Forum; Lieutenant Colonel (retired) Richard Williams; Dr Douglas Porch, US Naval Postgraduate School; General (retired) Richard Shirreff; Major General (retired) Jonathan Shaw; Emma Sky, Yale University; Professor Marc Weller, Cambridge University; Professor Adam Roberts, Oxford University; Dr Adrian Gallagher, Leeds University; Aaron Stein, Royal United Services Institute (RUSI); Lieutenant General Sir Simon Mayall, Defence Senior Adviser to the Middle East; Lieutenant General Gordon Messenger RM, Deputy Chief of Defence Staff Military Strategy & Operations; and, Mr Peter Watkins, Director General Security Policy, Ministry of Defence.

2. We also asked questions on the subject of Iraq (and Syria) during evidence sessions dedicated to other inquiries. This allowed us to question Admiral Sir George Zambellas, the First Sea Lord and Chief of Naval Staff, General Sir Nicholas Carter, Chief of the General Staff, Air Chief Marshal Sir Andrew Pulford, Chief of the Air Staff, General Sir Richard Barrons, Commander Joint Forces Command, and the Secretary of State for Defence, the Rt Hon Michael Fallon MP.

3. As part of this inquiry we visited both Baghdad and Erbil (capital of the Kurdish region of Iraq) as well as Amman in Jordan. We wish to express our thanks to both the staff of the British embassies and consulates who hosted us, and also to all of our interlocutors. The visit was invaluable in contributing to our understanding of the situation and we particularly appreciated the chance to meet British troops involved in training and defence engagement in the region.

2 The DAESH campaign in Iraq and Syria

The DAESH advance

4. DAESH—‘al-Dawla al-Islamiya fi al-Iraq al-Sham’—the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (also called ISIS/ISIL/IS)—is an offshoot of Al Qaeda in Iraq, a group originally founded by the Jordanian, Abu Musab al Zarqawi before 2003. By 2006, this group had emerged as a major threat to the stability of Iraq and indeed the international order, and had become the prime target of the US surge. By 2007, Al Qaeda in Iraq and other armed groups were mounting over a thousand attacks a week in Iraq.⁵

5. The American analysis of the threat posed by the group, and its composition was summarised by President Bush in 2007:

Al Qaeda is still active in Iraq. Its home base is Anbar Province. Al Qaeda has helped make Anbar the most violent area of Iraq outside the capital. A captured Al Qaeda document describes the terrorists’ plan to infiltrate and seize control of the province. This would bring Al Qaeda closer to its goals of taking down Iraq’s democracy, building a radical Islamic empire, and launching new attacks on the United States at home and abroad.

Failure in Iraq would be a disaster for the United States. The consequences of failure are clear: Radical Islamic extremists would grow in strength and gain new recruits. They would be in a better position to topple moderate governments, create chaos in the region and use oil revenues to fund their ambitions. Iran would be emboldened in its pursuit of nuclear weapons. Our enemies would have a safe haven from which to plan and launch attacks on the American people. For the safety of our people, America must succeed in Iraq.⁶

6. The US response to Al Qaeda in Iraq, eight years ago, ultimately involved the deployment of 130,000 US troops, focused on Baghdad and Anbar, the creation of ‘Sunni Awakening Councils’, under which hundreds of thousands of Sunnis were paid—mostly through tribal leaders—to fight Al Qaeda in Iraq, and a sophisticated counter-terrorist campaign, focused on killing or capturing insurgent leaders. This campaign was aided by the decision of the Shia leader, Muqtada al-Sadr, to call a ceasefire and remove his Shia militia from the fighting. By the end of 2008, the violence in Iraq had dropped to about a third of its 2006 levels, the Sunni populations of Anbar had turned against Al Qaeda in Iraq, and Al Qaeda in Iraq appeared to be a spent force.

7. The US concluded that the ‘surge’ had worked. In the words of Senator John McCain, now Chair of the Senate Armed Services Committee: “We had it won, thanks to the surge. [Iraq] was won.”⁷ But, in retrospect, that victory seems illusory. Iraq remained a fractured and fragile state—

5 [Why Did Violence Plummet? It Wasn't Just the Surge](#), The Washington Post, 8 September 2008

6 [Bush address on Iraq](#), BBC, 11 January 2007

7 [John McCain, Mika Brzezinski Spar Over Handling Of Iraq](#), Talking Points Memo, 13 June 2014

the US-backed Prime Minister al-Maliki had become increasingly close to Iran, was pursuing ever more aggressive policies against his Sunni opponents, and Sunni insurgents still survived in parts of Anbar. The US had expected to keep up to 50,000 troops in Iraq over the medium term: Vice-President Joe Biden was reportedly prepared to bet his vice-presidency that they would extend the Status of Forces Agreement beyond 2011.⁸ However, despite the personal intervention of the US President, the Iraqi Government refused to allow US troops to stay in Iraq, and began blocking visas for US diplomats. In 2011, US troops withdrew from Iraq, having invested \$815 US dollars, and deployed over a million individuals to Iraq over an eight year period.

8. At almost exactly the moment that the US left, the al-Maliki Government sent tanks to arrest the country's Sunni Vice-President, and began to arrest thousands of Sunni Iraqis, whom he accused of being in alliance with Al Qaeda/DAESH. It could be argued that this amounted to a paranoia becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy: the Sunni communities became increasingly alienated from the al-Maliki Government (which they perceived as an alien, Iranian-backed conspiracy), and, therefore, increasingly fertile ground for the insurgents.

9. Barely two months after the departure of US troops from Iraq, Al Qaeda in Iraq (now after a merger, rebranded as 'the Islamic State in Iraq') had reasserted control of many parts of Anbar, and had taken de facto control of much of Fallujah. It was also beginning to exercise increasing influence in Mosul, including collecting 'taxes' from the local population. The organisation soon became involved in the Syrian civil war, establishing itself in a large swathe of the Eastern Syrian Desert, fighting the forces of Bashar al-Assad. At the same time the al-Maliki Government provided tacit support to Bashar al-Assad, allowing Iran to move arms and men through Iraq to the war in Syria.⁹ This increasingly polarised the conflict between Shia and Sunni communities.

10. In 2013, the Islamic State in Iraq's leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi quarrelled with one of the movement's off-shoots in Syria, Jabhat al-Nusra and ultimately with Al Qaeda itself. He declared his group to be fully independent of Al Qaeda and renamed it the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant—'al-Dawla al-Islamiya fi al-Iraq al-Sham'—or DAESH.¹⁰

11. In June 2014, DAESH captured Mosul, the second largest city in Iraq. It is now clear that this was the culmination of almost two years of increasingly active DAESH presence in the area. Four of the fourteen divisions of the Iraqi Security Forces disintegrated in the face of the DAESH advance, abandoning to DAESH very large quantities of weapons, and armoured vehicles. DAESH took control of a substantial swathe of Eastern Syria and Western Iraq, including the cities of Raqqa, Deir-Azoor, Mosul, Tikrit, and Fallujah. On 29 June 2014, the group declared that the territory they now controlled in Syria and Iraq was a new Caliphate, anointed their leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, as 'caliph' and renamed the movement, this time as 'The Islamic State'. The insurgency within Iraq includes not only DAESH but also former Saddam regime elements. These are Sunni, but not necessarily 'Islamist', groups who oppose the 'Shia regime' in Baghdad and have

8 [In U.S. Exit From Iraq, Failed Efforts and Challenges](#), New York Times, 22 September 2012

9 [Iraq lets Iran fly arms to Syria despite U.S. protests](#), The Washington Times, 15 March 2012

10 The Soufan Group, [The Islamic State](#), (Nov 2014), p 12-13

ex-Saddam regime officials and military officers as members. Among the most prominent are Izzat al-Douri and the Naqshbandi Army.¹¹

The nature and recent actions of DAESH

12. According to Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, the core motivation and ideology of DAESH is the belief that the past glories of Islamic Civilisation were “due to the complete implementation of Islamic law [...] that foreign influences have corrupted the Islamic world [...] [and that] the Islamic world has been in decline because there has been no caliphate with full implementation of Islamic law as a way of life and a political system”.¹²

13. DAESH have, therefore, used passages from the Quran and the Hadiths to justify the use of extreme brutality to create a ‘true’ caliphate. This has begun with the systematic elimination of Iraq’s non-Sunni religious communities, who are categorised either as ‘apostates’ (Shia Muslims), or ‘pagan’ (the Iraqi Yazidi minority). They have insisted that the men of these communities must either convert or be killed (with the Yazidi women becoming sex slaves of favoured commanders).

14. Christians have also been killed but have generally been treated as a special category of second-class citizen, compelled to pay a special tax (jizya) to the DAESH authorities. Christians are not allowed to publicly wear crosses, pray in the presence of Muslims, or repair or renovate places of worship. Almost all members of these minority religious communities had fled the DAESH controlled territory by August 2014, leaving a largely homogenous Sunni population behind.

15. Those who remain have been compelled to live under conservative Islamic social codes. Women are expected to be ‘modestly covered’ and men are whipped for smoking. DAESH are also theoretically committed to segregating men and women in schools, to preventing public bathing, and the rewriting of textbooks to reflect their religious ideals, but implementation of these policies has so far been limited. They have, however, been universally brutal in the use of capital punishment to eliminate opposition and crime. Those who resist DAESH have sometimes been crucified, after killing them. Separately, DAESH decided to behead a number of US and UK journalists and aid-workers, filming these beheadings as a ‘warning’ or as ‘revenge’ against the actions of the West, which it perceives as a mortal enemy.

16. In August, DAESH attacked Kurdish forces, threatening the Kurdish capital Erbil, and capturing the minority areas between Mosul and the Kurdish heartland, displacing hundreds of thousands of Shia, Christian, Yazidi, Shabak and Kakai minority Iraqis. In September they mounted an attack on the Kurdish town of Kobani in Northern Syria. During our recent visit to Iraq, we were told that they controlled an area of 250,000 km²—about the size of the UK.

17. The group quickly attracted a large number of foreign fighters. The majority of the estimated 20,000 travelling to Syria, have now joined DAESH.¹³ Some of these fighters have expressed a

11 The Soufan Group, [The Islamic State](#), (Nov 2014), p 19

12 Q16

13 [Foreign fighters flow to Syria](#), The Washington Post 27 January 2015

desire to commit terrorist attacks in the West—an objective endorsed by the DAESH leadership, which perceives Western countries as their enemy. Amedy Coulibaly, the terrorist who carried out an attack on a Jewish Supermarket in Paris on 9 January 2015 had declared his allegiance to DAESH in a video made public after his death.¹⁴ Mehdi Nemmouche, who carried out an attack on the Jewish museum on 24 May 2014 in Brussels, was found to have fought for DAESH in Syria.¹⁵

Why act against DAESH?

18. On 26 September 2014, by a vote of 524 to 43, the House of Commons authorised the UK Government to carry out air strikes in Iraq—the third time in 25 years that the UK has been involved in military operations in Iraq. The House of Commons concluded in this vote that DAESH constituted a triple threat—a threat to UK national security, to the Iraqi population, and to the Iraqi state (thus echoing the US analysis of its predecessor—Al Qaeda in Iraq—in 2007). The words of the motion specified that DAESH should be attacked because of:

- “its sponsorship of terrorist attacks and its murder of a British hostage” and, therefore, the threat posed to wider international security and the UK directly;¹⁶
- “the barbaric acts of ISIL against the peoples of Iraq including the Sunni, Shia, Kurds, Christians and Yazidi and the humanitarian crisis this is causing”;
- “the clear threat ISIL poses to the territorial integrity of Iraq and the request from the Government of Iraq for military support from the international community and the specific request to the UK Government for such support.”¹⁷

19. Other reasons suggested for acting against DAESH have included the possible threat posed by returning foreign fighters,¹⁸ and the potential threat to a number of British allies, including Cyprus,¹⁹ Saudi Arabia and Jordan.²⁰

The legal case

20. Our witnesses on international law suggested that only one of these three reasons constituted a formal legal basis for a UK intervention (as opposed to a strategic argument for intervention). The threat felt by the UK was not considered by witnesses to be sufficient legal grounds for air-strikes against DAESH. Nor did the conditions exist for a humanitarian intervention justified in terms of the legal doctrine of ‘A Responsibility to Protect’ because the UN doctrine would require the agreement of the Security Council—which is likely to be blocked by Russia and China—and,

14 [Paris gunman Amedy Coulibaly declared allegiance to Isis](#), The Guardian, 12 January 2015

15 [French suspect in Brussels Jewish museum attack spent year in Syria](#), The Guardian, 1 June 2014

16 David Haines. Alan Henning was later beheaded on 3 October 2014.

17 HC Deb 26 Sep 2014, [col. 1255](#)

18 HC Deb 26 Sept 2014, [col. 1262](#)

19 [Cyprus under threat if ISIS continues advance westwards](#), LGC News, 13 October 2014

20 Q9

although a two-thirds majority approval in the General Assembly might give the political and moral legitimacy, it would fall short of a legal “green light”.²¹

21. Dr Adrian Gallagher argued, however, that it remained relatively straightforward to make an argument for the legitimacy of a humanitarian intervention (provided the consent of the Security Council could be achieved). DAESH as a group had been found by the UN in Iraq to have intentionally and systematically targeted ethnic and religious groups which, under article 2 of the Genocide Convention, constituted genocide.²² In November, the UN published a report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic entitled ‘Rule of Terror: Living under ISIS in Syria’. The report concluded that

ISIS has carried out mass victimization against civilians, including segments of the population on the basis of gender, religion and ethnicity. According to the evidence collected, there are reasonable grounds to believe that ISIS has carried out attacks in accordance with an organisational policy.²³

Dr Gallagher further noted that, as President Assad was manifestly failing to protect Syrian citizens from genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing, the case could also be made that the international community has a right to intervene in Syria.²⁴

22. The Government appeared to agree with our witnesses. It argued—in a note published on 25 September—that its right to intervene in Iraq was based on the Iraqi Government’s request for support in self-defence.

International law is clear that the use of force in international relations is prohibited, subject to limited exceptions. However, international law is equally clear that this prohibition does not apply to the use of military force by one State on the territory of another if the territorial State so requests or consents. It is clear in this case that Iraq has consented to the use of military force to defend itself against ISIL in Iraq. [...] [This] provides a clear and unequivocal legal basis for the deployment of UK forces and military assets to take military action to strike ISIL sites and military strongholds in Iraq.²⁵

On 26 September, the Prime Minister told the House that he believed there was a legal basis for intervening in Syria as well as Iraq.²⁶ He went on to tell the House that

21 Q200

22 Q200

23 United Nations, [Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, ‘Rule of Terror: Living under ISIS in Syria’](#) Nov 2014, p 13

24 Q200

25 Prime Minister’s Office, 10 Downing Street, [Summary of the Government legal position on military action in Iraq against ISIL](#), 25 Sept 2014

26 HC Deb, 26 Sept 2014, [col. 1259](#)

there is no question but that we have the legal basis for action, founded on the request of the Iraqi Government.

[...]

There are a variety of legal arguments that can be deployed. In this case it could not be clearer that we are acting at the request of a sovereign state, and if we were to act in Syria, I believe that would be the legal basis too: collective self-defence against ISIL which threatens Iraq. But my hon. Friend is absolutely right to say, and I have said this in the House before, that if one is averting a humanitarian catastrophe, that is a legal basis on which to act. Let me be clear again that although it is right that we are having this debate and this vote, if there was a moment when it looked as though there could be an urgent humanitarian need for intervention, I would be prepared to order that intervention and then come to the House and explain why.²⁷

23. In evidence to us, both Professor Marc Weller of Cambridge University and Professor Sir Adam Roberts of Oxford University also argued that extending air strikes into Syria, could be legally justified on the basis of the defence of Iraq.²⁸ However, they conceded that such air strikes would have to be focused on defending Iraq against DAESH, and not, for example, on toppling Bashar al-Assad; and that the UK Government would have to demonstrate that those DAESH forces in Syria—as opposed to those already in Iraq—represented a significant threat to the integrity of Iraq.

27 HC Deb 26 Sept 2014, [col. 1263](#)

28 Q187-8

3 The policy of the UK Government

24. Although a UK intervention has been authorised by Parliament and, we were told, would be legal under international law, it is immensely difficult to define the nature of the UK strategy. Indeed, in evidence to the committee, the Service Chiefs implied that there was not an overall military strategy or campaign plan, at least as yet. In the words of Air Chief Marshal Sir Andrew Pulford, the Chief of the Air Staff:

So, in terms of, “Have we got a campaign plan from here to success?” I think this is a situation where the international community, the Iraqi Government and all the other players within it are developing the plan as they go.

[...]

From my own viewpoint, this doesn’t lend itself to the traditional, “This is where we are. We’ve thought it all through. This is where we’re going to and this is the end state we’re looking for.”²⁹

Admiral Sir George Zambellas, the First Sea Lord and Chief of Naval Staff, concurred:

You can’t define precisely how long an operation is going to take. You certainly can’t select the end state.³⁰

25. In the previous interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, senior UK military and civilian figures did define clear missions, end-states, roles, responsibility and tactics, and summarised them in documents such as the April 2009 ‘comprehensive strategy for Afghanistan’.³¹ In this case, however, senior figures seemed to go out of their way to downplay the UK contribution, and the military contribution in particular: to emphasise that they were only one part of a large coalition. Peter Watkins, Director General of Security Policy at the Ministry of Defence, told us that the UK “should not expect to be doing everything” and that “we are only one country that is contributing to a large international coalition”³² and the Chief of the Air Staff stressed the complexity of the situation and the fact that there were lots of “moving parts”.³³

26. A frequent refrain was the ‘small’ nature of the UK contribution. Air Chief Marshal Sir Andrew Pulford described what the UK was doing as “merely a small part” or “a very small part”;³⁴ General Sir Richard Barrons, Commander Joint Forces Command, talked of the UK “doing a number of

29 Oral evidence taken on [5 Nov 2014](#), HC (2014-15) 512, Q210

30 Oral evidence taken on [5 Nov 2014](#), HC (2014-15) 512, Q220

31 Defence Committee, Seventh Report of Session 2009–10, [The Comprehensive Approach: the point of war is not just to win but to make a better peace](#), HC 224, para 36

32 Q354; Q352

33 Oral evidence taken on [5 Nov 2014](#), HC (2014-15) 512, Q210

34 Oral evidence taken on [5 Nov 2014](#), HC (2014-15) 512, Q130; Q210

very small things as part of this coalition”;³⁵ “a small niche contribution”;³⁶ “really quite small scale”; and again “we expect that contribution to be small”.³⁷

27. The Chiefs of Staff emphasised the insufficiency of military action. To the question ‘what is the mission in Iraq?’ General Sir Richard Barrons, had the response:

We are very clear that we are making a contribution to a coalition military operation in the full expectation that the military line of effort is not decisive.³⁸

The Chief of the Air Staff added:

The nature of military utility here is very difficult.³⁹

Service Chiefs were also insistent that one of the reasons they could not describe or define the mission, was that it was not their mission to define. In the words of the Chief of the General Staff:

I think the trouble is you are not really addressing it to the people who are going to be able to answer it. It seems to me it is fundamentally a question for somebody from the Foreign Office to answer, or even from Downing Street.⁴⁰

Air Chief Marshal Sir Andrew Pulford was also reluctant to define the exact role of the other players in the coalition:

You were looking for: who owns this? Well, the answer is that there are probably about 20 different players who own different elements of the comprehensive approach that needs to be applied in Iraq, in Syria and right around the region, because of the multifaceted and multi-natured nature of the ultimate solution, and all the moving parts that need to go into place.⁴¹

Shashank Joshi suggested that in reality the UK had simply signed up to a US strategy, without questioning it, or attempting to formulate any independent view.⁴² Peter Watkins was asked repeatedly by the committee to describe the resources which would be invested in the mission, and to offer metrics, to allow us to judge performance, or the UK commitment, but declined to do so.⁴³

35 Oral evidence taken on [5 Nov 2014](#), HC (2014-15) 512, Q208

36 Oral evidence taken on [5 Nov 2014](#), HC (2014-15) 512, Q205

37 Oral evidence taken on [5 Nov 2014](#), HC (2014-15) 512, Q199

38 Oral evidence taken on [5 Nov 2014](#), HC (2014-15) 512, Q199

39 Oral evidence taken on [5 Nov 2014](#), HC (2014-15) 512, Q220

40 Oral evidence taken on [5 Nov 2014](#), HC (2014-15) 512, Q207

41 Oral evidence taken on [5 Nov 2014](#), HC (2014-15) 512, Q210

42 Shashank Joshi ([ISI0021](#)) para 3

43 Q353; 355

28. Insofar as it is possible to define a UK mission in Iraq and Syria, it appears to combine a narrow focus—the elimination of a terrorist group—with a very broad definition of how to achieve it: no less than the fixing of the Iraqi and Syrian states. In the words of the Prime Minister:

[T]his alliance has a strategy which is very simple and straightforward, which is, we want a Government in Iraq and a Government in Syria that are capable of representing all of the people of those countries, and have security forces that can keep the security and stability of those countries, and not allow terrorists to thrive. That is the strategy. That is the aim.⁴⁴

29. The full theory of the UK Government appears to be as follows:

- a) In the words of General Sir Richard Barrons: “The objective of the coalition is to remove ISIL from Iraq.”⁴⁵ Or, more exactly, the final goal is to disrupt, dismantle and defeat DAESH in Iraq and Syria, and to prevent their return to either country in the future.
- b) But the UK and other international forces cannot be deployed in combat roles. (In Lieutenant General Sir Simon Mayall’s words: “Everybody has been absolutely clear that nobody wants western combat boots on the ground.”⁴⁶)
- c) The combat, therefore, will be undertaken by Iraqi Security Forces, who will have the task of countering the DAESH insurgency, and recapturing and holding the DAESH strongholds in Western Iraq.
- d) But this effort is hampered by the collapse of the Iraqi Security Forces, the sectarian divisions within Iraq, and the profound corruption, and unpopularity of the Iraqi State, particularly in Sunni areas.
- e) So this requires: the formation of a new Iraqi Security Forces, a new non-sectarian policy, the elimination of corruption, and the regaining of the trust of the Sunni population (so they too can turn against DAESH).
- f) This, in turn, relies on adopting a more comprehensive approach, aiming at—in the Prime Minister’s own words—“the creation of a new and genuinely inclusive Government in Iraq”.⁴⁷
- g) Finally, the situation in Iraq cannot be addressed without addressing the situation in Syria: and again in the Prime Minister’s words, the creation of “a new representative and accountable Government in Damascus.”⁴⁸

44 Oral evidence taken before the Liaison Committee, [16 December 2014](#), HC (2014-15) 887, Q66

45 Oral evidence taken on [5 Nov 2014](#), HC (2014-15) 512, Q200

46 Q317

47 HC Deb, 26 Sep 2014, [col. 1258](#)

48 HC Deb, 26 Sep 2014, [col. 1258](#)

State-building

30. State-building appears, therefore, to be at the heart of this military-political strategy. This was closely reflected in the House of Commons debate. The Prime Minister opened the debate saying his strategy depended on “the creation of a new and genuinely inclusive Government in Iraq [and] a new representative and accountable Government in Damascus.”⁴⁹ Andrew Mitchell MP argued that the solution to DAESH was to “focus on local governance and accountability”;⁵⁰ Dan Jarvis MP noted that “there needs to be a wider, encompassing political framework, with a plan for humanitarian aid and reconstruction, which will ultimately lead us to create a stronger and more accountable Iraqi Government.”⁵¹ The close connection, which some Members of Parliament seemed to draw between the narrow task of counter-terrorism, and the broader task of state-building was most neatly summarised in the debate by Gisela Stuart MP quoting UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon: “missiles may kill terrorists. But good governance kills terrorism.”⁵² This phrase had already been enthusiastically endorsed by the Prime Minister.⁵³

31. This theory of counter-terrorism/counter-insurgency/state-building raises issues well beyond the scope of this report. But, it is worth noting in passing that there are in fact no self-evident connections between the key objectives. You can create a stable legitimate state without winning a counter-insurgency campaign—as India has done—or you could win a counter-insurgency campaign without creating a ‘legitimate’ and ‘inclusive’ state—as Syria did in 1983. Strong states can sometimes harbour terrorists, weak states may seek to exclude them. We would question the capacity of the international community to create democratic states in the short term in either Iraq or Syria. Given those challenges, we would also question whether such things can be created and would question a strategy based upon the assumption of success, in state building.

The current strategy and comparison to the ‘Surge Strategy of 2007’

32. The clearest way, however, of analysing the current strategy is by comparing it directly to its predecessor—the counter-insurgency doctrine of the 2007 surge—which has been laid out in very considerable detail. The enemy we were fighting then, Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), is the precursor of DAESH. DAESH are occupying much of the same territory in Anbar that AQI occupied then. Fallujah, for example, which is now a major target for the operation, was captured, at immense cost, by the coalition in 2004, and subsequently lost again. The same party, the Da’wah party, is in power in Baghdad and almost all the Iraqi politicians and US commanders in control today were involved in the previous campaigns in Iraq. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi the current ‘Caliph’ was then an Al Qaeda in Iraq fighter, and was held in US custody. His movement draws its energy from many of the same political and sectarian divisions.

49 HC Deb, 26 Sep 2014, [col. 1258](#)

50 HC Deb, 26 Sep 2014, [col. 1299](#)

51 HC Deb, 26 Sep 2014, [col. 1327](#)

52 HC Deb, 24 Sep 2014, [col. 1307](#)

53 HC Deb, 24 Sep 2014, [col.1257](#)

33. The 2007 strategy was based on a military counter-insurgency campaign in which international troops were deployed: to clear and secure neighbourhoods, to help the Iraqi Security Forces protect the local population and to help ensure that the Iraqi forces left behind were capable of providing security.⁵⁴ This was then paired with many of the aspirations of the current strategy (economic development; state-building; devolution of power to local leaders; Sunni outreach through de-Ba'athification; training of the Iraqi Security Forces; using Sunni tribes against DAESH; controlling supplies to DAESH; creating a regional solution embracing neighbouring states). President Bush's 2007 presidential address could almost be used verbatim in 2015:

A successful strategy for Iraq goes beyond military operations. Ordinary Iraqi citizens must see that military operations are accompanied by visible improvements in their neighborhoods and communities. [The Iraqi Government must] show that it is committed to delivering a better life, to empower[ing] local leaders. And to allow more Iraqis to re-enter their nation's political life, the Government will reform de-Ba'athification laws

[...]

We'll help the Iraqis build a larger and better-equipped Army and we will accelerate the training of Iraqi forces [...] help local Iraqi communities pursue reconciliation, strengthen the moderates and speed the transition to Iraqi self-reliance.

[...]

Recently, local tribal leaders have begun to show their willingness to take on Al Qaeda.

[...]

We will interrupt the flow of support from Iran and Syria. And we will seek out and destroy the networks providing advanced weaponry and training to our enemies in Iraq. We will work with the governments of Turkey and Iraq to help them resolve problems along their border. We will use America's full diplomatic resources to rally support for Iraq from nations throughout the Middle East. Countries like Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan and the Gulf States need to understand that an American defeat in Iraq would create a new sanctuary for extremists and a strategic threat to their survival. These nations have a stake in a successful Iraq that is at peace with its neighbors, and they must step up their support for Iraq's unity Government.⁵⁵

34. When asked to define the differences between the 2007 strategy and the current strategy, the Defence Secretary declined to specify any difference in terms of counter-insurgency doctrine or Sunni outreach. Instead he implied the nature of difference was in the role and composition of the Iraqi Government:

54 [Bush address on Iraq](#), BBC, 11 January 2007

55 [Bush address on Iraq](#), BBC, 11 January 2007

[T]he biggest difference between now and 2007 is that we now have a genuinely inclusive Government in Iraq, who represent both Shia and Sunni, and, indeed, Kurdish elements in Iraq.⁵⁶

The central difference, therefore, between the 2007 and the current strategy is not in the objectives—which remain almost identical—but in the actors. This time these tasks are not to be performed by 130,000 US troops, 100,000 international contractors and consultants, dozens of Provincial Reconstruction teams, US-financed ‘Sunni Awakening’ councils and \$815 billion dollars of US money. Instead it is to be led by the Government in Baghdad. There are to be no foreign combat troops on the ground. Unlike the period between 2003–2011, training of the Iraqi Security Forces and the Peshmerga is to take place at secure bases, well behind the front line, and is not to include embedded trainers working alongside Iraqi troops.

35. The formal international coalition role is limited to air-strikes in Iraq (UK) and Syria (others), the training of local security forces, ‘capacity-building’ of the Iraqi state, and an aspiration to create ‘a regional solution’ (and, we presume, special forces operations—although these remain classified). This is not because of a conclusion that the deployment of 130,000 US troops was ineffectual—indeed, the conventional wisdom continues to be that their deployment was essential to the apparent success of the 2007 campaign. Instead, the decision to do it this time without international combat troops, reflects first, the absolute opposition of the Shia political parties, and, in particular, the Iranian-backed Shia militia to any Western combat deployments in Iraq (they have in fact implied that they would attack Western troops were such deployments to occur).⁵⁷ Secondly, it represents a totally changed political environment in the US, and the UK, in which there is no political appetite for combat troops.

36. During the course of our evidence sessions it became clear that regional partners were unlikely to deploy ground troops in Iraq, nor was it considered wise to suggest that they did so.⁵⁸ Instead, we were frequently told that any troops deployed would need to be Iraqi ground troops and that those troops would have to have the trust of all Iraqi citizens, a highly optimistic notion under the prevailing circumstances.⁵⁹ Lieutenant General Sir Simon Mayall told us:

Everybody has been absolutely clear that nobody wants western combat boots on the ground, but we are also clear, as we have been in a number of these conflicts, that the enabling activity we bring in terms of intelligence, strike assets, counter-IED, for instance, and just general training is what will actually allow the ISF—ultimately, we hope, non-sectarian—plus the Peshmerga, plus the national guard drawn from the tribes, plus the Shia militia drawn into the Iraqi security forces, to take the fight back to ISIL.⁶⁰

56 HC Deb, 12 Jan 2015, [col. 591](#)

57 [Iraqi cleric al-Sadr re-emerges](#), 60 Minutes, CBS News, 25 September 2014

58 Q6; 9-11; 47; 171; 241

59 Q36

60 Q317

37. A more limited coalition role is also reflected in the US strategy. In the evidence to the United States House Armed Services Committee on 13 November, US Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel said that the coalition's strategy was:

[F]ocused on supporting inclusive governance, sustaining a broad-based regional and global coalition and strengthening local forces on the ground. It also includes undercutting ISIL's flow of resources, countering ISIL's messaging, constricting the flow of foreign fighters, providing humanitarian assistance and our intensive regional and global diplomatic effort.⁶¹

The challenges of the strategy

38. We heard in Baghdad that Iraqi Security Forces will be expected to recapture Tikrit, Mosul and Fallujah. There appeared to be an expectation that Kurdish Peshmerga forces would capture the part of Mosul on the East bank of the Tigris, and that the Iraqi Security Forces would take the main part of the city, and then rapidly transfer control to the local police and a 'National Guard'. A number of interlocutors were confident that Mosul would be recaptured in 2015.

As stated above, Lieutenant General Sir Simon Mayall identified the actors in this assault:

[T]he ISF—ultimately, we hope, non-sectarian—plus the Peshmerga, plus the national guard drawn from the tribes, plus the Shia militia drawn into the Iraqi security forces.⁶²

This strategy therefore relies heavily on certain key assumptions about Iraqi forces (the Iraqi Security Forces, Kurdish Peshmerga, Shia Militia, and a putative 'National Guard'), about the Iraqi Government, about the Sunni population, and about DAESH itself. We will analyse these factors in turn.

61 US Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel, [Statement on the Administration's Strategy and Military Campaign Against ISIL Before the House Armed Services Committee](#), 13 November 2014

62 Q317

4 The Iraqi Security Forces and Government

Iraqi Security Forces

39. The central role in the fight against DAESH is expected to be played by the Iraqi Security Forces. Their capacity is, therefore, the key to the campaign. Their performance in June 2014 was deeply troubling. When approximately 3,000 DAESH fighters attacked the Iraqi Security Forces in Mosul in June 2014, an estimated 30,000 soldiers deserted, leaving behind equipment which was then appropriated by DAESH. Since December 2013, the Iraqi Security Forces have lost much of the territory of Western Iraq to insurgents who—at least initially—they massively outnumbered, and out-gunned. Shashank Joshi summarised the weakness of the ISF in his evidence to the inquiry:

In June, four entire divisions of the Iraqi Security Forces (out of 14) disintegrated in the face of the ISIL advance, despite the militants' relatively feeble numbers.

A team of US advisers later concluded that just half of Iraq's 50 brigades were "reputable partners", with the remainder suffering from "infiltration and leadership and sectarianism".

In mid-November, the Government replaced 36 commanders to "combat corruption", including the chief of ground forces, the chief of staff and commander of operations in Anbar Province. Even *prior* to the ISF's collapse in June 2014, they had struggled to recapture insurgent-held territory in Anbar Province from December 2013 onwards, notably in Fallujah.

[...]

In late November, the Iraqi Security Forces was found to have been paying salaries to 50,000 non-existent soldiers, at the cost of around \$318m per year.⁶³

We met the new Iraqi Defence Minister, General Obeidi. He had established a good reputation in his short time in the role, and we saw him on his return from the frontline where, after heavy fighting, the Iraqi Security Forces and the Shia militia had cooperated in the successful recapture of much of Bayji.

40. However, the deep structural weakness in the Iraqi Security Forces—the corruption, the sectarianism, the loss of morale and reputation, and the poor leadership—are not things which we believe will be easy to overcome. Most fundamentally, even if the Iraqi Security Forces prove able to recapture Tikrit, Mosul and Fallujah, there is little evidence, on the basis of their performance

63 Shashank Joshi ([ISIO021](#)) para 6

over the last two years, that they would be able to successfully win back the 'hearts and minds' of the local population, and thus bring a real end to the DAESH insurgency.

Shia Militia

41. The second component in the fight against DAESH are the dozens of Shia militia, who filled much of the military vacuum left by the disintegration of the Iraqi Security Forces. The largest militias are invariably associated with Iran or with leading Iraqi political or religious figures. Some have been newly formed, but many existed prior to the DAESH advance.

42. The most prominent militias include Kata'ib Hezbollah and the Badr Organization (both of which are directly sponsored by Iran); and Saraya al-Salam, (associated with Muqtada al-Sadr). Other prominent groups include Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH) and Saraya al-Khorasani (again associated with Iran); Liwa Dhu al-Fiqar, Liwa al-Shabab al-Risali (both indirectly associated with the Sadrist family); and the militias associated with the political parties the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (Saraya Ansar al-Aqeeda and Saraya Ashura) and the Da'wah party (Kata'ib al-Ghadab).⁶⁴

43. It is estimated that there may be as many as a million Iraqi Shia militia fighters. The militias are not a homogenous bloc although there is evidence of them working together and with the Iraqi Security Forces. They have powerful political connections. The Badr militia are allied to a political party, whose leader, Hadi al-Ameri, is active on the frontline, and whose aide is now the interior Minister. They have also appeared publicly alongside Qasem Soleimani, the Commander of the Iranian Quds Force, who appears to be funding, and equipping some of the militia. They appear to have had some military success. The militias helped the Iraqi Security Forces to break the siege of Amerli and to recapture Bayji. Militias were also responsible for recapturing the town of Jurf al-Sakher.⁶⁵

44. The Shia militia are, however, an aggressively sectarian force, who have brutally cleared Sunni populations out of recaptured areas, inflamed Sunni suspicion of the Baghdad Government and become a useful propaganda tool for DAESH (who have shown films of militia atrocities in Fallujah). The militias too often appear to treat Sunni Muslims who have remained in DAESH territory as being enemy combatants.⁶⁶ It is reported that over 130,000 Iraqis, the majority of them Sunni Muslims, have been displaced in the fight against DAESH and, despite the stated intention of the Government that they should be able to return to their homes, many are unwilling or unable to.⁶⁷ In the areas which the Iraqi Security Forces and the militias have retaken from DAESH there are numerous reports of these militias kidnapping and murdering Sunni Muslims,⁶⁸ razing their houses in order to prevent them from returning to the areas they had fled in order to escape the

64 [How Iraq Became a Proxy of the Islamic Republic of Iran](#), The Tower, December 2014

65 [Shiite Militias Win Bloody Battles in Iraq, Show No Mercy](#), The Wall Street Journal, 5 December 2014

66 [The Middle Eastern impasse \(1\): The problems of the Shias in responding](#), Foreign Policy, 7 January 2015

67 [Shi'ite militias expand influence, redraw map in central Iraq](#), Reuters, 31 December 2014

68 [Shiite Militias Pose Challenge for U.S. in Iraq](#), The New York Times, 16 September 2014; [Unsavoury allies: The growing power of Shia militias in Iraq and Syria poses a tricky problem](#), The Economist, 6 September 2014

DAESH onslaught⁶⁹ and summarily executing those it believes to be DAESH fighters.⁷⁰ Both Amnesty and Human Rights Watch have highlighted the abuses carried out by Shi'ite militias.⁷¹

45. On our visit to Baghdad we met tribal leaders from Jurf al-Sakher at a meeting who confirmed, in considerable detail, militia atrocities in the area. We heard how during the offensive against Jurf al-Sakher, civilians who fled the fighting, apparently holding white flags high to show surrender, were detained by militiamen. The women and children were separated from the men, of whom there is no record. The women and children are being detained by the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) indefinitely despite not having been tried for any crimes. There are concerns that this is part of a wider campaign to punish and further subjugate Iraq's Sunni population.⁷²

Kurdish Forces

46. The third element in the Iraqi forces are the Kurdish Peshmerga militia—a group with strong reputation, but whose performance was initially mixed and has since improved significantly. Following the capture of Mosul by DAESH fighters in June 2014, the Kurdish Regional Government sent their fighting force, the Peshmerga, into areas previously held by the ISF. When the DAESH forces advanced towards the Kurdistan region of Iraq in August 2014, the Peshmerga were forced out of minority areas around Sinjar, were driven back from the Mosul dam, and briefly lost control of a new frontline at Makhmour and Gwer, only twenty miles from their capital at Erbil. The Peshmerga managed to hold back DAESH fighters from Kirkuk but an estimated 1.5 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) were pushed into Kurdish territory. The launch of US air strikes helped to prevent DAESH advancing any further, and by January 2015, the Peshmerga had regained much of the territory they lost the previous August.

47. The Peshmerga attributed the success of DAESH, to their possession of Iraqi Security Forces equipment which had been abandoned in Mosul, including long-range artillery, tanks, armoured vehicles, rocket launchers, and sniper rifles, as well as large supplies of ammunition—a far superior armoury to the Peshmerga who relied on older weapons, many appropriated from the Iraqi Security Forces following the 2003 invasion.⁷³

48. On our visit to the Kurdistan region, we saw the current training taking place and spoke to both UK military personnel and Kurdish political and military figures. It was clear that, whilst the Peshmerga is an impressive fighting force, it faces a number of organisational challenges besides a lack of sophisticated weaponry. A significant number of the Peshmerga are allied to (and, it seems, are paid through) the two main political parties, the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan Party (PUK), rather than the Kurdistan Regional Government. This has created problems with communication between brigades and has hindered the cohesion

69 [The Gangs of Iraq](#), Foreign Policy, 3 November 2014

70 [Shiite Militias Win Bloody Battles in Iraq, Show No Mercy](#), The Wall Street Journal, 5 December 2014

71 Amnesty International, [Absolute Impunity: Militia Rule in Iraq](#), October 2014; Human Rights Watch, [For Iraq's Sunnis, Sectarian Militias Pose an Extra Threat](#), 24 October 2014

72 [Shi'ite militias expand influence, redraw map in central Iraq](#), Reuters, 31 December 2014

73 [Outgunned and untested for years, Kurdish Peshmerga struggle](#), Reuters, 13 August 2014

of the Peshmerga as a unified force. There are also concerns about corruption within the Peshmerga force with a large number of 'ghost soldiers' (that is, cash salaries that are paid to soldiers who do not exist). Moreover, we were told that at least a quarter of Peshmerga fighters were beyond retirement age and some are disabled.

49. When we met with the Minister of Peshmerga he told us that he and the Kurdish Regional Government were in control of the Peshmerga overall and the co-ordination of their supply, support and deployment. Varying claims were given to us by different groups about the numbers of Peshmerga employed and how many were deployable as fighters; beyond being 'reserve' forces. What is clear is there are larger numbers of people being paid than can be actively deployed. The figures of the total number of Peshmerga seem to be estimated as being between 150,000 and 160,000, including security forces and volunteers, with the actual frontline force being estimated at between 40,000 and 50,000. Roughly 40,000 Peshmerga are linked to the Ministry of Peshmerga (14 brigades) with the remainder linked to the Kurdish Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan party.

50. A number of these issues are being addressed through the reform of the Peshmerga—the Kurdish Regional Parliament passed a law in July 2014 which set the Minister of Peshmerga a six month deadline to institute reforms (although these have yet to be fully implemented). It was notably the division of the Peshmerga along political lines which it is claimed had prevented the US from carrying out extensive training programmes with its forces prior to the 2011 departure of US soldiers from Iraq.⁷⁴

51. We visited the Central Joint Operations Centre (CJOC) in Erbil, including the UK training personnel there, and saw how air strikes in support of Peshmerga fighters and the supply of weaponry have helped the Peshmerga to regain much of the territory which they had lost to DAESH. Significantly, they have captured one of the main roads between Mosul and the Syrian border which had acted as a major supply route for DAESH.⁷⁵ The Foreign Affairs Committee has highlighted its concerns that the Kurdish Regional Government would not expect the Peshmerga to work with the Iraqi Security Forces in areas that it did not consider to be Iraqi Kurdistan.⁷⁶ However, representatives of the Kurdish Regional Government have suggested that it might ultimately be in a position to participate in an offensive to re-take Mosul from DAESH provided that it had Iraqi Security Forces (and Sunni fighters) alongside them in order to ensure the success of such an operation.⁷⁷ Whilst we recognise the significance of the Kurdish Regional Government's concern about Mosul, we question their capability to recapture non-Kurdish areas of Iraq.

74 [Kurdish peshmerga divisions hamper war effort](#), Al-Monitor, 13 January 2015

75 [Kurdish offensive against ISIL gains momentum](#), Al-Jazeera, 26 December 2014

76 Foreign Affairs Committee, Eighth Report of Session 2014-15, [UK Government policy on the Kurdistan Region of Iraq](#), HC 564, Para 101

77 [Iraqi Kurds Retake Territory; Seek More Help to Free Mosul](#), Voice of America, 7 January 2015

52. As DAESH fighters have failed to exploit their advance, they have employed different tactics, notably the laying of Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) in towns they have retreated from.⁷⁸ We were told that 60% of injuries caused to the Peshmerga were as a result of IEDs and that counter IED training and equipment would be welcome, as would training in the evacuation of the wounded from the battlefield. These are skills which were honed by UK troops in Afghanistan and are considered to be an area of UK expertise. In addition to military support in counter IED, it is clear there is a need for mine and IED clearance in areas of former conflict. Whilst in Erbil, we met with the NGO Mines Advisory Group (MAG) and discussed the ways in which such support might be provided to complement the military and other UK Government support to the Kurdistan Regional Government. MAG highlighted that many of the areas that had been won back from DAESH would need to be cleared of unexploded ordinances before the IDPs could return. The return of IDPs is seen as vital to retaining the land and alleviating pressure on the Kurdistan Regional Government. We were told that such a programme would cost an estimated £2 million with the opportunity for the NGO to train security and civil defence forces on IED awareness and search.

The National Guard

53. Many in Baghdad confidently promoted the idea of a 'National Guard' as the key to winning Sunni tribes over to the fight against DAESH. The model appeared to be based on the experience of the Sunni Awakening in 2007—which employed Sunni tribes to fight Al Qaeda—but, the difference being, as we heard in Iraq, that, in the new National Guard, money would not be going through the tribal chiefs. All the weapons would be accounted for, all the fighters carefully documented, and the units would be loyal to the Iraqi State.

54. A number of challenges were identified. First, Shashank Joshi questioned whether Sunni tribes would again trust the Iraqi Government after it reneged on commitments given to the Sunni Awakening during the previous surge.⁷⁹ Second, it appeared from discussions with senior Iraqi officials that the National Guard appeared to be very different in scale and objectives from the Sunni Awakening. It was emphasised that, if there were to be a National Guard, they would not be on anything approaching the scale of the Sunni Awakening (perhaps 5,000 for Anbar province, rather than 100,000 people); and that many of the places would be given to the Shia militia—or 'patriotic volunteer groups'—as a way of ensuring regular government funding for the militia. If the National Guard concept were to be implemented, the cost of the programme was estimated to be many hundreds of millions of dollars a year for units which were neither police nor army, and would have an uncertain function after the insurgency. In a country already struggling for money, it seemed difficult to believe these units would be long continued—and if they were disbanded there seemed a serious possibility of a repeat of the problems of bitter Sunni Awakening members re-joining the insurgency.

78 [Ambushes, Mines And Booby Traps: ISIS Militants Change Tack](#), NPR, 21 October 2014

79 Shashank Joshi ([ISI0021](#)) para 16

55. At the time of our visit only 270 men had been recruited into a prototype of the National Guard in the Anbar region. There seemed to be considerable problems in getting the Iraqi National Security Adviser to guarantee salaries, or to get the Ministry of Defence to issue weapons. The Baghdad Government appeared less enthused about the idea of the National Guard units than its foreign backers. The timetable for passing a law authorising the National Guards has been repeatedly delayed.⁸⁰

The Iraqi Prime Minister and State

56. In Baghdad a key reason for optimism was faith in the new Prime Minister, Haider al-Abadi. He was seen as a far more inclusive, effective, and legitimate leader than his predecessor Nouri al-Maliki. He had surpassed expectations by agreeing a generous oil and budget deal with the Kurds, thus lessening, for the moment, tensions with the Kurds.

57. But the Prime Minister is only one man, and the highly limited capacity of the Iraqi state is unlikely to be transformed simply by removing Mr al-Maliki, and replacing him with Mr al-Abadi. The drop in oil prices has dramatically eroded the resources of the Baghdad Government at its time of greatest need. Corruption is so deeply embedded in every crevice of the Iraqi state and military that its elimination would seem to be a task of decades, and certainly not an immediate solution to the problem posed by DAESH.

58. Professor Toby Dodge emphasised that the Iraqi Government was unpopular across the whole of the country. He suggested that this unpopularity was a result of the abject failure of the political system set up since 2003 and called for the reformation of that political system to rebuild trust in all the communities:

We can look at the Kurdish Regional Government and the people they represent and say that they have turned their back, or sought to turn their back, on Baghdad, for very good reasons. Then we can look at the revolt through 2014 in the Sunni majority areas as something similar. But then if we go down into the south and look at the Shia majority population, there are no great fans of the Government there. The Government, because of its corruption, has squandered its oil wealth and undermined the institutional capacity of the state and is broadly unpopular across the whole of the country. It just does not have the calibre of political parties or politicians or state institutions to deliver those resources in a meaningful way to any of the population and tie them back into the state on the basis of citizenship.⁸¹

59. Mr al-Maliki clearly exacerbated the problems in Iraq, but his removal will not in itself overcome them. Although he is now blamed for many of the problems, he was initially a popular partner of the international coalition, credited with leading 'the charge of the knights' in Basra, against the 'Mahdi Army' militia. The US supported his taking over in a disputed election in

80 [U.S.-backed Plan for Iraqi National Guard Falters](#), The Wall Street Journal, 16 October 2014

81 Q1

2010,⁸² and he won by a large majority in an internationally acclaimed election in 2014. His personal following was much greater than Mr al Abadi's (for example Mr al-Maliki received 700,000 'write-in' votes in the last election, when Mr al-Abadi received almost none).⁸³ Whatever the failings of Mr al-Maliki, if the entire strategy of counter-insurgency and state-building, conducted over so much time and at so much cost, was unable to survive the democratically elected Prime Minister of Iraq (whom the US knew well and had worked with for years) then Iraq remains remarkably fragile.

Sectarian conflict

60. Mr Al-Abadi, we were also told in Baghdad, would be re-engaging the Sunni minority through a number of initiatives:

- the de-centralisation of power to the provinces;
- the repeal of legislation including de-Ba'athification and counter-terrorism law (particularly a 2004 Counter-Terrorism law very focused on Sunni terrorism);
- the release of political prisoners; and
- the creation of a National Guard.

61. Chuck Hagel, the US Secretary for Defence, cited the appointment of a Sunni Defence Minister, the proposed creation of a National Guard and the replacement of 36 senior commanders in the Iraqi Security Forces, including the integration of senior Sunni leaders, as proof that the Iraqi central Government was becoming more inclusive.⁸⁴ These measures, it was hoped, would consolidate Sunni support for the Baghdad state, help to ensure that the Sunni local population would rise up against DAESH, and effectively welcome Iraqi troops as liberators. This was echoed by the UK Secretary of State for Defence's statement that

the biggest difference between now and 2007 is that we now have a genuinely inclusive Government in Iraq, who represent both Shia and Sunni, and, indeed, Kurdish elements in Iraq.⁸⁵

62. There is no doubt that there is movement in the direction of inclusiveness, as the appointment of a new, more inclusive, Cabinet and the replacement of senior Commanders in the Iraqi Security Force demonstrates. But, in other meetings, it became clear that new measures are yet to be given a clear timetable and that there is significant opposition to these inclusive measures from the Shia political parties (and their Iranian supporters). There have been reports that the legislation to

82 [Why we stuck with Maliki — and lost Iraq](#), The Washington Post, 3 July 2014

83 [How Maliki Broke Iraq](#), Politico, 13 August 2014

84 US Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel, [Statement on the Administration's Strategy and Military Campaign Against ISIL Before the House Armed Services Committee](#), 13 November 2014

85 HC Deb, 12 Jan 2015, [col. 591](#)

create the National Guard is unlikely to pass through the Iraqi Parliament⁸⁶ and that the Iraqi Prime Minister, Haider al-Abadi, does not believe that the leaders of Sunni tribes in Anbar province are trustworthy.⁸⁷

63. Perhaps more importantly, the depth of suspicion that now exists between the communities following a civil war—which led to perhaps 50,000 deaths,⁸⁸ followed by the recent experience of the surge, and the perceived betrayal by Mr al-Maliki—will be very difficult to overcome simply through new legislation. The Sunni population in the DAESH areas remain deeply suspicious of Kurds, the Shia-dominated Baghdad Government, and, most significantly, of the Shi'ite militias who are doing much of the fighting. Militias have the freedom to act with near-impunity and many are feared not just by Sunnis but by Kurds and Shi'ites too.⁸⁹ Even if the Iraqi state were nominally able to recapture cities like Mosul and Fallujah, it would struggle to secure those cities, let alone rebuild them, and win back the trust of the local population. If they fail to rebuild, DAESH will only re-emerge in a new form.

DAESH

64. Meanwhile, the insurgents continue to be surprisingly resilient: in terms of propaganda, international recruitment, and local finance. They are able to exploit an open border for safe haven in Syria. They have been able to recruit many people, keen to oppose the brutality of the Assad regime, and others who perceive Baghdad as an Iranian stooge. They have established powerful local sources of funding (including property portfolios, and utility taxes) and are not primarily dependant on foreign grants, or even the sale of oil (which they continue to smuggle with some success through Syria). They have proved themselves adept in the use of social media, sending 90,000 messages a day. In evidence to the Home Affairs Committee, Dr Thomas Hegghammer stated that:

Syria is the most socially mediated conflict in history and there is an enormous amount of audio-visual documentation produced by rebels themselves, documenting the things they do [...] social media affects recruitment simply by linking people up—Facebook, for example. When someone travels to Syria and posts pictures from there and his friends see those pictures, those friends are more likely to be inspired to go. That is not really propaganda; that is just regular information conveyed through online social media that then facilitates recruitment.⁹⁰

65. Regional players including Saudi Arabia, Iran, Qatar and Turkey continue to be deeply suspicious of or even hostile towards each other and seem to be perpetuating in Syria, a proxy war. Turkey has been reluctant to turn against DAESH until there is a campaign against Bashar al-

86 [U.S.-backed Plan for Iraqi National Guard Falters](#), The Wall Street Journal, 16 October 2014

87 [U.S. Fears New Iraqi Prime Minister Isn't Serious About Sunni Outreach](#), Foreign Policy, 15 December 2014

88 [Who is responsible for Iraq's sectarian violence?](#), Open Democracy, 7 June 2013

89 [Their nation in pieces, Iraqis ponder what comes next](#), Reuters, 29 December 2014

90 Home Affairs Committee, Seventeenth Report of Session 2013-14, [Counter-terrorism](#) HC 231, Para 121

Assad. Joost Hiltermann told us that for many Sunnis, DAESH are seen as the lesser of two evils, compared to the Baghdad Government. The Sunni tribes in Iraq have been marginalised since 2003 and, even when efforts were made to integrate them, they have not been followed through. He gave us the example of the treatment of Sunni fighters who took part in the ‘surge,’

Efforts to bring them back into the political game have not been made in good faith, with the actual absorption of Sunni elements into the Iraqi security forces not having taken place and salaries not paid. Essentially, there has been a continuation of the shutting out through the surge and until June of this year when in many cases they chose the side of Islamic State. To bring them back out is the game and that is a long-term political game and cannot be done fast.⁹¹

66. The sense of grievance is further compounded by the perception that the current Iraqi regime is overly close to the Iranian Government. Aymann Jawad al-Tamimi told us that a number of influential Sunni insurgent groups had issued statements following the DAESH advance which suggested that:

[T]here is no point in trying to work within the political system, because it is discriminatory against Sunnis and it is a ‘Safavid’ Government, meaning that they see it as just a stooge of Iran. The result of that is that any scheme that the Government tries to issue now in the hopes of winning over Sunnis to form a wider pushback against Islamic State, analogous to the Sahwa of 2007 onwards, is derided as a mere lackey project for the Safavid Government.⁹²

These problems are only exacerbated by the atrocities committed by the Shia militia. Other witnesses have consistently emphasised that DAESH cannot be destroyed through military means alone. Professor Sir Adam Roberts told us:

It is very, very rare in dealing with terrorist movements that they be completely annihilated. In fact, I think it never happens. The interesting question is how such movements are defeated or run out of steam, absent that possibly desired goal of complete annihilation. They do; they regularly suffer from fission, fusion and exhaustion. We have to envisage a richer array of possibilities than complete annihilation.⁹³

67. 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.

91 Q1

92 Q1

93 Q207

5 Britain and Iraq

68. Despite its major role in Iraq from 2003–2007, the British Government appears to have walked away from Iraq from 2007 until the summer of 2014. In 2009, it ceased to pay for Iraqi officers to undertake officer training at Sandhurst. In 2011, it closed the British Consulate General in Basra (despite Basra being the base of all UK military operations and the major oil-producing region of the country). In the spring of 2014, it seems that Iraq was a low priority for UK intelligence, there was no Defence section in Kurdistan, no DFID office in Iraq, and the political section of the British Embassy in Baghdad consisted of three relatively junior, although extremely able, employees on short-term deployments leading to a frequent turnover of staff.

The current UK contribution

69. In his update to the House on the implementation of the National Security Strategy the Prime Minister set out the Government's actions in response to DAESH as:

In addition to providing UK humanitarian aid to alleviate the suffering of those displaced by ISIL's violence, the Government is working to: disrupt attack-planning against the UK and our interests; counter ISIL's propaganda; isolate ISIL by supporting inclusive political governance that can reach out to all communities in Iraq and Syria; strengthen those moderate forces fighting ISIL on the ground; cut off ISIL's access to funds and fighters; help strengthen the resilience of neighbouring countries; and bring the widest possible coalition of countries together to degrade ISIL through diplomatic engagement. Following the debate in Parliament on 26 September, the UK's response extended to include UK air strikes in Iraq to support local security forces fighting ISIL on the ground; and in October, the Defence Secretary confirmed that UK aircraft would also begin surveillance missions over Syria to gather intelligence. A sustained effort across all these elements will be needed in order to defeat ISIL and its violent ideology.⁹⁴

70. In written evidence to this inquiry, the MOD set out what resources were currently deployed to the Middle East in support of the international coalition effort to combat DAESH.

- Eight Tornado GR4 aircraft;
- One C130 Hercules transport aircraft;
- One Rivet Joint surveillance aircraft;
- One Voyager air-to-air refuelling aircraft;
- [MQ-9] Reaper remotely-piloted aircraft; and

⁹⁴ Cabinet Office, [Annual Report on the National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review](#), 18 December 2014

- Approximately 400 UK personnel in support of the above assets; as part of a regional liaison network in coalition and partners' headquarters, and as a contribution to the developing training presence in Iraq,⁹⁵ (it subsequently emerged that the vast majority of these '400' were not in Iraq).

The UK has also gifted equipment to the Peshmerga, and run several three-week training courses for the Peshmerga.⁹⁶

Air strikes

71. The purpose of UK air strikes has been, it seems, threefold. First, to 'contain DAESH' and prevent them from expanding out of their existing territory by taking new areas of Iraq. Second to 'degrade' DAESH by targeting their equipment, units and infrastructure, and—according to General Messenger—to reduce their morale and increase that of the Iraqi Security Forces and the Peshmerga.⁹⁷ Third, to support the ground troops of the Iraqi Security Forces and the Peshmerga in retaking territory from DAESH—most recently at Bayji and in Sinjar.

72. When we visited Iraq as part of this inquiry, many of those we met were at pains to emphasise the value provided by the airstrikes to both the Iraqi Security Forces and the Peshmerga, both in terms of helping to retake territory and in challenging the myth of infallibility which DAESH have cultivated. Lieutenant General Gordon Messenger said that the effectiveness of the attacks could be seen in DAESH resorting to more asymmetric tactics, including the use of IEDs and using extensive measures to avoid being struck: moving at night, using bad weather to provide cover and avoiding grouping in open areas.⁹⁸

73. On the 17 December, the Secretary of State for Defence told us that, thanks to their commitment of surveillance aircraft, the UK was also a major source of surveillance and intelligence-gathering, second only to the US contribution.⁹⁹

Training and equipping the Peshmerga

74. We visited UK military personnel who comprised the Short-Term Training Team based near Sulemaniyah. At that time the team consisted of 48 UK personnel and 27 Danes, under the auspices of the Central Joint Operations Centre (CJOC), run by US General Kurilla. Training consisted of straightforward infantry training and was designed to be sustainable, being carried out using equipment already available to them, not equipment specially provided by the UK.

75. The UK and Danish forces were to remain until February, by when it was hoped a consistent plan for Peshmerga training would be set out. It was explained that the uncertain demand for

⁹⁵ MOD, ([ISI 0016](#))

⁹⁶ MOD, ([ISI 0016](#))

⁹⁷ Q320

⁹⁸ Q320

⁹⁹ Oral evidence taken on [17 Dec 2014](#), HC (2014-15) 512, Q348

training being put forward by the Peshmerga meant it was difficult to plan for drawing on additional trainers. Additionally, the locations for such training were undecided. The coalition training plan also, at that time, included another coalition country's force component to take on artillery training, as their troops were expected to be allowed to the front line (unlike UK troops who were not allowed within 20 km of front line). The quality of the UK and Danish forces' work and commitment in Sulemaniyah, in a basic facility, was appreciated by the Kurdish forces and by the Committee and we commend them for their professionalism and forbearance in carrying out their tasks.

76. The other method of supporting the Peshmerga utilised by the coalition is providing the Regional Government and the Peshmerga with military equipment, through arrangement with the Iraqi Government, with shipments routed via Baghdad. The UK has provided 40 Heavy Machine Guns and ammunition as well as ration packs, sleeping bags, helmets, body armour and eye protection.¹⁰⁰

Assessing the scale of the UK contribution

77. The Secretary of State for the Defence has insisted that the UK operations in Iraq are 'major'. The Prime Minister implied that the UK contribution was second only to that of the US:

If you look at the kinetic action—the bombing that has been done of ISIL positions in Iraq—I think Britain has taken the second largest role, after the United States. I think we have done five times as much as, for instance, France.¹⁰¹

But, in reality, the UK contribution so far has been—in comparison to actions taken between 2003–06 and even in relation to other coalition partners—surprisingly modest.

78. In the House on Monday 12 December, the Defence Secretary announced that only 99 air strikes had been carried out since the UK started flying missions.¹⁰² This amounted to fewer than one a day. Six days prior, US CENTCOM (which is coordinating strikes) announced that 1,676 strikes have been carried out, meaning that the UK is responsible for just 6% of the strikes carried out so far.¹⁰³ This refers to the number of strikes carried out rather than missions (or sorties) flown, which will, of course, be much greater but upon which there is no recent publicly available data, making it difficult to draw a comparison.

79. In terms of weapons, the UK has only contributed 40 UK Heavy Machine Guns to the Kurdish Regional Government. The Germans by comparison have provided:

- 8,000 G3 assault rifles with 2 million rounds of 7.62mm ammunition;

¹⁰⁰ MOD, (ISI 0016)

¹⁰¹ Oral evidence taken before the Liaison Committee, [16 December 2014](#), HC (2014-15) 887, Q66

¹⁰² HC Deb, 12 Jan 2015, [col. 590](#)

¹⁰³ [U.S.-led air strikes have hit 3,222 Islamic State targets: Pentagon](#), Reuters, 7 January 2015

- 40 MG3 machine guns with 1 million rounds of 7.62mm ammunition;
- 8,000 G36 assault rifles with 4 million rounds of 5.56mm ammunition;
- 8,000 Walther P1 pistols with 1 million rounds of 9mm ammunition;
- 30 MILAN anti-tank guided missile launchers with 500 anti-tank rounds;
- 200 Panzerfaust 3 light anti-tank weapons with 2,500 rounds;
- 40 Carl Gustaf 84mm recoilless rifles with 1,000 battlefield illumination rounds;
- 100 flare guns (signal pistols) with 4,000 battlefield illumination rounds;
- 10,000 hand grenades;
- 4,000 sets of personal protection equipment (helmets, body armour, ballistic safety glasses);
and
- 270 personal medical kits¹⁰⁴

The US have provided 393 up-armoured Humvees to Kurdish Forces.¹⁰⁵ We were also told that the German Government had provided the Kurdish Regional Government with five Dingo armoured vehicles and that the US had provided 25 Mine-Resistant Ambush Protected vehicles (MRAPs).

80. The UK presence outside the Kurdish areas is also remarkably small. At the time of our visit to Baghdad—six months after the capture of Mosul—the entire UK military presence outside the Kurdish regions amounted to three individuals (outside of members of the UK Embassy defence section). By comparison the Australians have offered up to 400 troops, the Spanish 300 troops, and Italy 280. The US has authorised up to 3,100 personnel to be in Iraq.¹⁰⁶

104 American Institute for Contemporary German Studies (John Hopkins University), [German Military Aid to the Kurdish Peshmerga](#), 16 September 2014

105 [Iraqi train and equip programme gets under way](#), Jane's Defence Weekly, 9 January 2015

106 HL Deb, 15 Dec 2014, [col 52](#), HC Deb 15 Dec 2014, [col. 1129](#)

6 What more might the UK do?

81. Dr Douglas Porch suggested to us that the best policy was, in fact, to refrain from any intervention in Iraq or Syria. In his opinion, every time the West had intervened in a crisis since the 1980s, it had made the situation worse with the result being the creation of power vacuums, ungoverned spaces and the alienation of the local population.¹⁰⁷ He suggested that, in this case, the campaign of airstrikes would result in collateral damage, the legitimisation of DAESH, the radicalisation of the local population and an increase in the number of foreign fighters.¹⁰⁸

82. The option of ‘doing nothing’ is of course worth examining. Such an approach could conceivably reduce the risk of DAESH targeting UK citizens. It involves no commitment to long-term re-engagement with the security problems of Iraq. It would involve in the short term minimum cost for the UK.

83. 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.

84. The UK Government also appears to agree with our assessment of the importance of DAESH, Iraq, and the UK’s active involvement, to UK national interests. Lieutenant General Sir Simon Mayall explained Iraq is:

[...] highly complex, highly complicated, and encloses within it a very wide range of British interests—political, diplomatic, military, commercial, financial. It is an area where the United Kingdom cannot afford not to be engaged or not to approach with a well-educated and long-term mindset. It will throw up both threats and opportunities for many years to come, and I think we happen to be a country that has both a history and responsibility for being engaged there.¹⁰⁹

Peter Watkins and Lieutenant General Gordon Messenger both expressed support for this position, noting that relationships between the UK and many Middle East states were heavily

107 Q48

108 Q49

109 Q286

based on military co-operation which allowed political relationships to flourish and was therefore vital to the progression of UK national objectives.¹¹⁰

85. Given the importance the Government apparently attaches to Iraq, the UK could do considerably more which might be constructive in Iraq without being pulled into combat operations, or significantly risking UK lives. We suspect the Ministry of Defence would be willing to do more, and if given the political direction to do, so could generate many options. Here, however, are some examples of opportunities for the UK which emerged in the course of our evidence.

Formulate a strategy

86. 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.

87. When we asked the Secretary of State for Defence whether our understanding of what was happening between the Sunni and Shia factions on the ground was adequate, he acknowledged that there had been intelligence failures earlier in the year (particularly in regards to DAESH leadership and the group's deployments) but suggested that such gaps could be remedied by surveillance flights as opposed to increased intelligence-gathering on the ground.¹¹¹ We remain unconvinced by the remedy proposed by the Secretary of State and would suggest that the problem is more fundamental and extends to the whole nature of the UK Government's intelligence strategy in Iraq, from requirement to assessment. We would suggest that such intelligence failures can only be remedied through human intelligence sources and political reporting, rather than a reliance on technology which cannot provide any degree of context or cultural understanding.

88. At present, it appears from witnesses that mission analysis and planning has been left almost entirely to the United States, and that the UK is currently simply supporting the US plan, without attempting to arrive at any independent analysis of its detail, assumptions or viability. This means that the British military and public is being asked to support a plan, which the UK is in no position to evaluate independently. It also means that the UK does not have the detailed knowledge to debate credibly the analysis with the United States, and Iraqi partners, and shape and influence the strategy.

89. 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. The UK

¹¹⁰ Q287

¹¹¹ Oral evidence taken on [17 Dec 2014](#), HC (2014-15) 512, Qq344-7

does not, of course, begin to have the resources of the US, but it is a member of the P5 of the Security Council, has the fifth largest economy in the world, and one of the largest defence budgets in the world. It should, therefore, expect to play a full and responsible role in coalition planning.

90. At the very least, it should have a full understanding of the plan. British officials and policy-makers should be expected to demonstrate a deep understanding of the nature of the insurgency (the tribes, DAESH itself, and the broader battlefield); a much better grasp of the strengths and weakness of the Iraqi Security Forces, and the Peshmerga; a strong grasp of the actions, intentions, and Iranian connections of the Shia militia; and a much deeper sense of the local population in the Sunni areas (including their views of DAESH and the Government, and their likely motives and incentives). The lesson of our last engagement in Iraq is that the absence of such ‘granular’ knowledge prevented the international coalition then from designing a credible plan or monitoring its performance.

91. Ideally, the UK should be contributing positively to the development of the plan, and even influencing it. We doubt that the British people are comfortable simply taking it on faith that the current Iraq plan will succeed, and conducting military operations in support of it, if we have no way of assessing or judging that plan.

Training Iraqi Forces

92. The second—and most concrete—opportunity for the UK is to meet immediately Iraq’s specific request for UK trainers in counter-IED measures (made in November). Training of Iraqi Forces is intended to be supported by eight nations¹¹² and will take place in four bases across Iraq (with one located in the Kurdish region where the Peshmerga will be trained) and is described as focusing on building the training capacity of the Iraqi Security Forces.

93. In Baghdad we heard the detail of the request from the Iraqi Ministry of Defence (coordinated with the US First Infantry Division), which was for a few hundred UK trainers to train Iraqi soldiers in mine awareness. This was to take place within the Al-Asad airbase North-West of Baghdad. One 15 December 2014, the Secretary of State appeared to be considering this request. He told the House that:

In early November, I announced our intention to provide further training to the Iraqi military. No decisions on troop numbers, units or locations have been made, although we expect to focus on providing expertise in countering explosive devices. During Defence questions on 24 November, I also announced our intention to advise and assist the Iraqi armed forces through the secondment of advisory personnel to command headquarters. We are considering what contribution we can make and the details of any of these decisions will be announced to Parliament in the usual way.¹¹³

112 These are Australia, Germany, Denmark, New Zealand, Italy, Spain, the UK and the US.

113 HC Deb, 15 Dec 2014, [col. 1121](#)

On the same day the House of Lords was told that:

the “advise and assist” recce team returned to this country on 7 December, and options are being considered to set up a logistics headquarter and a ninth armoured mechanical division.¹¹⁴

It was then thought that, overall, several hundred British troops would be involved.

94. However, it has subsequently become clear in press reports that even the relatively modest UK contribution to training in Iraq has been delayed or reduced in number, if not cancelled. **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.**

95. At present, however, we would caution against too much investment in broader training of the Iraqi Security Forces. Twenty-five billion dollars was spent between 2003 and 2011 on training the Iraqi Security Forces, down to the very most local level, including lengthy ‘embeds’ of international troops, living and fighting alongside Iraqi troops.¹¹⁵ By 2009, it was common to hear international soldiers praise the Iraqi Security Forces for its increasingly robust performance at a large unit level.¹¹⁶ Unlike the formation of the Iraqi police force, the Iraqi Security Forces were perceived as one of the ‘successes’ of Iraq (like the Afghan National Army in Afghanistan).

96. However, when 3,000 DAESH fighters advanced against the Iraqi Security Forces in Mosul in June 2014, an estimated 30,000 soldiers deserted, leaving behind equipment which was then misappropriated by DAESH. Professor Toby Dodge has highlighted the varying reasons for the collapse at Mosul:

- Corruption: “Junior officers complain that defence officials demand bribes of \$3,000 for a place at the Officer Training Academy, and the price of promotion to general is as high as \$30,000. Repaying the costs of gaining promotion leads to the existence of ‘ghost payrolls’—which supply the names of fictitious soldiers to the Ministry of Defence and have defrauded it of an estimated 25% of its annual wage budget—and the embezzlement of funds earmarked for soldiers’ food and fuel. Reports suggest that soldiers in Mosul had to buy their own supplies from local markets and cook the food themselves. This level of corruption would have been obvious to frontline soldiers, undermining their ability to fight effectively while sapping their morale and willingness to defend the state.”
- The then Prime Minister’s subversion of the chain of command and the promotion of his close allies in to positions of power: “On 7 June 2014, Lieutenant General Ali Ghaidan and

114 HL Deb, 15 Dec 2014, [col. 51](#)

115 Shashank Joshi ([ISI0021](#)) para 10

116 [Stiff test for Mosul as US pulls out](#), The Financial Times, 20 August 2010

Lieutenant General Abboud Qanbar flew into the city to personally oversee the fight against ISIS.²² As the commander of Iraqi ground forces and the commander of joint operations respectively, they had benefited from their close relationship with Maliki. However, as ISIS advanced on the main army base in Mosul, Ghaidan and Qanbar quickly left the city, fleeing to Erbil and then flying back to Baghdad. Reports that they had made their escape disguised as civilians began to circulate soon after, further undermining the rank and file's commitment to defending the city.”¹¹⁷

It was reported that inadequate training and limited air support also contributed to the desertion of the soldiers from their posts.¹¹⁸ It appears, at least anecdotally, that the senior commanders who are now portrayed as corrupt and incompetent place-men, were almost all trained by international forces. Dr Douglas Poch, in particular, emphasised the futility of such training programmes, in the absence of credible leadership and government.¹¹⁹ **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.**

Expanding current UK operations:

Extending air strikes

97. A third opportunity is to build on and expand current UK operations. The air strikes currently being carried out by the Royal Air Force are obviously improving morale amongst our Iraqi allies, and should be continued. This is a relatively minor commitment involving eight of Number 2 Squadron's sixteen Tornados, of which it seems only two are flying at a time. But it appears to be putting strain on the RAF. Number 2 Squadron, which was due to be disbanded this year, has had to have its lifetime extended by a year¹²⁰ and the Tornados' planned out-of-service date remains, as the Secretary of State confirmed, 2019.¹²¹ Air Chief Marshal Sir Andrew Pulford explained that the Tornado could maintain their precision-bombing role throughout this year, but noted that such operations in the future depended on the migration of the Typhoon force into a multi-role combat aircraft. This was due to be completed over the next six years and he expected the Joint Strike Fighter to come into service towards the end of this decade.¹²²

98. 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

117 Dr Toby Dodge, [Can Iraq Be Saved?](#) Survival: Global Politics and Strategy October–November 2014, Volume 56, pages 7-20

118 [The Iraqi Army Was Crumbling Long Before Its Collapse, U.S. Officials Say](#), The New York Times, 12 June 2014

119 Q56; 91-2

120 [RAF Tornado squadron saved from the scrap heap to bomb Isis](#), The Telegraph, 2 October 2014

121 Oral evidence taken on [17 Dec 2014](#), HC (2014-15) 512, Q301-3

122 Oral evidence taken on [5 Nov 2014](#), HC (2014-15) 512, Q130-1

UK providing the planes and resources to be able to expand and maintain air support for the military campaign.

99. The UK has not so far contributed to air strikes into Syria. On 26 September, the Prime Minister signalled this might be possible, but has so far refrained from acting.¹²³

[I]f we were to act in Syria, I believe that would be the legal basis too: collective self-defence against ISIL which threatens Iraq. But my hon Friend is absolutely right to say, and I have said this in the House before, that if one is averting a humanitarian catastrophe, that is a legal basis on which to act. Let me be clear again that although it is right that we are having this debate and this vote, if there was a moment when it looked as though there could be an urgent humanitarian need for intervention, I would be prepared to order that intervention and then come to the House and explain why.¹²⁴

There is clearly an issue—which has been raised in the House of Commons¹²⁵—about the UK continuing to strike only in Iraq when DAESH is able to take sanctuary on the Syrian side of the border, and when our coalition partners are conducting strikes in both Syria and Iraq. The UK Government should be careful to explain the legal reasoning and strategic logic of this restriction.

Expanding work with the Peshmerga

100. Recent Kurdish advances, in particular the seizing of one of the main supply corridors into Mosul and the recapture of much of Sinjar and the territory taken in August by DAESH has restored confidence in the Peshmerga forces. The Kurdish President has publicly stated however that more is required if the Peshmerga are to counter DAESH effectively.¹²⁶ The equipment which we were told that the Kurdish needed were armoured personnel carriers, heavy artillery that can penetrate the armour on DAESH-modified trucks and tankers. We were also told that the Kurdish Regional Government might be prepared to purchase this equipment, rather than relying on donations.

101. Claims were made by many that it would be more efficient to supply military equipment directly rather than through Baghdad. Indeed, we note that the Foreign Affairs Committee were informed that, as a result of the requirement for inspections of the gifted equipment in Baghdad, there was often a delay of several days in the equipment reaching the Kurdistan Region.¹²⁷ We were, however, also told by UK representatives in Iraq that the turnaround time for many items was, in practice, very short and that such claims were likely to be motivated more by a desire for greater independence for operations by the Kurdistan Regional Government and its Peshmerga

123 HC Deb, 26 Sept 2014, [col. 1259](#)

124 HC Deb 26 Sep 2014, [col. 1263](#)

125 HC Deb, 16 Oct 2014, [col. 484](#)

126 [Iraqi Kurds say West not providing enough arms to defeat Islamic State](#), Reuters, 19 November 2014

127 Foreign Affairs Committee, Eighth Report of Session 2014-15, [UK Government policy on the Kurdistan Region of Iraq](#), HC 564, Para 102

forces than by any identifiable hindrance to supplies. They insisted that the greater problem for the Peshmerga, initially, was the variable quality of some of the equipment supplied, particularly some of the ammunition. There is a valid debate about whether equipment should be gifted directly to the Kurdish Regional Government or whether it ought to continue being routed via Baghdad. Direct routing would certainly improve the timeliness of receipt, however, it would be in tension with the coalition policy of strengthening the unity of Iraq—by routing assistance through Baghdad..

102. With regards to training, there are further difficulties in that the Peshmerga are not only defending their borders against DAESH, but are focused on advancing against them. A number of Peshmerga fighters have also been dispatched to Kobani to support the Syrian Kurds in their fight against DAESH. This means that, in order to train troops, they will have to be pulled off the front line. We were told that UK military (alongside coalition partners) were working with the Ministry of Peshmerga to try and devise training regimes which would best suit their needs. It was hoped that the coalition training programme would be in operation by February. We do believe that the expertise which UK troops have gained in countering IEDs is one area where training of the Peshmerga could prove decisive in the battle against DAESH.

103. 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.

Special Forces

104. It was suggested in evidence that part of the UK contribution to the fight against DAESH, could be a counter-terrorism strategy,¹²⁸ similar to that carried out by the US Special Forces (outside of the NATO operation) in Afghanistan.¹²⁹ We assume that some of this is already in operation. Such a strategy, would presumably rely on Special Forces operations and remotely piloted air systems (RPAS) to kill or capture High Value targets, and would aim to disrupt their

¹²⁸ Q32

¹²⁹ [U.S. Asks Allies for Counterterrorism Force in Afghanistan](#), *Wall Street Journal*, 4 June 2014

capacity to organise and plan terrorist strikes. The advantages of such an approach, is that it would degrade DAESH leadership without excessive commitment of foreign troops or resources.¹³⁰

105. Critics of a counter-terrorism approach argued that it did not always work towards the same goals as the overall counter-insurgency operation and therefore undermined its nation-building mission.¹³¹ It was also suggested that the lack of intelligence-gathering processes on the ground in Iraq (which previously would have been carried out by international troops, who had a legal mandate to do so under the status of forces agreement, detaining and interrogating local sources) would hamper any counter-terrorism strategy.¹³² Major General (retired) Shaw also suggested that any such strategy would “seem to be mowing the grass as far as killing terrorists were concerned” but not addressing any of the significant problems which had acted as an ideological motivation for the terrorist action.¹³³

106. The concerns about the legality of such operations would also have to be addressed, Professor Sir Adam Roberts told us that:

Military operations with an anti-terrorist purpose frequently result in legal violations, because identifying legitimate targets in real time is inherently difficult, and the adversary is often hard to distinguish from the general population.¹³⁴

Combat troops are also often very important for providing the tactical intelligence and support for counter-terrorism operations. Finally, the significant legal obstacles to targeted killings; and the absence of any agreed detention facilities in Iraq, and, therefore, the impossibility of interrogating suspects for intelligence on the terrorist networks, mean that a sustained Special Forces campaign may also undermine the UK Government’s ability to influence the process of political reform in Iraq.

107. Special Forces operations will be of great use to the Iraqi Government and a counter-terrorism 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.

Defence Engagement and the Adaptable Brigades

108. There is considerable potential for a large and capable UK team of area specialists, developing a deep understanding of the Iraqi theatre, helping to shape analysis, and planning, and then contributing to influencing the actors on the ground. They could be placed as staff and liaison officers to the US and Iraqi systems; attached to Iraqi Divisions and Brigades; given more significant roles in the Iraqi Ministry of Defence, contributing to Iraqi planning, the development

130 Q23

131 Q23

132 Q32

133 Q111

134 Professor Sir Adam Roberts ([ISI 0001](#)), para 26

of the mission and tactics; and developing deep defence relationships with the Sunni community, including helping to integrate them into the Iraqi Government effort.

109. The UK should be ideally placed to provide this. It has committed strongly to an international defence engagement strategy, which appears designed (among other things) to enable them to provide such ‘thought-leadership’. The new Adaptable Brigades have been designed specifically to “develop understanding of the geography, culture and languages of their specified regions.”¹³⁵ The Chief of General Staff highlighted the opportunities presented by the international defence engagement strategy:

[T]he idea of defence engagement is important to us, because it sees young officers and NCOs having the chance to be overseas, training individuals, doing the upstream capacity building and all of that.¹³⁶

And, in response to our report calling for (among other things) “language skills required for effective engagement with the local population and authorities,”¹³⁷ the MOD has committed to “the development of [...] a professionalised military diplomat with credibility and developed cultural, language and other skills.”¹³⁸ The UK Military currently has 50 language students in Jordan and has announced a new naval base in Bahrain as the centrepiece of deeper Gulf Engagement. The Defence Centre for Languages and Culture at Shrivenham has been expanded to provide for more linguistic and cultural expertise.¹³⁹

110. The current crisis in Iraq is an ideal opportunity for all of this to be put to work. The UK Embassy in December 2014 had capacity for a substantial expansion in its staffing levels with available accommodation units, which could be utilised at only marginal extra cost and without additional outlay on security and ‘life-support’ systems. The US forces indicated that they would be willing to provide free life support to UK personnel in theatre.

111. 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.

Regional Solution

112. In addition to work in Iraq itself, there is immense potential for such ‘professionalised military diplomats’ to work on security structures across the region. The UK could supplement existing staff with the many British citizens with deep experience of Iraq. Central to their work would be the creation of a ‘regional solution’ and, in particular, helping to reduce conflict and

¹³⁵ British Army, Transforming the British Army 2013, July 2013, p21

¹³⁶ Oral evidence taken on [5 Nov 2014](#), HC (2014-15) 512, Q99

¹³⁷ Defence Committee, Fourteenth Report of Session 2013-14, Intervention: Why, When and How? HC 952, para 96

¹³⁸ Defence Committee, Fourth Special Report of Session 2014-15, Intervention: Why, When and How? Government Response to the Committee's Fourteenth Report of Session 2013-14, HC 581, Para 18

¹³⁹ Q289

resolve the many tensions between the major regional players, in particular Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar, and indirectly, Russia.

113. The dangers of the current regional confrontation is clear. Witnesses have told us that the war in Syria has now become a proxy war between (mostly Iranian) Shi'ites, supporting the regime, and Sunni Arab Gulf States, supporting the opposition.¹⁴⁰ Lieutenant General Sir Simon Mayall, the Defence Senior Adviser for the Middle East, reiterated this, telling us that:

We can create the space for politics to gain ground, but if the politics does not gain ground, we are conducting a very difficult military campaign, which is, fundamentally, just back into containment. There are elements of pressure in Ankara not to encourage the KRG to split. There is pressure in Tehran—tied in, of course, to all sorts of other Iranian ambitions there—to convince them that an inclusive Government that brings the Kurds and the Sunnis in is better for them than being on the frontline against ISIS in the long term. There is pressure in Riyadh and, dare I say it, the Gulf states to help us do part of the Sunni outreach and reach out a bit to Abadi, as long as he repays that confidence by acting in a non-sectarian manner. In the mean time, of course, [...] the key is to try to enable the Kurds, the peshmerga in particular, and the ISF to regain the confidence and have enough capacity and capability to take that fight.¹⁴¹

Although the Sunni Arab states and Turkey view both the Assad regime and DAESH as a threat, Turkey views the Assad regime as more of a threat and so has refused to engage unless the coalition expands operations to attack Assad regime targets.¹⁴²

114. All regional players should by now acknowledge the significant threat posed by DAESH to the stability of the region. The stated aim of DAESH is to create an Islamic Caliphate in the Levant—an area which encompasses Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Jordan, Cyprus and Southern Turkey.¹⁴³ There have also been suggestions that DAESH have aspirations to move in to Saudi Arabia¹⁴⁴ and that Jordan and Lebanon¹⁴⁵ are vulnerable to DAESH incursions.

115. Joost Hiltermann told us that there could be a role for the West in facilitating dialogue amongst the countries in the region. He referred to a previously held forum which could act as a model:

There used to be such a thing as a regional security conference that involved the Ministers of Foreign Affairs and the Ministers of the Interior from Iraq's neighbouring states—Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and others—and it could be revived. That would be one way of lessening some of the tensions and I certainly

140 Q185

141 Q317

142 Q262

143 [What is Islamic State?](#) The Wall Street Journal, 12 June 2014

144 Q1

145 MOD, (ISI 0016)

think that Western nations could help to facilitate and encourage that. That requires good diplomacy and that is certainly something that you have great experience in.¹⁴⁶

There is certainly an appetite for a regional solution among some members of the international coalition—in Jordan, we were told that there was a desire to ‘Arabise’ the narrative of the fight against DAESH and that bilateral discussions were taking place amongst regional leaders. This idea was welcomed by the Defence Secretary who said:

The extent to which our allies in the Gulf accept that they and other regional parties have a regional responsibility to help the Government of Iraq deal with this challenge is encouraging. The recent conference in Kuwait on combating the ideology of ISIL was an important illustration of that.¹⁴⁷

As well as the conference, there is further evidence of the neighbouring countries (including Jordan and Turkey) taking responsibility by agreeing to host the training of moderate Syrian opposition troops. However, as previously highlighted, the positions of the key regional powers—Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Iran—remain heavily polarised.

116. *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.*

The Political Dimension of Iraq

117. While all military activities will be (as they should be) directed through the Government in Baghdad, it is vital that the military and political strategy are intertwined—without success in one, the other will surely fail. The importance of this work was emphasised by witnesses. Malcolm Chalmers of RUSI has commented that the

strategy of the campaign in Iraq is also becoming clear—to contain and then degrade ISIS, replacing it with alternative Sunni leaders who command local support. This will require the nurturing of these leaders, and a reversal of the repressive and sectarian policies that helped ISIS to build its support in the first place. Important steps in this direction have been taken by the removal of Nouri al Maliki, and by the broadening of the Iraqi Government.¹⁴⁸

118. A similar point was made by Major General Jonathan Shaw who noted that, although containment was a worthwhile objective, current UK military actions may prove to be limited in supporting any sort of political process.¹⁴⁹ Peter Watkins informed us that containment was the

146 Q19

147 HC Deb 15 Dec 2014, [col. 1127](#)

148 RUSI, [Western Operations Against ISIS: Holding Back in Syria](#), 24 November 2014

149 Q142

first step in the longer term strategy which was focused on a political solution.¹⁵⁰ We heard in Baghdad from some very senior Iraqi leaders that there would ultimately need to be a political settlement between the Baghdad Government and the non-Islamist elements in the insurgency includes former Saddam regime/Ba'athist officials and military officers.

119. In particular, this could include playing a role in reintegrating Sunni and Shia forces in a way that has proved challenging for the Baghdad government. As a coalition partner, we must take some responsibility for the actions carried out against DAESH by Shia militias, especially when those actions result in the gross violation of human rights. The UK Government should use whatever influence it has available in Baghdad to underline the necessity to curb the atrocities and influence of the Shia militia.

120. In terms of engagement with the political endeavours, Peter Watkins told us that the political strategy, focused on seeing a more inclusive government in Iraq, would be carried out by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in conjunction with the UN, the US and other coalition partners.¹⁵¹ However, during the most recent FCO questions in the House of Commons, the Minister failed to mention any aspects of a political strategy:

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): Do the Government recognise that the failure of reconstruction after the last Iraq war shows that any military effort will be insufficient unless the UK does far more to engage with its partners and allies, to enable good governance in currently ungoverned spaces in Iraq and Syria to prevail?

Mr Ellwood: The hon Gentleman raises a critical point. The international community, especially Iraq's neighbours and Iraq itself, must play a crucial role in providing assistance and technical support and governance and stabilisation once the fighting has happened. We are seeing successes: Iraqi forces have liberated the key town of Bayji, and the National Guard programme is formalising the militia structure, to improve security as well as command and control. They are stopping ISIL in its tracks and pushing it back, out of Iraq. This is a turning point.¹⁵²

It would therefore appear that UK lacks a developed political strategy.

150 Q314-5

151 Q317

152 HC Deb, 2 Dec 2014, [col. 144](#)

7 Conclusion

121. The Prime Minister told the Liaison Committee that:

[T]his is not a terrorist body that has found a willing host. It is a terrorist body that runs a state, has oil revenues, has weapons, has land, has money and all the rest of it. So we will not deal with the problem of the Islamist extremist terrorist narrative unless we quite aggressively deal with ISIL. So it is a priority.¹⁵³

He added:

We should work out: where does Britain have some expertise and some heft that we can bring to bear?¹⁵⁴

122. We believe that Britain has significant interests in the defeat of DAESH and in a more stable Iraq. The UK military is still one of the largest and most capable forces in the world and its experience of Iraq is second only to that of the United States. Britain still has considerable expertise on Iraq from its recent operations in Iraq—when it contributed significantly for example to Sunni engagement. The recent investment in Defence Engagement, language training and the adaptable brigades should have strengthened this skill base.

123. 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.

124. 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.

153 Oral evidence taken before the Liaison Committee, [16 December 2014](#), HC (2014-15) 887, Q1

154 Oral evidence taken before the Liaison Committee, [16 December 2014](#), HC (2014-15) 887, Q66

125. 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.

126. 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.

127. We are not calling for combat troops, still less for an attempt to repeat the counter-insurgency 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.

Formal Minutes

Tuesday 27 January 2015

Members present:

Rory Stewart, in the Chair

Richard Benyon
Mr Dai Havard

Dr Julian Lewis

Draft Report (The situation in Iraq and Syria and the response to al-Dawla al-Islamiya fi al-Iraq al-Sham (DAESH)), proposed by the Chair, brought up and read.

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

Paragraphs 1 to 127 read and agreed to.

Summary and recommendations agreed to.

Resolved, That the Report be the Seventh 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 3 February 2015 at 2.00 pm]

Witnesses

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

Tuesday 14 October 2014

Question number

Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, Shillman-Ginsburg Fellow at the Middle East Forum, **Professor Toby Dodge**, Director of the Middle East Centre, London School of Economics, and **Joost Hiltermann**, Chief Operating Officer, International Crisis Group

[Q1–22](#)

Lieutenant Colonel (retired) Richard Williams

[Q23–43](#)

Tuesday 21 October 2014

Dr Douglas Porch, US Naval Postgraduate School

[Q44–64](#)

General (retired) Richard Shirreff

[Q65–109](#)

Major General (retired) Jonathan Shaw

[Q110–142](#)

Tuesday 28 October 2014

Emma Sky, Senior Fellow, Jackson Institute, Yale University

[Q153–186](#)

Wednesday 29 October 2014

Professor Marc Weller, Cambridge University, **Professor Sir Adam Roberts**, Oxford University, **Dr Adrian Gallagher**, Leeds University, and Aaron Stein, RUSI

[Q187–285](#)

Wednesday 3 December 2014

Lt General Sir Simon Mayall, Defence Senior Adviser to the Middle East, **Lt General Gordon Messenger RM**, Deputy Chief of Defence Staff Military Strategy and Operations, and **Peter Watkins**, Director General Security Policy

[Q286–355](#)

Published written evidence

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

- 1 Cdr N D Maccartan-Ward DSC AFC ([ISI0009](#))
- 2 DefenceSynergia ([ISI0010](#))
- 3 Dr Jon Moran ([ISI0002](#))
- 4 Dr Lars Berger ([ISI0008](#))
- 5 Henry Jackson Society ([ISI0004](#))
- 6 Human Security Centre ([ISI0007](#))
- 7 Institute for Cooperation, Conflict, and Security, University of Birmingham ([ISI0013](#))
- 8 Jane Kinninmont ([ISI0019](#))
- 9 Kamal Alam ([ISI0018](#))
- 10 Luke Murphy ([ISI0022](#))
- 11 Margaret Owen, Widows for Peace through Democracy ([ISI0005](#))
- 12 Michael Stephens ([ISI0020](#))
- 13 Ministry of Defence ([ISI0016](#))
- 14 Ministry of Defence ([ISI0024](#))
- 15 Mr Chris Woods ([ISI0017](#))
- 16 Oxford Research Group ([ISI0014](#))
- 17 Paul Schulte, Professor Stefan Wolff and Dr Christopher M Wyatt ([ISI0023](#))
- 18 Professor G H Bennett ([ISI0003](#))
- 19 Professor Paul Rogers ([ISI0012](#))
- 20 Professor Sir Adam Roberts ([ISI0001](#))
- 21 Reprieve ([ISI0015](#))
- 22 Shashank Joshi ([ISI0021](#))
- 23 Tadamun Iraqi Women Solidarity ([ISI0011](#))

List of Reports from the Committee during the current Session

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

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

Session 2014–15

First Report	The Ministry of Defence Main Estimates 2014–15	HC 469 (HC 681)
Second Report and First Joint Report	Scrutiny of Arms Export and Arms Controls (2014) First Joint Report of the Business, Innovation and Skills, Defence, Foreign Affairs and International Development Committees of Session 2014–15	HC 186 (Cm 8935)
Third Report	Towards the next Defence and Security Review Part Two: NATO	HC 358 (HC 755)
Fourth Report	The Armed Forces Covenant in Action Part 5: Military Casualties, a review of progress	HC 527 (HC 953)
Fifth Report	Armed Forces (Service Complaints and Financial Assistance) Bill	HC 508 (HC 900)
Sixth Report	Pre-appointment for the Service Complaints Commissioner	HC 832