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UK Air Strikes in Syria Time for a Decision?

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Key Points

- The ISIS attacks on Paris will bring renewed focus to the debate on the extension of UK counter-ISIS air strikes to Syria. A commitment by the House of Commons to take part in coalition air strikes in Syria would be seen as an important demonstration of solidarity with France, which has contributed its own forces to air strikes in Syria since September
- Ultimately, the fate of both Iraq and Syria will be determined by political dynamics within these two states and by the policies adopted by powerful neighbouring states. But coalition air strikes already contribute to protecting Kurdish-majority areas in northern Syria and ensuring that ISIS has no safe haven from which to support its operations in Iraq. If MPs accept that coalition allies are right to use force for these purposes, it is hard to justify a refusal in principle to authorise UK participation in future comparable operations
- In the absence of a wider political settlement in Syria, the UK's military campaign may need to be sustained over a period of several years. In these circumstances, it is possible – perhaps even likely – that the operation could end without achieving a decisive strategic effect.

SINCE THE Conservatives gained an overall majority in the May 2015 election, the government has made clear that it will seek a parliamentary vote to authorise bombing missions against ISIS in Syria as soon as it has a 'consensus' to do so.

Some Conservative backbenchers have made their opposition to air strikes in Syria clear, including the respective chairs of the all-party defence and foreign affairs committees. At the same time, a significant number of Labour MPs are willing to support military action, despite the clear opposition of their new leader Jeremy Corbyn. In a further illustration of the issue's sensitivity, the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee recently approved a report that was highly critical of extending air strikes to Syria, but only on a majority of four votes to two.

While three Conservatives and one Scottish National Party MP voted against air strikes, two Labour members supported further military action.¹

While the parliamentary manoeuvring continues, the UK's reputation as a reliable military partner is being undermined. General Sir Nick Houghton, Chief of the Defence Staff, has stated that 'to an extent ... we are letting our allies down by not being a full player.'² In the wake of the Paris attacks, ministers will also be highly sensitive to comparisons with France, whose total contribution to coalition air strikes against ISIS (about 270 as of 5 November, but now rapidly rising) is comparable to that of the UK (a total of 344 as of the same date).³ Despite this, France's recent commitment in September 2015 to extend air strikes to Syria (and to conduct a growing number of strikes there) had already led *New York Times* journalists to conclude that 'Britain has talked tough about going after the Islamic State, but unlike France, its actions have not matched its talk.'⁴ Such comparisons would be bound to intensify if the UK were to continue to refuse to take part in air strikes in Syria.

If the government were to go to Parliament and lose the vote, the UK's international reputation would suffer further significant damage. Yet, especially after the attacks on France, pressure will now build to resolve this issue one way or another; otherwise, the government risks repeating the error that it made in its handling of the NATO 2 per cent commitment, when it chose to highlight the importance of this target as a measure of national resolve at the September 2014 Wales summit, only to spend the following ten months refusing to commit to meeting it beyond 2015. Today, ministers are again building up the commitment to air strikes in Syria as a measure of the UK's seriousness as a military player, while failing to deliver on the commitment. The longer the uncertainty continues, the worse it threatens to become for the UK's reputation.

The case for joining air strikes in Syria is, in important respects, stronger now than it was when the anti-ISIS military coalition was first formed in September 2014. The Foreign Affairs Committee's assessment that there is still no 'coherent international strategy that has a realistic chance of defeating [ISIS] and of ending the civil war in Syria', which it gives as its main reason for opposing an extension of air strikes, may be accurate. But air strikes in Syria contribute to important second-order objectives, including the protection of Kurdish-majority areas in northern Syria. They also allow the coalition to attack ISIS's headquarters in Raqqa, ensuring that it has no safe haven from which to provide logistical and financial support to its operations in Iraq.

In making the case for extending air strikes to Syria, however, the government should be careful not to overstate the extent to which UK action (military or diplomatic) can shape the outcome

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1. House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, 'The Extension of Offensive British Military Operations to Syria', Second Report of Session 2015–16, HC 457, 3 November 2015, pp. 22–25.
 2. Laura Hughes, 'Britain is "Letting Down Allies" by Failing to Take Part in Syria Air Strikes', *Daily Telegraph*, 8 November 2015.
 3. Eric Schmitt and Michael R Gordon, 'As US Escalates Air War on ISIS, Allies Slip Away', *New York Times*, 7 November 2015; UK Ministry of Defence reporting.
 4. Schmitt and Gordon, 'As US Escalates Air War on ISIS, Allies Slip Away'. Eric Schmitt and Michael R Gordon, 'US Steps up its Attacks on ISIS-Controlled Oil Fields in Syria', *New York Times*, 12 November 2015.

of the conflict. It should make clear that the military campaign (in Iraq and Syria) will need to be calibrated on the assumption that it may have to be sustained over a period of several years. Even then, it is possible – perhaps even likely – that the operation could end without achieving a decisive strategic effect.

Parliament and Syria

In August 2013, the government was narrowly defeated (by 285 votes to 272) in its effort to gain parliamentary approval to bomb targets in Syria in response to the Assad government's extensive use of chemical weapons against its own people. Just over a year later, in September 2014, the government was successful in gaining authorisation for air strikes against ISIS in Iraq. As a result of continuing unease over the Syrian element of the US war effort, however, the House of Commons made clear in 2014 that any proposal to 'endorse UK air strikes in Syria' as part of the anti-ISIS campaign would have to be subject to a separate vote. The government has now made clear that it wants to hold such a vote when a 'consensus' exists in Parliament.

The 2014 decision to limit air strikes to Iraq has not stopped the UK playing an important role in supporting US air strikes in Syria through extensive use of RAF aircraft in command-and-control, surveillance and target-acquisition roles. The primary result of a parliamentary endorsement, therefore, would be symbolic, reassuring the UK's allies that it had re-established its strategic nerve after the government's unexpected defeat in 2013.

The decision would have relatively little importance in strategic or legal terms. It could allow coalition commanders some additional flexibility over the use of UK assets. It could also provide some additional specialist capabilities which the US does not possess, notably for precision, low-collateral strikes against mobile targets (such as dual-mode Brimstone missiles). But given the size of the UK effort compared with that of the US, UK air strikes in Syria could not be expected to be strategically transformative. In terms of the legal picture, a UK commitment would add political weight to the coalition's argument that air strikes in Syria without the permission of the Assad government are legal under international law. By providing extensive support for US air strikes, however, the UK has already implicitly accepted that this is the case.

Protecting the Kurds

The government's case for action has been strengthened by events on the ground since the last vote. In January 2015, US air strikes played a decisive role in preventing ISIS from capturing the city of Kobani in northern Syria. If US forces had been subject to the same constraints as those placed on the RAF, they would have had to leave the Syrian Kurds to the tender mercies of ISIS, with the Turkish government content to stand by as the prospect for an autonomous Syrian Kurdish enclave was crushed. The campaign to protect Kobani, therefore, has achieved clear results from both a humanitarian and operational viewpoint. Operations to protect the Kurdish 'safe haven' continue to have these positive effects.

Yet if MPs accept that the US was right to use force to protect Kobani (with UK non-lethal support), it is hard to see how they can then justify a refusal in principle to authorise UK participation in future comparable operations. The question of whether and to what extent British aircraft are diverted from Iraq to Syria in practice is then a second-order question, to be determined as the operational picture evolves.

UK Interests and the Case for Action

Most of those arguing against military action in Syria are not isolationists. They support the UK's proud tradition of a values-based foreign policy, and believe that the country cannot turn away from the suffering of the Syrian people. Nor are they blind to the ways in which the deepening of the conflict will create new problems for the UK and its European neighbours, as made clear by the attacks in Paris. As in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Syrian war has mobilised tens of thousands of foreign fighters from across the Arab world and Europe, some of whom are returning to the UK with terrorist intent. If ISIS is able to consolidate its initial state-building success (it now controls around 10 per cent of the civilian populations of both Iraq and Syria), its ideological appeal could increase even more, potentially posing a severe threat to other states in the region. A continuation of the war, moreover, could add millions to the numbers of refugees fleeing from a collapsing country.

Yet strong interests and good intentions, even when accompanied by clear objectives and massive resources, have not been sufficient to achieve success in other recent interventions. For military action in Syria to be justified, Parliament also needs to be convinced that there is a plausible case that the continuing coalition air campaign can do some good. This does not mean that the government needs to guarantee victory or spell out how it can achieve a clear exit within a fixed period of time – that would be setting the bar too high. But it does need to make a convincing case that the benefits of continuing military action in Syria, at least for now, clearly exceed the costs of such action.

The Limits of the Anti-ISIS Campaign

Coalition air power has been most effective when used to defend primarily Kurdish and minority areas, including Sinjar, Iraqi Kurdistan and Kobani. The military and political impact of coalition air strikes, by contrast, has been more limited when used in the Sunni areas most vulnerable to the ideological appeal of ISIS, where the use of irregular forces and activated urban sleeper cells in offensive operations cannot easily be combated from the air. Despite the constant threat of US-led air strikes, ISIS has continued to make advances in predominantly Sunni-Arab areas, including (in Iraq) large parts of Anbar province and (in Syria) Palmyra and the approaches to Aleppo. Coalition efforts to mobilise a Sunni-Arab militia to lead a fight-back have proved largely unsuccessful, while local Shia and Kurdish forces have been reluctant to deploy too far outside their own areas. If ISIS is to be dislodged from the main urban centres it now controls, there will need to be credible Arab ground forces prepared to fight block by block through these centres. The failure to find such forces remains a central weakness in the anti-ISIS campaign.

Safe Areas

Critics are also concerned that, by focusing their military effort only on ISIS, the US and its allies are addressing only one piece in a wider conflict jigsaw. The UK government continues to say that it is opposed to both ISIS and the Assad regime. But it appears to be seeking parliamentary authorisation for air strikes in Syria that would be focused solely on the former. It is not even clear, from the wording of the 2014 resolution, whether UK air strikes against other jihadist groups in Syria, such as Al-Qa'ida affiliates, would have been permitted.

Many critics of current policy have therefore argued that the US and the UK should support the creation of 'safe areas' or 'no-fly zones' in areas currently under the control of opposition militias. Such zones, it is argued, could lessen the damage done by the Assad regime's aerial bombing, responsible for a high proportion of those fleeing the country. They have been publicly supported by Hillary Clinton, as well as by Turkey and several other states.⁵

Unfortunately, such areas have now become highly problematic. In contrast to the 2011 effort to create a no-fly zone to protect the people of Benghazi in Libya, there is no prospect of UN backing for a Syrian no-fly zone. As in Libya, the provision of air protection for any part of Syria would inevitably have the effect of providing a military advantage to whichever armed groups were operating from this area. It could therefore only be effective if accompanied by measures to ensure that more moderate groups could hold these areas against opposition from ISIS or other more radical factions. As a result, any attempt to create a no-fly zone would be likely to develop into a more comprehensive safe-area approach, in which the UK and its allies would be drawn into taking sides in the competition between different groups within a highly fragmented armed opposition. A safe area might be more plausible in southern Syria, where the rebel groups that are dominant at the moment are more moderate. Yet this is not currently the main focus of fighting.

Whatever the merits of the safe-area concept in the past, its disadvantages have been heightened by Russia's recent deployment of air forces to Syria. As a result, a no-fly zone in the north or west of the country would have to be applied against the Russian aircraft who are currently engaged in bombing precisely those areas that such a zone would have been designed to protect. The protection of a no-fly zone, therefore, would require coalition air forces to neutralise the air-defence systems – including both ground-based missiles and fighter squadrons – which Russia has now deployed precisely in order to deter such a possibility. The US is not prepared to take such a step, which would risk a level of direct US–Russia military confrontation that was not seen even at the height of the Cold War. In the absence of US cover, however, no other power will want to risk a war with Russia by instigating a no-fly zone.

5. Also see Condoleezza Rice and Robert M Gates, 'How America can Counter Putin's Moves in Syria', *Washington Post*, 8 October 2015.

Containing Russia

Yet the direct involvement of Russian armed forces in Syria may also strengthen the case for maintaining coalition military involvement in both Syria and Iraq, at least for now. Russia's intervention is motivated in part by President Vladimir Putin's determination to prevent a close ally from being overthrown, a scenario that had become increasingly possible as rebel forces threatened to cut key lines of communications in regime defences. If Assad were to fall, it is feared, it would strengthen radical jihadist forces in the region, posing an increased threat of terrorism to Russia itself. Russia's policy has also been shaped by its wider ideological aversion to the overthrow of dictators, especially when (as in Serbia, Iraq and Libya) this involves some combination of US-led military operations and popular revolution.

Yet Russia's intervention may also reflect a broader trend towards military adventurism since the invasion of Crimea in February 2014. The success of Russia's military action in eastern Ukraine, albeit partial and arguably unsustainable, may encourage its leaders to believe that a more assertive use of military force elsewhere can likewise help it gain the strategic initiative in its struggle against Western influence and power. Despite the relative weakness of Russian military forces compared to NATO, the argument goes, Russia can make up for this by exploiting US hesitancy to establish facts on the ground.

In these circumstances, the Western powers have an interest in persuading Russia that its involvement in Syria will not be allowed to compel the departure of Western forces, nor to terminate their modest (but still significant) support for anti-Assad rebels. For, if such a perception were to gain credence, it could have wider negative consequences elsewhere, for example by encouraging an increased Russian role in Iraq.

Russia has a long-established and close relationship with Syria, and the Western powers have no realistic prospect of ending this relationship. But they do have an interest in limiting it. Therefore, even if a no-fly zone is out of the question at present, there is still a strong case for providing arms and other assistance to help more moderate rebel forces within Syria defend themselves (against both ISIS and the regime) and to help persuade the regime to negotiate seriously. Insofar as such support also helps to contain the reach of Russian intervention, this could be an additional benefit.

Iran

The coalition's strategy also needs to take account of Iran's role in Syria. The Assad regime is now highly dependent on Iran for both financial and security assistance. As the Syrian government's ability to recruit local personnel comes under increasing strain, its military dependence on Iran, and on Iran's close ally Hezbollah, has deepened further. Moreover, unlike Russia, Iran's ground forces have been involved in taking and holding territory, and have suffered significant casualties in doing so. As a result, it is hard to see how sustainable progress can be made without its involvement.

Iran's primary interests in Syria lie in its determination to protect the lines of supply to Hizbullah, and more broadly to safeguard Lebanon's large Shia community. It also has a clear interest in preventing the threats that the emergence of a radical jihadist regime in Damascus would pose to Iraq, and thus potentially to Iran's own borders. Rapid intervention by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard played a decisive role in the defence of Baghdad and Iraqi Kurdistan against ISIS in the immediate aftermath of the fall of Mosul in 2014. Iran has demonstrated that it is willing to use these assets again to ensure that its interests are taken into account.

Much will depend on how Iran responds to the nuclear deal it reached with the world's major powers in July 2015. If Iran uses the possibilities for détente and improved relations with Western powers that the deal creates, then it may break out of its international isolation. It could become one of the region's leading powers and pursue a policy of reconciliation and compromise in efforts to end the conflicts in Syria and Iraq. But there is also a real risk of over-reach, in which Iran tries to consolidate a Shia-dominated axis stretching from Beirut to Tehran through Damascus and Baghdad, using this as a base from which to threaten the Gulf monarchies to its south. If Iran were to go down this path, it would be a recipe for intensified sectarian conflict across the region, and indeed more widely. The stakes could not be higher.

Uncertain Allies

The calculations of America and Britain are further complicated by the position of their two most important regional partners: Turkey and Saudi Arabia. Although both countries are members of the US-led anti-ISIS coalition, in practice both powers (as well as other important regional states) give much higher priority to other objectives. They are both strong supporters of the armed opposition to President Assad, and are noticeably less concerned than the US to restrict this support to the most 'moderate' groups. Saudi support, channelled through Turkey, played a critical role in the advances of the Army of Conquest (Jaysh Al-Fatah), a coalition of Sunni Islamist rebel groups, during summer 2015, which were the proximate trigger for the subsequent Russian intervention. In response to that intervention, Turkey and Saudi Arabia are reported to have accelerated arms supplies to rebel groups, including large numbers of US-made TOW anti-tank missiles. Neither country has provided a comparable level of support to the campaign against ISIS, despite – or perhaps to an extent because of – the domestic threat that ISIS could pose to their own societies. The Saudi leadership views the war in Syria as one of a series of proxy conflicts with Iran. Turkey, for its part, is more concerned to prevent the strengthening of an autonomous Kurdish entity in northern Syria, to the extent that it recently attacked Kurdish forces on the front line against ISIS in Tel Abyad.

Despite a 'Global Coalition' that claims to have sixty-three nations working together to dismantle and destroy ISIS, therefore, in practice the core group of countries that broadly shares the US approach to the conflict remains relatively narrow. As a result, existing levels of co-operation between the Western powers and their regional allies will continue to be at risk, especially if differences in strategic priorities develop into more fundamental conflicts of interest.

The Future

There have recently been some signs of tentative progress on the diplomatic front. The terrorist attacks in Egypt and France have highlighted the common interests that Russia and the Western powers have in degrading and defeating ISIS. The presence of both Iran and Saudi Arabia at the most recent International Support Group for Syria meeting is also a welcome recognition that their wider rivalry has been fuelling the conflict.

However, while most external actors want a political settlement in Syria, the terms on which they would be prepared to accept one are still radically divergent from each other. In addition to disagreements on the fate of the Assad clan, there are deep-rooted differences on who should hold political and military power, how the rights of different ethnic and religious groups can be guaranteed and how to incorporate armed militia into any settlement.

As a result of these continuing differences, the Syrian war could continue for years, punctuated by inconclusive battles and shifting front lines. In a highly fractured society, each of the main armed groups involved will fight fiercely to defend its heartlands. Given this, it is unlikely that any one group – be it the regime, a rebel alliance or ISIS – will be able to recreate a united Syria by force.

The UK should base its Syria policy on protecting its own interests, and on its commitment to ending the suffering of the Syrian people as soon as possible. It should continue to press for a comprehensive diplomatic settlement, based on pluralism and the respect of individual rights, supported by a broad spectrum of parties and armed groups, with only the most extremist elements (such as ISIS and Al-Qa'ida) excluded from the process. It should continue to insist that such a settlement would require the departure of the Assad family from power, but be flexible as to whether this would occur at the start or end of a transition process. It should use whatever influence it has to persuade the US to keep to this path, and to continue to reject both the argument that the West must now throw all its weight behind a Saudi-led, anti-Iran alliance, and the argument that all that matters is to defeat ISIS, even if this means accepting Russian and Iranian dominance over Syria.

The UK does retain a degree of influence in the region in part because of its close links with the Gulf monarchies and Jordan, and in part because of the significant resources it continues to deploy to maintain and strengthen these relationships. As a permanent member of the UN Security Council, and a leading member of the EU, the UK can make some difference in shaping international debates on Syria and the region. Its special military and intelligence relationships with the US help to ensure that in Washington the UK's voice is heard rather more often than those of its European allies. And the UK has, so far, provided the second-largest contribution to both the coalition's military effort and, by a significant margin, to the international humanitarian effort in the region.

Yet the UK's leaders should not be under any illusion that these strengths mean that it can be a central player in diplomatic efforts over the future of Syria. The key external powers in this


process will continue to be Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia, along with the US and Russia. The relatively limited nature of the UK role adds weight to the argument that it will be important to ensure that it does not over-commit resources to a protracted military campaign whose strategic objectives it has little ability to influence.

All this has at least three substantial consequences. First, it means that the UK commitment of forces must be at a level which can, if necessary, be sustained in the long term. Although the UK already provides a substantial contribution to coalition air power (including some 30 per cent of ISTAR capabilities), there is pressure for it to do more. But a higher level of air-power commitment could not be sustained for long without seriously eroding the UK's ability to respond to other demands that may arise in the medium term. These might include, for example, new commitments in the Baltic states, the Western Balkans, West Africa or Afghanistan. Indeed, the more that the anti-ISIS air campaign stalls because of the lack of credible Sunni-Arab forces on the ground, the stronger will be the case for some scaling down of the level of air capabilities that the UK is currently devoting to that campaign, albeit still taking into account continuing national counter-terrorism requirements.

Second, the UK also needs the capability to escalate its military effort at relatively short notice, for short periods and, if necessary, without further parliamentary approval, as and when new opportunities present themselves.

Third, if diplomatic efforts begin to bear fruit, there could be calls for the UK to pledge forces in support of a UN-authorized peace-enforcement effort, helping to safeguard a government of national unity (or an enforced ceasefire) from those who would seek to undermine it. In these circumstances, the promise of international assistance could play a key role in providing assurance to nervous elements of Syrian society that their rights would be protected in the event of a settlement.

On the other hand, a time could also arrive – perhaps sooner rather than later – when the US and the UK could conclude that there is no more that can usefully be done to shape the outcome of the conflict through the use of external military force. Ultimately, the fate of both Iraq and Syria will be determined, first and foremost, by political forces within these two states, and, second, by the policies adopted by powerful neighbouring states. If Iraq were to decide to turn to Russia as its primary source of military support, for example, then the days of both US and UK forces in that country could well be numbered.

That moment has not yet arrived. As long as the involvement of UK forces in Iraq – and, separately, Syria – continues to do some good, it should be continued. 

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