Royal United Services Institute
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Occasional Paper

Inherently Unresolved

The Military Operation against ISIS

Edited by Elizabeth Quintana and Jonathan Eyal

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Timeline of Events: Key Dates

Compiled by Nathan Mathiot and James Nelson

1999	Jama'at Al-Tawhid wal-Jihad, the forerunner of ISIS, is formed in Iraq by Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi
19 March 2003	President George W Bush announces that US and coalition forces have invaded Iraq
16 May 2010	Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi is appointed as the leader of ISI, the predecessor of ISIS
17 December 2010	Mohammed Bouazizi sets himself on fire as protest against Tunisian authorities. This triggers the so-called 'Arab Spring'
March 2011	Protests break out in Deraa in souther Syria, quickly escalating and spreading across the country
18 December 2011	The last US combat troops leave Iraq
15 July 2012	The Red Cross announces that the internal conflict in Syria has become so widespread it should be considered a civil war
9 April 2013	Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, leader of ISI, announces a merger with Jabhat Al-Nusra of Syria and the creation of the Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham/Syria (ISIS)
21 August 2013	The alleged use of chemical weapons by Syrian regime forces in the suburbs of Damascus sparks an international outcry
Late August 2014	President Obama seeks support for strikes against the Assad regime, which he says has crossed a 'red line'
30 August 2013	The UK House of Commons votes against air strikes in Syria in response to the regime's use of chemical weapons
11 September 2013	President Obama puts air strikes on hold, ultimately agreeing to a Russian-led plan for Syria's chemical-weapon stockpiles to be removed from the country
10 June 2014	ISIS seizes control of Mosul. An estimated 500,000 flee the city
30 June 2014	ISIS declares itself a caliphate. It controls large swathes of Syria and Iraq
3 August 2014	IS conquers Sinjar and Zumar. The UN reports that 200,000 civilians, mostly Yazidi, flee the massacre
7 August 2014	The UK announces it will begin dropping emergency aid to the trapped Yazidi community on Mount Sinjar
7 August 2014	President Obama authorises the first air strikes to protect US diplomats and aid Iraqi government forces
14 August 2014	Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki of Iraq announces his intention to step down
18 August 2014	President Obama announces that Mosul Dam has been recaptured from ISIS
29 August 2014	The UK raises its threat level to 'severe' in response to the danger posed by ISIS
5 September 2014	President Obama announces the formation of an anti-ISIS coalition at the NATO Summit
8 September 2014	Haider Al-Abadi succeeds Nouri Al-Maliki as the prime minister of Iraq
11 September 2014	Ten Arab nations announce they will join the anti-ISIS coalition

Mid-September 2014	ISIS launches a major offensive against the town of Kobane in Syria
23 September 2014	The US leads a coalition, including Jordan, UAE, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Qatar, in air strikes against targets in Syria
26 September 2014	The House of Commons approves air strikes in Iraq
27 September 2014	RAF Tornado aircraft conduct armed reconnaissance operations over Iraq
30 September 2014	The first British air strikes are conducted. Paveway IV and Brimstone missiles are launched against ISIS targets
31 January 2015	ISIS militants admit defeat and retreat from Kobane in Syria
30 March 2015	President Assad confirms that Russia is supplying arms to Syria under new deals signed since the outbreak of the civil war in 2011
21 August 2015	Two British ISIS fighters in Syria are killed by an RAF drone strike, the first targeted strike by the UK on a British citizen
Late August 2015	ISIS destroys the main temple at Palmyra, the Temple of Bel
9 September 2015	Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin Dempsey suggests that the fight against ISIS has reached a stalemate
27 September 2015	Russia, Iran, Iraq and Syria sign a intelligence and security co-operation pact, targeting ISIS in particular
28 September 2015	President Putin addresses the UN General Assembly, denouncing the US-led air strikes on ISIS as illegal, arguing that Assad, and not the Syrian opposition, must be helped
30 September 2015	Russia launches its first air strikes in Syria in support of the Assad regime, but its claim that these are targeting ISIS militants is immediately disputed by the West

Table of Military Assets

Compiled by Justin Bronk

Country	Combat Assets	Non-Combat Assets	Personnel
Australia	**Air:** 6x F/A-18A Hornet (from April 2015) 6x F/A 18F Super Hornet (September 2014–April 2015) **Maritime:** Replenishment oiler HMAS *Success* **Land:** 500 troops	**Air:** 1x E-7A Wedgetail AWACS 1x KC-30A multi-role tanker/transport 2x C-130J Hercules C-17A Globemaster **Air Bases:** Al-Minhad Air Base, UAE	1,200
Bahrain	**Air:** 3x F-16C/D Fighting Falcon		
Belgium	**Air:** 6x F-16A/B Fighting Falcon (withdrawn July 2015) **Land:** 35 troops	**Air:** 2x C-130 Hercules (withdrawn July 2015) **Air Bases:** Muwaffaq Salti Air Base, Jordan	120
Canada	**Air:** 6x CF-188 Hornet (+1 spare CF-188) **Land:** 69 troops	**Air:** 2x CP-140M Aurora 1x CC-150T Polaris tanker 1x CC-177 Globemaster III **Air Bases:** Ahmed Al-Jaber Air Base, Kuwait	600
Denmark	**Air:** 7x F-16A/B Fighting Falcon (3 reserves) (withdrawn from August 2015 until summer 2016) **Land:** 140 troops	**Air:** 1x C-130J Hercules **Air Bases:** Ahmed Al-Jaber Air Base, Kuwait RAF Akrotiri, Cyprus	250
France	**Air:** 6x Rafale B/C 6x Mirage 2000D 12x Rafale M (withdrawn April 2015) 9x Super Étendard (modernised) (withdrawn April 2015)	**Air:** 1x C-135 FR tanker/transport aircraft 1x Atlantique 2 1x E-2C Hawkeye (withdrawn April 2015) 1x E-3 Sentry AWACS	800

Source: All data public domain. Where possible, data have been cross-checked with official sources.

Country	Combat Assets	Non-Combat Assets	Personnel
France (cont)	**Maritime:** CVN *Charles de Gaulle* (withdrawn April 2015) Air-defence frigate *Jean Bart* (withdrawn January 2015) Air-defence frigate *Chevalier Paul* (withdrawn April 2015) 1x *Rubis*-class SSN (withdrawn April 2015) **Land:** 200 trainers	**Air Bases:** Al-Minhad Air Base, UAE King Abdullah II Air Base, Jordan	
Germany	**Land:** Up to 100 troops training the Kurdish Peshmerga (Iraq)	**Air:** 4x C-160 Transall	
Italy	**Land:** 280 troops in a training role (Iraq)	**Air:** 4x Tornado IDS (not armed, Tac/R only) 2x MQ-1 Predator (unarmed) 1x KC-767 tanker **Air Bases:** Ahmed Al-Jaber Air Base, Kuwait	
Jordan	**Air:** Up to 25x F-16 Fighting Falcon used in strikes after death of Muath Al-Kasasbeh in January 2015	**Air Bases:** King Abdullah II Air Base, Jordan	
Morocco	**Air:** 4x F-16 Block 52+ Fighting Falcon	**Air Bases:** Al-Minhad Air Base, UAE	
Netherlands	**Air:** 8x F-16A/B Fighting Falcon (2 are reserves) **Land:** 130 troops training the Iraqi Army	**Air Bases:** Muwaffaq Salti Air Base, Jordan	380
Qatar		**Air:** 4x Mirage 2000 (in an ISR role only) **Air Bases:** Al-Udeid Air Base, Qatar	
Saudi Arabia	**Air:** 4–6x F-15S/SA Strike Eagles Typhoon 4x Tornado IDS	**Air Bases:** King Faisal Air Base, Saudi Arabia King Fahad Air Base, Saudi Arabia King Khalid Air Base, Saudi Arabia	
Spain	**Land:** 300 trainers (Iraq)		300
United Arab Emirates	**Air:** 10x F-16E/F Fighting Falcon	**Air Bases:** Muwaffaq Salti Air Base, Jordan	

Country	Combat Assets	Non-Combat Assets	Personnel
United Kingdom	**Air:** 8x Tornado GR4 10x MQ-9 Reaper **Maritime:** Type 45 destroyer HMS *Defender* (withdrawn December 2014) Type 45 destroyer HMS *Dauntless* (from January 2015) Type 23 frigate HMS *Kent* (from December 2014) 1x *Trafalgar*-class SNN or *Astute*-class SSN **Land:** 275 troops (Iraq)	**Air:** 1x C-17 Globemaster III 1x RC-135W Rivet Joint 1x A330 MRTT Voyager tanker/transport 2x E-3D Sentry AWACS 2x C-130J Hercules 4x HC4 Chinook (withdrawn in late 2014) 2x R1 Sentinel **Air Bases:** RAF Akrotiri, Cyprus RAF Brize Norton, UK RAF Waddington, UK Al-Minhad Air Base, UAE Ahmed Al-Jaber Air Base, Kuwait	
United States	**Air:** 44x F/A-18C/D/E/F Hornet/Super Hornet 12x EA-18G Growler F-15E Strike Eagle F-16 Fighting Falcon AH-64 Apache F-22 Raptor B-1B Lancer 12x A-10C Thunderbolt II MQ-1 Predator MQ-9 Reaper **Maritime:** USS *Theodore Roosevelt* (CVN 71) and battlegroup (April–October 2015) USS *Carl Vinson* (CVN 70) and battlegroup (August 2014–August 2015) USS *George H W Bush* (CVN 77) and battlegroup (until August 2014) USS *Arleigh Burke* (DDG 51) (TLAM strikes) USS *Philippine Sea* (CG 58) (TLAM strikes) USS *Bunker Hill* (CG 52) USS *Dewey* (DDG 105) USS *Gridley* (DDG 101) USS *Sterett* (DDG 104) USS *Normandy* (CG 60) (from April 2015) USS *Winston S Churchill* (DDG 81) (from April 2015) USS *Farragut* (DDG 99) (from April 2015) USS *Forrest Sherman* (DDG 98) (from April 2015)	**Air:** KC-135 Stratotanker KC-10 Extender E-8 Joint STARS 4x E-2C Hawkeye 9x MV-22 Osprey (USMC) 4x EA-6B Prowler (USMC) RQ-4 Global Hawk RC-135 Rivet Joint U-2S Dragon Lady C-17 Globemaster III C-130 Hercules RQ-170 Sentinel 4x CH-53E Super Stallion (USMC) **Air Bases:** Ahmed Al-Jaber Air Base, Kuwait Al-Udeid Air Base, Qatar Al-Minhad Air Base, UAE Ellsworth Air Force Base, South Dakota, US Dyess Air Force Base, Texas, US Incirlik Air Base, Turkey (from August 2015)	

Country	Combat Assets	Non-Combat Assets	Personnel
United States (cont)	**Maritime (cont):** USS *Makin Island* (LHD 8) USS *San Diego* (LPD 22) USS *Comstock* (LSD 45) **Land:** 4,250 troops (3,550 in Iraq; 700 in Syria)		

Note on Nomenclature

There are numerous ways of referring to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria/Al-Sham (ISIS) at various points of its historical evolution, and many of these are informed by the political preferences of various actors. While the editors acknowledge all of these viewpoints, and the perceived political connotations of each term, for ease and consistency this occasional paper uses the acronym 'ISIS' throughout, except where it is necessary to identify the group at different points in its history, when the contemporary term employed by the group itself is used.

I. Introduction: Countering ISIS – A Military Operation to Buy Time

Elizabeth Quintana

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) was propelled up the international agenda in June 2014 following its seizure of Mosul, the second-largest city in Iraq, and by its siege of tens of thousands of Yazidis in and around Mount Sinjar later that summer. It has effectively exploited deep discontent among local Sunni Arabs at the sustained repressive treatment they have suffered under the regimes in Baghdad and Damascus, as a result of which it has been able to benefit from a degree of consent from the populations under its control. The group's ability to manoeuvre quickly over large expanses of territory, its employment of fear as a tactic, its accrual and exploitation of vast sources of wealth, and its effective use of social media as a communications and recruitment tool have turned it into one of the most successful terrorist organisations of recent years. It is also noteworthy for its focus on taking and holding territory, with a view to entrenching a new state (in the form of a caliphate) and thereby altering the regional and, ultimately, global order. In combination with the popularity of its narrative of victimhood among Sunnis in the Middle East and beyond, these traits have made ISIS extremely difficult to counter, requiring a strategy that addresses each of the factors of its success synergistically.

In September 2014, following a summer of ISIS gains, the US proposed what President Barack Obama called a 'comprehensive strategy to degrade and ultimately destroy the terrorist group'.[1] This 'Iraq-first' strategy would be prosecuted by a US-led coalition comprising many of the states that had previously participated in operations in Iraq and Afghanistan but that, crucially, also incorporated many key regional powers. The coalition would focus on nine lines of effort:[2]

- Supporting effective governance in Iraq
- Denying ISIS safe haven (through air strikes and the efforts of local forces on the ground)
- Building partner capacity
- Enhancing intelligence collection on ISIS
- Disrupting ISIS's finances
- Exposing ISIS's true nature (countering its narrative and sophisticated strategic-communications efforts)

1. David Hudson, 'President Obama: "We Will Degrade and Ultimately Destroy ISIS', White House blog, 10 September 2014, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2014/09/10/president-obama-we-will-degrade-and-ultimately-destroy-isil>, accessed 25 September 2015.
2. White House, 'FACTSHEET: The Administration's Strategy to Counter the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and the Updated FY 2015 Overseas Contingency Operations Request', first published 7 November 2014.

- Disrupting the flow of foreign fighters (thereby also diminishing the domestic risk posed by returning foreign fighters)
- Protecting the homeland (identifying potential terrorists and countering radicalisation and violent extremism)
- Humanitarian support.

The military operation (primarily to deny ISIS a safe haven) was designed to degrade and contain ISIS in order to buy time in which the political and governance strands could take effect. Yet the latter remain underdeveloped – and is largely unsuccessful in the case of Iraq. Such a strategy is not even possible in relation to Syria, where there is currently no credible political partner for the West.

The passing of time has brought its own challenges. The situation both on the ground and at the negotiating tables of the international community has been greatly complicated over the last twelve months by the shifting patterns of groups within Iraq and Syria, as well as the intervention of external powers – within and outside of the coalition – in ways that run counter to the coalition's efforts.

This introductory chapter explores the political landscape of the conflicts in Syria and Iraq, how this has changed since September 2014 and the difficulties this poses for the military aspect of the counter-ISIS strategy. After outlining the military campaign, focusing in particular on the UK's contribution, it goes on to assess the significant challenge of ensuring cohesion in a coalition of more than sixty countries,[3] in the pursuit of a wide-ranging strategy over an extended period of time – possibly up to twenty years, according to the latest estimates of senior US military personnel. In military terms, the current objective is to degrade ISIS with an eye on its destruction by military means. However, it might be more realistic to accept a policy of open-ended containment (without a view to the group's *destruction* as a military force), suppressing ISIS until a political solution is found in Syria. This does not, however, mean that there is nothing more that coalition members can do beyond their current efforts, and the chapter concludes with options for ways in which the UK can augment its contribution.

A Changing Landscape

In the year since President Obama first set out the strategy, we have witnessed an ebb and flow in the fortunes of the coalition, both militarily and politically.

ISIS is an exceptionally clever and brutal organisation but it is not invincible: despite its spectacular victories in Mosul and in towns across Anbar province in 2014, as well as its gains more recently in Ramadi, Tadmur and Al-Qaryatayn, it has also suffered losses in Kobane, Tal Afar, Kirkuk and Tikrit, and in the areas around Mosul – most notably, the strategically important

3. Only about a quarter of these countries are participating in air strikes against ISIS. See House of Commons Library, 'ISIS/Daesh: The Military Response in Iraq and Syria', 9 September 2015, <http://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/SN06995>, accessed 30 September 2015.

Mosul Dam. Nevertheless, the organisation remains agile, targeting strategic towns and military bases as well as dams, reservoirs, and oil and gas fields. Most recently, it has turned westward in Syria, seeking further gains there in response to losses in Iraq. It is now gaining ground around Aleppo in the northwest, while in Iraq the group is holding firm in the western province of Anbar.

This speaks to one of the fundamental difficulties of countering ISIS: the conflict rages across two countries of differing political and security environments that demand a differentiated military effort and distinct political solutions, if such solutions are to be found at all. In Syria, where an array of armed groups has been fighting against the regime of President Bashar Al-Assad since 2011, there is no standout actor on the ground to partner with, while the US, among others, has so far refused to collaborate with Assad against ISIS. In Iraq, the government under Prime Minister Haider Al-Abadi is, at least, a partner the coalition can work with. However, the provision of extensive coalition support to any of the armed groups – such as the Kurdish Peshmerga and various Shia militias – that have come to the defence of Iraq since summer 2014 risks fatally undermining the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the country.

The military picture has also been distorted as time has passed by the actions of Russia and Iran. While both stand outside the formal coalition of sixty-three states, and undoubtedly have different motivations for fighting ISIS, in some respects their activities are in alignment with those of the coalition campaign. Iranian Revolutionary Guard personnel, for instance, have been heavily involved in organising Shia militias in the recapture of Tikrit and Baiji from ISIS.

However, in other ways Iranian and Russian involvement greatly complicates the coalition's military task. For example, both are actively providing support to the Assad regime.[4] Their ongoing support enables the regime to fight not only Salafist groups like ISIS and Jabhat Al-Nusra, but also the more moderate armed groups the coalition is seeking to support. In addition, Russia's recent deployment of ground forces, aircraft and air-defence systems to Syria can be understood as an attempt to protect its own interests there,[5] especially as the US increasingly attacks ISIS on its western flank – near Russia's only permanent naval base in the Mediterranean at Tartus. The presence of these air-defence systems seemingly has little to do with ISIS, which has no air power to speak of, and so one might surmise that they are instead a deterrent to the US and its fellow coalition members should they entertain the idea of regime change in Syria. Moreover, in a move that US Secretary of Defense Ash Carter called 'tantamount … to pouring gasoline on the fire',[6] on 30 September Russia began its own air strikes in Syria, with a

4. A more detailed discussion of the intentions and actions of both Iran and Russia is available in the first RUSI occasional paper assessing the counter-ISIS campaign. See Ali M Ansari, 'Iran' and Igor Sutyagin, 'Russia', in Jonathan Eyal and Elizabeth Quintana (eds), 'Inherently Unresolved: Regional Politics and the Counter-ISIS Campaign', RUSI Occasional Paper, September 2015.
5. Dan Williams, 'Russia Sending Advanced Air Defences to Syria: Sources', *Reuters*, 11 September 2015; Helene Cooper and Michael R Gordon, 'Russia Buildup Seen as Fanning Flames in Syria', *New York Times*, 29 September 2015.
6. Shaun Walker et al., 'US Accuses Russia of "Throwing Gasoline on the Fire" of Syrian Civil War', *Guardian*, 1 October 2015.

spokesperson for President Vladimir Putin admitting that it is not only targeting ISIS, but other armed groups opposed to Assad as well.[7]

Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia and Turkey – two members of the coalition – are supplying different Sunni militias in Syria with weapons and funds,[8] outside of their respective contributions to the coalition. Furthermore, following the Shia Houthi advance in Yemen in early 2015, Saudi Arabia – along with eight other regional states – switched its focus and its operational power to the threat on its southern border.[9] In late July, Turkey pursued its own domestic agenda when it began conducting air strikes against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), under the cover of strikes against ISIS.[10]

As time has passed, therefore, the situation on the ground has become increasingly complex, which has implications not only for efforts to find a durable *political* settlement in Syria and possibly Iraq, but also for the military campaign against ISIS.

The Military Counter-Terrorism Campaign

In early September, the Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Martin Dempsey, warned that the campaign against the group has become 'tactically stalemated', especially in Iraq where fighting continues over Ramadi and Baiji.[11] This followed the assessment, a month earlier, of General Ray Odierno, then Chief of Staff of the US Army, that while the air campaign had blunted ISIS's offensives, the provision of more support on the ground – possibly through embedding Western troops with Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) units – would be needed if the stalemate is to be broken.[12] Meanwhile, the flow of foreign fighters to ISIS has continued unabated.

The Key Question: Boots on the Ground?

Ultimately, the coalition's military objectives – to degrade and destroy ISIS as a militarily capable force – can only be achieved by ground forces. Air power may create the conditions for effective ground-force operations but it cannot substitute for them.[13] However, the rebuilding of the ISF will be a long-term project, and Kurdish forces are now stretched and risk the wrath of their Turkish neighbour and of local Arab populations if they continue to take ground. Absent a

7. Kareem Shaheen, Matthew Weaver and Saeed Kamali Dehghan, 'US-Backed Rebels Say They Have Been Hit by Russian Airstrikes', *Guardian*, 1 October 2015.
8. Recent evidence suggests Ahrar Al-Sham is among the latest groups to receive Turkish support. See Mariam Karouny, 'Resilient Insurgent Group Ahrar Al-Sham to Play Bigger Role in Syria', *Reuters*, 22 September 2015.
9. Martin Reardon, 'Saudi Arabia Draws the Line in Yemen', *Al Jazeera*, 26 March 2015. For further discussion of the Gulf States' motivations and actions, see Michael Stephens, 'The Gulf States', in Eyal and Quintana (eds), 'Inherently Unresolved: Regional Politics and the Counter-ISIS Campaign'.
10. *BBC News*, 'Turkey's Air Force Hits IS and PKK in Syria and Iraq', 26 July 2015.
11. Carla Babb, 'Top US General: Islamic State Fight "Stalemated"', *Voice of America*, 9 September 2015.
12. *Ibid*.
13. The deployment of coalition troops on the ground as well as the use of air power in the counter-ISIS campaign are explored in this occasional paper in chapters by Peter Quentin and Justin Bronk, respectively.

new Sunni Awakening, there are insufficient numbers of effective ground forces to reclaim the territory currently held by ISIS and there is, so far, no appetite at all in Western countries once again to deploy combat troops in the region.

There are very good reasons why Western ground forces should not be used for the foreseeable future. Iraqi Foreign Minister Ibrahim Al-Jaafari recently explicitly rejected the need for Western troops,[14] and such forces would unlikely be popular with the majority of the Iraqi population. Moreover, their use would play directly into the apocalyptic narrative that ISIS employs. Nor is it entirely obvious that Western forces could operate smoothly, or ethically, alongside some of the Shia militias which are also fighting ISIS. Only re-trained and sustained Iraqi forces can hold any ground regained in Iraq over the long term, and only some combination of Syrian forces can hold any ground regained in Syria.[15]

Of course, the political calculus in Western countries might change as the region becomes ever-more volatile and dangerous to Western interests. Speculation about 'safe zones' inside Syria or a buffer zone along the Syrian-Turkish border, both of which would have to be closely defended along their ground perimeters and backed up from the air, are not entirely fanciful.[16] These might be the first instance in which significant numbers of Western or NATO troops operate on the ground. However, the situation would have to deteriorate a good deal further before that might appear as the least-worst option – and a UN Security Council resolution would likely be required before this could happen.

Furthermore, and as noted above, foreign troops such as those from Iran and Russia are already in theatre. Certainly, the dangers of getting drawn into a proxy war between Russian-backed forces of Assad – supported in other ways by Iran – and Western-backed opposition forces with ambiguous Turkish support have loomed larger over recent weeks. All these factors make it less likely that Western ground forces will be committed in this war; however, they also undermine the political status quo that the current, more limited level of operations is designed to support.

Light-Footprint Counter-Terrorism

As the main focus of the military effort to deny ISIS safe haven, air operations have been the highest-profile element of the campaign. Less attention has been given to other components, such as the delivery of train-and-equip programmes to local forces including the ISF and Peshmerga in Iraq. The coalition is also channelling some of its efforts in fighting the 'battle of

14. John Irish, 'Iraq Says Winning Battle against Islamic State, Wants More Bombing', *Reuters*, 25 September 2015.
15. It is worth noting the continued insistence of Russia – one of the key players in Syria, especially in the wake of its own military intervention – that Assad's military is the only legitimate force in Syria. Jeff Mason and Dennis Dyomkin, 'Obama, Putin Spar over Syria', *Reuters*, 29 September 2015.
16. No-fly zones are also on the table in order to allow coalition forces to target ISIS in northwest Syria but the presence of Russian air-defence systems would complicate their implementation.

the narrative' (exposing ISIS's true nature) through military organisations, primarily through a US Strategic Command working group, led by the UK.[17]

Military personnel are also contributing to the other lines of effort, such as disrupting ISIS's financing and enhancing intelligence collection on the group. The latter is crucial, not only in facilitating military and political activity *vis-à-vis* Iraq and Syria, but also in enabling broader counter-terrorism activity. This is potentially very important, given that the threat picture in relation to returning fighters and those inspired by ISIS has worsened significantly. UK intelligence agencies, for example, have foiled six terrorist plots in the year to September 2015 alone.[18] With around 700 British citizens thought to have travelled to the Middle East to fight, according to the latest UK government figures,[19] there is concern that these fighters may return radicalised and with the intention of launching an attack on the UK.[20] In recent weeks, both France and Australia have announced their respective decisions to extend air strikes into Syria, citing the threat posed by ISIS to their own countries.[21]

The UK Contribution

The UK fell in behind the US strategy at both the political and military levels with a series of announcements from September 2014. The government has been at pains to point out that its military action is only one element, with its contribution otherwise including the provision of aid to refugees and the internally displaced, and support to regional partners in identifying ISIS funders and in undermining the group's production and distribution of oil.

Militarily, the UK is now making the second-largest contribution to the air component. However, in line with most other coalition partners, at the time of writing the UK is only conducting bombing operations against ISIS in the Iraqi theatre and not across the border in Syria (although it carries out airborne intelligence and surveillance missions over both countries). Although when this decision was made in September 2014 ISIS was more immediately successful in Iraqi territory, there could be little doubt that its political and military centre of gravity was in Syria around Raqqa and Dayr-Az-Zawr. While this caveat made little operational sense, it was regarded as a political and legal necessity: UK assistance had been requested by a sovereign power, Iraq, whereas operations over Syria are legally more problematic. This distinction did not, however, prevent the UK government from authorising, in August 2015, its first-ever targeted strike against a British citizen, who was based in Syria at the time – a highly controversial act

17. The 'battle of the narrative' is the subject of the chapter by Ewan Lawson in this occasional paper.
18. *BBC News*, 'MI5 Boss Warns of Technology Terror Risk', 17 September 2015.
19. Home Office, 'Home Secretary: We Must Work Together to Defeat Terrorism', 18 June 2015, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/home-secretary-we-must-work-together-to-defeat-terrorism>, accessed 25 September 2015.
20. British counter-terrorism efforts are discussed in depth in this occasional paper by Raffaello Pantucci.
21. Anna Henderson and Eliza Borrello, 'Australia Confirms Air Strikes in Syria, Accepts Additional 12000 Syrian Refugees', *ABC News*, 9 September 2015; *France 24*, 'France to Launch Airstrikes "in Coming Weeks"', 16 September 2015.

subsequently justified by the prime minister as 'necessary and proportionate for the individual self-defence of the UK'.[22]

Notwithstanding this major caveat regarding the area of operations, the UK's military contribution to the coalition currently comprises eight Tornado GR4s and a supporting Voyager tanker; ten Reaper remotely piloted air systems; Rivet Joint signals intelligence aircraft; two Sentinel wide-area surveillance platforms; and two E-3D airborne warning and control systems.[23] In addition, the UK has bolstered its commitment of personnel to the regional Combined Air Operations Centre at Al-Udeid.

On the ground in Iraq, the UK has taken the lead in the counter-IED team, and it has deployed 275 personnel, including trainers for train-and-equip programmes, as well as planners and exchange officers in headquarters and attachés.[24] A small number of special forces has also been deployed.[25] Most of these efforts are critically dependent on the facilities and skills of the UK's intelligence services.

The Greatest Hurdle: Long-Term Coalition Cohesion

The problem for the coalition is that while destroying ISIS is the imperative, this will nevertheless take some time to achieve. On the military side, the coalition is therefore playing for time, containing and degrading ISIS while the other lines of effort – such as the disruption of financing, the reform of political institutions and the building of local forces to take and hold ground – take effect. However, provision of support to any forces on the ground in Syria is likely to complicate a deepening civil war that may also spill back over the border into Iraq. Training select forces in Iraq, meanwhile, is proving a slow process – as confirmed by General Dempsey's assessment that the process will require up to twenty years.[26] Moreover, there remain fundamental questions about why the ISF crumbled in the face of ISIS's advance last summer – questions that go far beyond technical capability and touch upon the political appetite to fight. This 'moral component' is essential to military capacity but also takes time, and a more comprehensive approach, to create when building partner capacity.[27] However, such an extended timescale for the strategy makes it extremely vulnerable to the fluid nature of the conflict and the various regional 'moving parts'.

22. Prime Minister's Office, 'Syria: Refugees and Counter-Terrorism – Prime Minister's Statement', 7 September 2015, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/syria-refugees-and-counter-terrorism-prime-ministers-statement>, accessed 30 September 2015.
23. A full list of UK military assets deployed in theatre is available in the Table of Military Assets in this occasional paper.
24. Kathleen J McInnis, 'Coalition Contributions to Countering the Islamic State', Congressional Research Service, August 2015, p. 4.
25. Ben Farmer, 'SAS "Took Part in Abu Sayyaf Raid in Syria"', *Daily Telegraph*, 9 August 2015.
26. Jim Garamone, 'Dempsey Makes Case for Long-Term Effort to Defeat ISIL', US Department of Defense, 17 August 2015, <http://www.defense.gov/News-Article-View/Article/613782/dempsey-makes-case-for-long-term-effort-to-defeat-isil>, accessed 25 September 2015.
27. For a more detailed discussion of the 'moral component' when building partner capacity, see Quentin, 'The Land Component'.

While the current strategy is based on an expectation of eventual success – defined as the destruction of ISIS as a military force – it may therefore be more realistic to assume that the strategy will become one of open-ended containment, limited to the degrading of ISIS in Iraq and Syria in order to limit its spread in and beyond the region. In this case, 'success' may be the reduction of the ISIS phenomenon to something that regional players and Western powers can tolerate until the Syrian civil war is resolved.

Such a strategy of open-ended containment would rest on the hope that ISIS would collapse along its own fault lines or suffer the same fate as its predecessor, Al-Qa'ida in Iraq, which generated such resentment among those under its control that it laid the groundwork for the Sunni Awakening that ultimately destroyed its hold – and in the case of ISIS, resentment might also be fuelled by discontent over the inadequacy of the services it provides as a 'state'. Alternatively, it might be hoped that the constellation of forces across the region will eventually alter in some way, creating ground forces of sufficient strength, capacity and unity to destroy ISIS militarily. This is not at all an appealing strategy for the US-led coalition – particularly if credible ISIS franchises start to appear elsewhere – but unless the current strategy changes, it may nevertheless emerge as the default position.

The Future of the UK's Involvement

Realistically, the UK – a junior partner in the coalition – cannot induce a strategic step change. However, collectively, coalition partners could throw additional weight behind this effort and there are a number of areas where the UK could bolster its contribution, should it choose to do so:

- **The UK could further strengthen its diplomatic efforts.** Military action will be important in defeating ISIS, but a political resolution with regards to the administration in Syria – as with Iraq – is an essential first step. Discussions over Assad's future represent a red flag to most stakeholders (particularly non-Sunni communities and external partners such as Iran and Russia) and therefore block any sensible talks. While the UK will remain in a supporting role to the US in terms of diplomacy, it could strongly support the UN process, led by special envoy Staffan de Mistura, and push for a resolution of the Syrian conflict that is suitable for all of Syria's communities
- **The UK could expand air strikes to Syria.** A number of countries (including Canada, France and Australia) have already expanded their missions to cover Syria, and an expansion of the UK's Operation *Shader* to include Syria would signal the government's determination to contribute to the containment of ISIS. While the RAF's contribution will not make much difference to the coalition's overall strike capability over Syria, it would nevertheless provide the Combined Force Air Component Commander (CFACC) with a greater range of options
- **The UK could invest more heavily in counter-IED training.** The UK has developed an outstanding counter-IED and forensic capability during operations over the last decade in Iraq and Afghanistan. Its role leading the dedicated coalition task force is a vital one, given that vehicle-borne IEDs have been central to ISIS's success in 2015. Increasing the ability of troops on the ground to deal with such weapons would further undermine ISIS's

freedom of manoeuvre, making it much more difficult for it to launch heavy, co-ordinated attacks against government forces, anti-ISIS militias or populated areas

- **The UK could do more in long-term brigade-level mentoring and in the train-and-equip programme for Iraq.** This would support the immediate build-up of professional forces and strengthen the cadre of military officers over the longer term, although current train-and-equip efforts in Iraq are hampered by the low throughput of ISF trainees rather than a paucity of trainers
- **The UK could expand its contribution to the full spectrum of intelligence-gathering and analysis capabilities.** Such capabilities are undoubtedly the UK's greatest practical contribution to the coalition effort, in terms of both collection and analysis. In addition, these missions have further benefit in terms of domestic counter-terrorism efforts
- **The UK could take the lead in a more co-ordinated effort on financial intelligence (FININT)**, playing a greater role in helping to identify and squeeze ISIS's finances. RUSI analysts have pointed out how the UK could do more in partnership with the City of London, the UK's financial centre, to improve the tracking of foreign fighters.[28] Much more could also be done to restrict regional sources of finance and disrupt illegal trade conducted along Syria's borders
- **Plans for addressing refugee flows in the region, and Europe, should be explicitly addressed.** The pressure of refugee flows from the Middle East towards Europe will be a long-term phenomenon, regardless of whether a series of immediate peace settlements can be reached. There will also likely be a generational legacy where people seek to escape post-war societies once they have the means to do so. The UK could push for much more systematic planning to cope with this phenomenon within the coalition itself as well as within multinational institutions such as the EU and UN.

Inherently Unresolved: The Military Operation against ISIS

This occasional paper, the second of two exploring international efforts to counter ISIS,[29] examines three key elements of the military aspect – the air campaign, the land component and the battle of the narrative – with each chapter considering the broader coalition effort before focusing on the UK contribution. The final chapter then assesses in detail the domestic terrorist threat posed by ISIS to the UK and its response to this threat so far.

28. Tom Keatinge, 'Identifying Foreign Terrorist Fighters: The Role of Public-Private Partnership, Information Sharing and Financial Intelligence', RUSI and International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague, July 2015.
29. The first is Eyal and Quintana (eds), 'Inherently Unresolved: Regional Politics and the Counter-ISIS Campaign'.

II. The Air Campaign

Justin Bronk

Large-scale air strikes by the US-led multinational coalition against ISIS have been underway since August 2014.[1] Since the strikes began there has been a heated political debate, on both sides of the Atlantic, as to whether air strikes alone will prove sufficient to enable the West's Iraqi and Kurdish allies to destroy ISIS on the ground in Iraq and Syria.[2] Whilst Western leaders continue to insist that, with time, a train-and-equip programme supported by sustained air power will 'degrade and destroy' ISIS,[3] there has been a marked lack of progress on the ground. The lethal toll claimed by the coalition is high; according to the US Central Command (CENTCOM), by August 2015 more than 10,600 separate targets had been hit and 10,000–15,000 ISIS fighters killed by US air strikes alone. However, recent setbacks such as the fall of Ramadi in Iraq and the large-scale Palmyra offensive in Syria (May 2015), along with the excruciatingly slow progress of Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) and Peshmerga offensives to recapture lost territory, suggest little strategic success.

Table 1: Total Targets Damaged or Destroyed by Coalition Aircraft during Operation *Inherent Resolve* as at 7 August 2015.

Target Classification	Damaged/Destroyed
Tanks	119
HMMWVs (Humvees)	340
Staging areas	510
Buildings	3,262
Fighting positions	2,577
Oil infrastructure	196
Other targets	3,680
Total	**10,684**

Source: CENTCOM CCCI.

1. The coalition members participating in air strikes against ISIS include Australia, Bahrain, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Jordan, Morocco, the Netherlands, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom and the United States. Iran has also conducted air strikes in co-operation with military forces on the ground in Iraq but not as a recognised coalition member. Also outside the coalition, Russia has insisted that it is targeting ISIS, as well as other armed opposition groups, in its air strikes in Syria.
2. See, for example, Adam Chandler, 'For the First Time, Americans Support Ground Troops against ISIS', *The Atlantic,* 19 February 2015; Lizzie Dearden, 'Tony Blair: "Ground Troops are Necessary to Fight Islamic State – Diplomacy Will Not Defeat Them"', *Independent*, 22 September 2014.
3. US Central Command, 'Coalition United to Defeat Daesh', Combined Joint Task Force – Operation *Inherent Resolve* news release, May 2015, <http://www.centcom.mil/en/news/articles/coalition-united-to-defeat-daesh>, accessed 11 August 2015.

On the ground in Iraq and Syria, the refrain from the ISF and the Peshmerga is the same: the air strikes are vital, but they are far too few and they take far too long to call in, resulting in slow responses to lightning-fast assaults by ISIS suicide bombers and heavily armed militants.[4]

From a technical standpoint, however, coalition air forces are well suited to making a real difference against ISIS due to their experience and tactics developed over the previous decade or so in Afghanistan and Iraq. Western military aircrew have extensive experience of providing air support against insurgent forces that conduct concentrated surprise attacks and then melt back into the population, relying on improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and snipers to make recapturing ground costly and slow. Militant groups in Iraq and the Taliban in Afghanistan regularly employed similar tactics against Coalition/International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) forces. The major differences in the current campaign are the large amounts of territory that ISIS controls as a quasi-state, the quantity and quality of heavy weaponry it can field since the Iraqi Army's disastrous routs at Mosul and Ramadi, in June 2014 and May 2015 respectively, and the limited military capability of local ground forces compared with ISAF and US-led Coalition forces.

ISIS and Coalition Military Capabilities

When ISIS first exploded out of the ruins of Syria and then into Iraq in the summer of 2014, it quickly captured large quantities of Iraqi Army heavy equipment, including M1 Abrams main battle tanks, thousands of up-armoured US-built Humvee (HMMWV) trucks, heavy artillery and much more. This gave the group the ability to concentrate heavy equipment and firepower in its operations, as seen at the Mosul Dam and Kobane. However, such concentrations of heavy military equipment are visible from the air with modern sensor technology and are vulnerable to precision munitions such as the ubiquitous GPS-guided Joint Direct Attack Munition (JDAM) and laser-guided Paveway bombs, as well as the RAF's dual-mode seeker Brimstone anti-armour missile. During the initial US-led strike waves against fixed targets and known equipment concentrations in Iraq and Syria, which included sorties with the stealthy F-22 Raptor and heavy B-1B Lancer bomber, the capability of ISIS to outgun its opponents in conventional military engagements was severely diminished, as evidenced by its return to more traditional insurgent tactics such as the use of suicide bombers and snipers.[5] However, the capture of heavy military hardware has been an outcome of ISIS's battlefield victories, but not a fundamental cause of its battlefield prowess. Thus, destroying it has limited the level of extra firepower that the group can bring to bear during offensives, but it has not significantly degraded its battlefield flexibility, co-ordination and leadership capabilities.

The ISIS response to the threat from Western air power has been to disperse and conceal equipment and blend in with civilians when not directly on the attack – an approach also seen in Iraq from 2003 to 2011, and Afghanistan from 2006 to 2014. While on the offensive, they use tactical surprise and take full advantage of the fluid, confusing battlespace where both sides use

4. Isabel Coles and Maggie Fick, 'Kurds Report More Chlorine Attacks, Iraq Pauses Tikrit Offensive', *Reuters*, 16 March 2015.
5. See, for example, Sameer N Yacoub, 'ISIS Advances into Iraq's Ramadi amid Wave of Suicide Attacks', *Reuters*, 15 May 2015.

the same mismatch of Russian- and US-made equipment, making discernment of friend from foe extremely challenging – a situation exacerbated by the limited number of joint terminal attack controllers (JTACs) or Forward Air Controllers to co-ordinate air support from the ground. Furthermore, in the political context of Western publics that are wary of messy, discretionary campaigns in the Middle East, avoiding collateral damage to the civilian population or friendly Iraqi and Kurdish forces is not only a moral issue but a strategic priority. According to military personnel involved in the operation, legitimate ISIS targets have often not been engaged to avoid even the smallest risk of inflicting civilian casualties.[6]

The effects of this can be seen in the number of RAF air strikes, since the UK only began strike operations at the very end of September 2014 when fixed targets had been largely wiped out and ISIS had adopted dispersion and concealment tactics. According to official reports released by the Ministry of Defence (MoD) reports, between October 2014 and the end of July 2015, RAF Tornados conducted at least 200 air strikes, with a further 132 strikes launched by Reaper drones.[7] This compares poorly with the US figures outlined above, released by the US Department of Defense.[8] As a result, there has been some criticism levelled at the UK for its comparatively small contribution to the air campaign in terms of aircraft provided and targets hit as part of the wider coalition (see Table 1 on page 11).[9]

However, it is important to note that the RAF's Tornado and Reaper fleets are particularly suited to the mission set they are required to undertake in Iraq. The Tornado GR4 can cover ground fast and carries either the Litening III targeting and reconnaissance pod or the RAPTOR wide-area-surveillance pod alongside Paveway IV bombs and Brimstone missiles – which are both extremely accurate and low-explosive yield weapons in their respective classes. It also has a crew of two, allowing the pilot and the weapons-systems operator to work together to analyse sensor inputs and put weapons on target with maximum precision, thereby minimising collateral damage. These attributes and equipment, along with aircrews with extensive experience of operating in the region against insurgent groups, make for a formidably capable asset for hunting and destroying elusive targets in the expanse of the Iraqi desert.

At the same time, the MQ-9 Reaper provides extended loitering time over contested areas or troops in contact for hours at a time, providing invaluable intelligence and guiding coalition aircraft in for strikes, as well as making its own strikes with Hellfire missiles. The armed tactical reconnaissance capabilities of the Tornado and Reaper are especially valuable in this campaign

6. Author interviews with RAF aircrew and targeting/intelligence officers involved in operations against ISIS in Iraq, London, May and June 2015.
7. Ministry of Defence, 'British Forces Air Strikes in Iraq: Monthly List', <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/british-forces-air-strikes-in-iraq-monthly-list>, 22 September 2015.
8. US Department of Defense, 'Operation Inherent Resolve Targeted Operations against ISIL Terrorists', Special Report: Operation Inherent Resolve, <http://www.defense.gov/home/features/2014/0814_iraq/>, 11 August 2015.
9. See, for example, Larisa Brown, 'UK's Commitment to Crushing ISIS? Just One Strike a Day: MPs Set to Slate Britain's "Tiny" Role in Fight Against Jihadists as "Deeply Concerning" and "Unacceptable"', *Daily Mail*, 5 February 2015; and Simon Jenkins, 'Britain's Involvement in the New Iraq War is a Doomed and Dangerous Gesture', *Guardian*, 25 September 2014.

given that most strikes are dynamically targeted – that is, targets of opportunity are found and strikes are co-ordinated 'on the fly' via communications and data links with the Combined Air and Space Operations Center (CAOC) at Al-Udeid Air Base – rather than relying on pre-planned target information.

The strike aircraft themselves are supported by the RAF's new and highly capable A330 MRTT Voyager air-refuelling tanker as well as R1 Sentinel and E-3D Sentry AWACS ISTAR assets. These assets have been conducting over 30 per cent of coalition intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) missions according to the defence secretary,[10] with the US and France the only other major contributors of this asset class.

Given this force, the significant lesson is that strike numbers have been severely limited by the lack of suitable targets rather than available assets: the ISTAR assets, Tornados and Reapers together are capable of a far greater strike rate than that achieved since October 2014. The RAF does not have political clearance to attack targets within Syria, although Reapers do conduct reconnaissance there – and, controversially, an RAF Reaper was employed in a targeted strike against British foreign fighter Reyaad Khan in Syria on 21 August 2015, in what the government justified as a necessary counter-terrorist act.[11] RAF aircraft have otherwise played no part in the intensive air strikes in support of Kurdish defenders near the embattled town of Kobane during the three-month siege, with this support instead being provided by other coalition partners, particularly the US.

In For the Long Haul

Sustainability of effort is crucial for this campaign, especially for non-US coalition partners with comparatively small combat air and ISTAR fleets, since bombing alone will not destroy ISIS nor roll back its territory gains, and there are no signs of a quick victory on the ground. The RAF contribution is designed for a long campaign with the basing of eight Tornado GR4 aircraft at Akrotiri in Cyprus intended to ensure two aircraft are available for missions over Iraq on any given day, and that the three remaining Tornado squadrons in the RAF (drawn from a front-line pool of forty-one) can sustain a rotation of fresh aircraft and trained personnel. By contrast, there are signs that many of the nations contributing F-16s, which have sent similar numbers of aircraft to join the operation but from smaller total fleet pools, will be unable to sustain their current level of effort in the long term.

Small precision-guided munitions such as the US small-diameter bomb and British Brimstone missile have emerged as a clear success story, demonstrating outstanding accuracy with minimal

10. Michael Fallon, speech given at the RUSI Air Power Conference 2015, Church House, London, 16 July 2015.
11. A second British foreign fighter, Ruhul Amin, was also killed in the strike. See David Cameron's statement to the House of Commons on refugees and counter-terrorism in Syria, 7 September 2015, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/syria-refugees-and-counter-terrorism-prime-ministers-statement>, accessed 22 September 2015.

danger of collateral damage.[12] Their dual-mode seekers have allowed targets from main battle tanks to shipping containers repurposed as command centres to be engaged with pinpoint accuracy and good effect. At the same time, the small warhead means that targets previously considered too close to civilians or allied forces have been successfully attacked without causing collateral damage.

However, the drawback to the coalition's employment of high-precision weaponry is cost. For example, the ballpark unit costs for RAF munitions are £30,000 for a Paveway IV, £80,000 for a dual-mode Brimstone missile and around £70,000 for a Hellfire missile.[13] This means that the total cost of expended munitions in known RAF strikes between October 2014 and the end of April 2015 is over £13 million, or around £60,000 per target destroyed. The most commonly engaged targets have been 'technicals' (pickup trucks with rear-mounted heavy machine guns) and machine-gun positions.

So while the coalition is contributing to the attrition of ISIS forces, the cost curve is not on its side in the long term if tactical successes cannot be turned into strategic gains. The US, conducting operations on a much larger scale, has spent over $1.5 billion on air strikes alone in its campaign.[14] Alongside the costs of fuel and munitions, long-duration combat patrols by coalition aircraft are severely depreciating critical assets through airframe fatigue – especially ISTAR platforms such as the E-3 AWACS. Of course, the multi-trillion-dollar cost of the campaigns post 2003 in Iraq and post 2006 in Afghanistan shows that conducting a counter-insurgency campaign with large-scale troop deployments is even more expensive. However, if the losses inflicted on ISIS by air strikes do not translate into recaptured territory on a significant scale for the ISF and the Peshmerga, then the campaign risks becoming another expensive lesson that, despite their best efforts and intentions, expert personnel and superb equipment in the air cannot by themselves deliver strategic victory.

The Wider Picture Going Forwards

When the Iraqi Army disintegrated at Mosul under ISIS's initial attack, there was a great deal of criticism of the US for leaving in 2011 without ensuring Iraq had an air force capable of providing effective close air support.[15] However, the lack of strategic success achieved by the might of the US Air Force, Navy and coalition members – as well as the indecisive results of sustained Syrian Air Force operations against all rebel groups during the Syrian civil war so far – suggest that Iraqi F-16s or Super Tucanos would have made little difference to the outcome. The scale of US air operations – and their limited strategic impact in the absence of a more effective ground component – should also be kept in mind when assessing the political decisions around force levels committed to Iraq and potentially Syria by the UK. Whilst the RAF provides superb

12. Kashmira Gander, 'Iraq Air Strikes: What are Brimstone Missiles, and What Can They Do?' *Independent*, 2 October 2014.
13. Author interview with air staff officers, Ministry of Defence, London, 7 July 2015.
14. Rebecca Shabad, 'US Spending $9M a Day in ISIS Fight', *The Hill*, 11 June 2015.
15. See, for example, Hugh Naylor, 'Crippled by Gulf War, Iraq's Air Force Struggles to Repel Advancing Insurgents', *The National*, 1 July 2014.

air support from a tactical standpoint and British participation in strikes is politically important for the coalition as a whole, we should be under no illusions that even a greatly increased effort by the RAF could achieve a strategically decisive outcome in Iraq (or, indeed, in Syria, should the mission be extended).

In order to improve the effectiveness of air power, the international coalition will need to identify, train and equip ground forces, as a viable military component of long-term partners, in order to take and hold ground from ISIS on a large scale. Only then can JTACs and other co-ordination assets, acting in concert with those ground forces, allow air power to be utilised most effectively by enabling and supporting ground troops. This process will be a long one, and will require political will as well as military capability.

However, in order to maintain the pressure on ISIS in the meantime, the UK, US and other partner states will need to ensure that sufficient combat air power and ISR enablers are sustained in theatre over a period that could very well stretch to many years. In the UK, this must be taken into consideration during the forthcoming Strategic Defence and Security Review process when it comes to fast-jet numbers, ISR enablers and upgrades to key platforms such as the E-3D AWACS, which have been over-tasked and underfunded during more than a decade of continuous operations.

III. The Land Component

Peter Quentin

Last summer, while the Iraqi government reeled from the lightning advances of ISIS, withdrawing from Mosul and Tikrit, British Prime Minister David Cameron and other international leaders were taking their own cards off the table. Cameron was explicit: 'Britain is not going to get involved in another war in Iraq. We are not going to be putting boots on the ground. We are not going to be sending in the British Army'.[1] ISIS therefore need not have anticipated a land intervention in Iraq but was instead free to pursue the recently routed Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) to the gates of Baghdad.

Politics, history and plain common sense may have dissuaded policy-makers from returning combat troops to the Iraqi 'quagmire' but, as a result of such guarantees, the land component of the 'Iraq-first' counter-ISIS strategy[2] has been dictated by an economy-of-effort approach ever since, resourcing sparingly and avoiding casualties. This notion of 'smart intervention' or 'leading from behind' through the Building Partner Capacity (BPC) programme is proving complicated, slower and, crucially, less effective and *cost*-effective than anticipated. Absent an alternative counter-ISIS solution, however, this may well represent the least-worst option to manage the threat: to 'contain and degrade', not 'destroy' or 'defeat', in military parlance.[3] Nevertheless, given the enduring potency of the threat and the coalition's inability to 'get it back in the box'[4] within Iraq's borders, let alone within Syria's, bold adjustment to current international efforts on the ground are required, even if they are to avoid placing combat boots on Iraqi soil.[5]

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1. *BBC News*, 'David Cameron Defends "Clear" Iraq Strategy', 18 August 2014.
2. The 'Iraq-first' approach of coalition efforts – partly necessitated by the intractable political situation encapsulated by the ongoing civil war in Syria – and current suspension of training for the Free Syrian Army (FSA) dictates this chapter's focus on Iraq. There are, however, transferrable lessons on the centrality of political allegiance and importance of vetting; appropriate force scaling; conditionality in train-and-equip programmes; and clarity and continuity of support for sponsored forces. Whilst building Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) capacity may be a challenging proposition, it is even more daunting in relation to the FSA, given that the coalition is lacking a coherent force to partner with in Syria and no recent in-country military experience or intelligence presence, let alone a pre-established basing plan from which to operate.
3. Nick Houghton, 'Annual Chief of the Defence Staff Lecture', speech given at RUSI, London, 17 December 2014.
4. This was reportedly the direction given to Department of Defense policy-makers by President Obama soon after ISIS captured Mosul and Tikrit in June 2014. Author interview with senior Department of Defence Official, RUSI, London, 22 January 2015.
5. Missy Ryan and Erin Cunningham, 'U.S. Seeks to Build Lean Iraqi Force to Fight the Islamic State', *Washington Post*, 27 November 2014; Michael Knights, 'No One Talks about Liberating Mosul Anymore', *Foreign Policy*, 11 August 2015.

The Rot

Scepticism surrounding the UK's renewal of intervention in Iraq, under coalition auspices, is reasonable, given the bearing out of warnings made in assessments of Iraqi security from a decade ago:[6]

> Progress has been made towards the building up of the new Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) ... however, the ISF remain too few in number and are insufficiently trained ... we recommend that the United Kingdom and its international partners redouble efforts to build up the ISF ... and ensure that it reflects the whole of Iraqi society, so that it can act as a force of national unity.

During the intervening period, efforts to establish a credible Iraqi security apparatus saw the force rise to around 400,000 personnel at a cost of more than $25 billion (by the most conservative estimates),[7] yet on 10 June 2014 the Mosul garrison of 22,500 ISF personnel fell to just 1,500 insurgents,[8] abandoning much of its equipment along with the 'fantasy' of Iraq's territorial integrity.[9] As one Kurdish official bluntly stated, 'the Iraqi Army took ten years to build and ten hours to collapse'.[10]

This was borne out over the following weeks and, while estimates of the ISF's combat effectiveness vary, it became clear that air power alone would not be sufficient to repel ISIS: considerable 'thickening' of Iraqi ground forces would be required. Yet without an enduring presence on the ground it was impossible to determine what remained or what was required to 'reanimate' the force, and special forces, including those of the UK, were deployed to conduct a survey of ISF capability and provide what was, in effect, a 'training needs analysis'. The resultant reports found not only quantitative shortfalls – for example, of the 7,000–8,000 soldiers in the 7th Iraqi Army Division (Al-Anbar) before the crisis, only 2,000 personnel remained in post[11] – but also qualitative weakness, with only twenty-six of fifty Iraqi brigades considered 'reputable partners'; the rest displayed weaknesses of 'infiltration and leadership and sectarianism', according to the Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Martin Dempsey.[12]

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6. House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, *Foreign Policy Aspects of the War against Terrorism: Response of the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs*, Cm 6590 (London: The Stationery Office, 2005).
7. Ryan and Cunningham, 'U.S. Seeks to Build Lean Iraqi Force to Fight the Islamic State'.
8. Gareth Stansfield, 'Iraq', in Jonathan Eyal and Elizabeth Quintana (eds), 'Inherently Unresolved: Regional Politics and the Counter-ISIS Campaign', RUSI Occasional Paper, September 2015, p. 18.
9. Hakim Al-Zamili, head of the Iraqi parliament's National Security and Defense Committee, stated shortly afterwards that 'we were living in a fantasy. We thought the army could defend the country.' The equivalent of five of fourteen divisions disappeared, shrinking the combat force to as few as 85,000 active troops. See Ryan and Cunningham, 'U.S. Seeks to Build Lean Iraqi Force to Fight the Islamic State'.
10. Comments made by Falah Mustafa Bakir, minister of foreign relations, Kurdistan Regional Government, RUSI, London, 10 December 2014.
11. See Martin E Dempsey, 'Statement of Gen Martin E. Dempsey, USA, Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff', testimony given to the US Senate Armed Services Committee, 'U.S. Policy Towards Iraq and Syria and the Threat Posed by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)', Washington, DC, 16 September 2014.
12. Kirk Semple, 'Iraq Army Woos Deserters Back to War on ISIS', *New York Times*, 28 September 2014.

The ISF did not, in fact, implode unexpectedly in the summer of 2014; it was already a poorly led, hollow and exhausted force. This 'rot' had set in long before summer 2014 – and it had done so from the head down, starting in earnest as Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki sought to consolidate his power base following the 2010 election, even prior to the US withdrawal. His political and sectarian-influenced appointment of senior military personnel and ministry officials quickly led to absent, weak or corrupt leadership throughout the organisation. This resulted, most significantly, in a failure to integrate the Kurdish Peshmerga as well as those Sunni militias which had 'awoken' in 2006–07 as the 'Sons of Iraq' but, as government appointments and salaries failed to materialise, withered from a strength of over 100,000 to near insignificance.[13]

Likewise, corruption of logistic and personnel accounting, ingrained during the years of lucrative US investment, hollowed out the ISF's fighting power. Most notable was the absence of no fewer than 50,000 soldiers who, by the Iraqi government's own admission in November 2014, were found to have been present only on paper but for whom commanders were still drawing salaries. In total, these 'ghost *jundi*' (Arabic slang for soldiers) represented an equivalent shortfall of four divisions of combat troops, at an estimated cost of $380 million per annum.[14] This weakness left the burden of fighting on those clusters of resolve that remained, such as the highly capable Counter-Terrorism Service (CTS), which had been attempting to suppress ISIS in its emerging pockets of territory since 2012. The CTS, supported by the only surviving US advisory programme, has been deployed in almost every major battle since, losing more than a quarter of its manpower as a consequence.[15] Meanwhile, it was reported by those conducting the survey of ISF units that most soldiers had not once fired their rifle in training since the conclusion of the US mission in December 2011.[16]

In summary, by autumn 2014 the ISF was no longer the 380,000-strong secular guarantor of national security which the US had intended to bequeath upon its withdrawal. Instead, it was a hollow, embattled and Shia-dominated rump of indeterminate number (best estimates suggest a total of 109,000 troops, considerably less than a third of the original strength[17]), but undoubtedly lacking sufficient fighting power to expel ISIS, whether alone or even in concert with other Iraqi security actors and international air power.

A reconstituted, rejuvenated ISF was clearly required. Yet, those failed efforts to establish the original force had taken direct investment of at least $25 billion,[18] a vast US-led international

13. Linda Robinson, 'An Assessment of the Counter-ISIL Campaign: One Year after Mosul', testimony given to the House of Representatives Committee on Armed Services, Subcommittee on Emerging Threats and Capabilities, Washington, DC, 24 June 2015, p. 41.
14. As detailed in an investigation announced by Prime Minister Abadi on 30 November 2014 reported in Loveday Morris, 'Investigation Finds 50,000 "Ghost" Soldiers in Iraqi Army, Prime Minister Says', *Washington Post*, 30 November 2014.
15. Robinson, 'An Assessment of the Counter-ISIL Campaign', p. 3.
16. Author interview with senior Central Command official, RUSI, London, 3 July 2015.
17. Michael Knights, 'The Long Haul: Rebooting U.S. Security Cooperation in Iraq', Policy Focus 137, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2015.
18. Ryan and Cunningham, 'U.S. Seeks to Build Lean Iraqi Force to Fight the Islamic State'.

presence that peaked at 176,000 personnel, and more than eight years. Today's efforts are distinctly more modest.

The Rebuild

In December 2014, the US government appropriated $1.62 billion for the Iraq Train and Equip Fund (ITEF) to 'rebuild ISF capabilities to conduct offensive operations to liberate ISIL-held territory' through the equipping of 65,000 personnel across twelve brigades (nine ISF and three Peshmerga). In addition, a 5,000-strong Sunni tribal force was planned as the precursor to the National Guard, legislation for which is currently under considerable pressure from some Shia militia-aligned parties in the Iraqi parliament.[19] This will cost $89.3 million per brigade and includes everything from M4 rifles and body armour, to 1,572 up-armoured Humvees (HMMWVs) and 2,400 Light Medium Tactical Vehicles.[20] Further 'gifts' have already been provided by coalition members – initially on an ad-hoc basis to the Peshmerga, which required the immediate assistance of heavy weapons and ammunition. However, the core of the coalition's plan to regenerate Iraqi counter-ISIS forces lies within these twelve brigades.

The training, advice and assistance component is being provided through the deployment of more than 5,900 ground forces from sixteen coalition members at five BPC locations – around Baghdad, along the Euphrates and further north, in Erbil. These locations are intended to act as 'lily pads' from which the ISF can launch counter-offensives northwest across Anbar province.[21] The BPC sites are major pre-existing military bases, with sufficient security and facilities to provide training for substantial numbers of ISF troops in marksmanship, counter-improvised explosive device (C-IED) drills, battlefield first aid, urban combat and infantry tactics up to 'Collective Training Level 2' (operating as sub-units or companies). In addition, more specialist instruction is being provided for the use of support weapons (such as the 60-mm, 81-mm and 120-mm mortars being gifted by the US to the ISF), as well as the training of combat engineers and Explosive Ordnance Disposal technicians, and command elements in operational planning and tactical decision-making.

Of the roughly 900 UK (non-special forces[22]) personnel participating in Operation *Inherent Resolve*, two-thirds are contributing to the air component or command structures outside the country,[23] so 275

19. Zaid Sabah and Caroline Alexander, 'Secretive Militia's Challenge Risks Eroding Abadi Power in Iraq', *Bloomberg*, 28 September 2015.
20. Office of the Secretary of Defense, 'Department of Defense Budget Fiscal Year (FY) 2015 Budget Amendment: Justification for FY 2015 Overseas Contingency Operations Iraq Train and Equip Fund', 2014.
21. Jeremy Binnie, David Ing and Dan Wasserbly, 'US Expands Iraqi Re-train/Equip Programme into "Lily Pad" Strategy', *Jane's Defence Weekly* (Vol. 52, No. 24, June 2015).
22. The scale and precise activity of UK special-forces operations in Iraq and Syria remain undisclosed, but ongoing surveillance and reconnaissance and offensive-action tasks have clear strategic effect, not just in disrupting ISIS leadership networks but in offering a positive media narrative of the UK's contribution to the coalition and ability to conduct decisive action 'on the ground'.
23. The UK military contribution is being co-ordinated through the US-dominated coalition structure, from the Land Component Command in Baghdad (CFLCC-I), which is sponsored by the US 82nd Airborne Division – a British deputy commander, at one-star level, is in the headquarters only by virtue of the permanent interoperability post within the division. The command reports, via

are officially 'on the ground' in Iraq to provide ISF training.[24] They are focused in Erbil and currently comprise mainly the 2nd Battalion, The Princess of Wales's Royal Regiment, alongside enablers from across Force Troops Command. These personnel have provided basic infantry, support weapons and battlefield first-aid training to just over 2,000 Kurdish forces, complementary to the gifting of forty heavy machine guns, 50 tonnes of equipment (including combat body armour, binoculars and 1,000 Vallon metal detectors) and almost 500,000 rounds of ammunition.[25]

Table 1: Nations Contributing Ground Forces to Command Joint Task Force – Operation *Inherent Resolve* (CJTF-OIR), as at 4 August 2015.

Country	Personnel
United States	3,550
Australia	500 (scheduled increase from current ~200)
Spain	300
Italy	280
United Kingdom	275
France	200
New Zealand	143
Denmark	140
Netherlands	130
Norway	120
Germany	100
Canada	69
Finland	47
Belgium	35
Sweden	35
Portugal	30
Total	**5,954**

Source: Open sources and Kathleen J McInnis, 'Coalition Contributions to Countering the Islamic State', Congressional Research Service, August 2015.

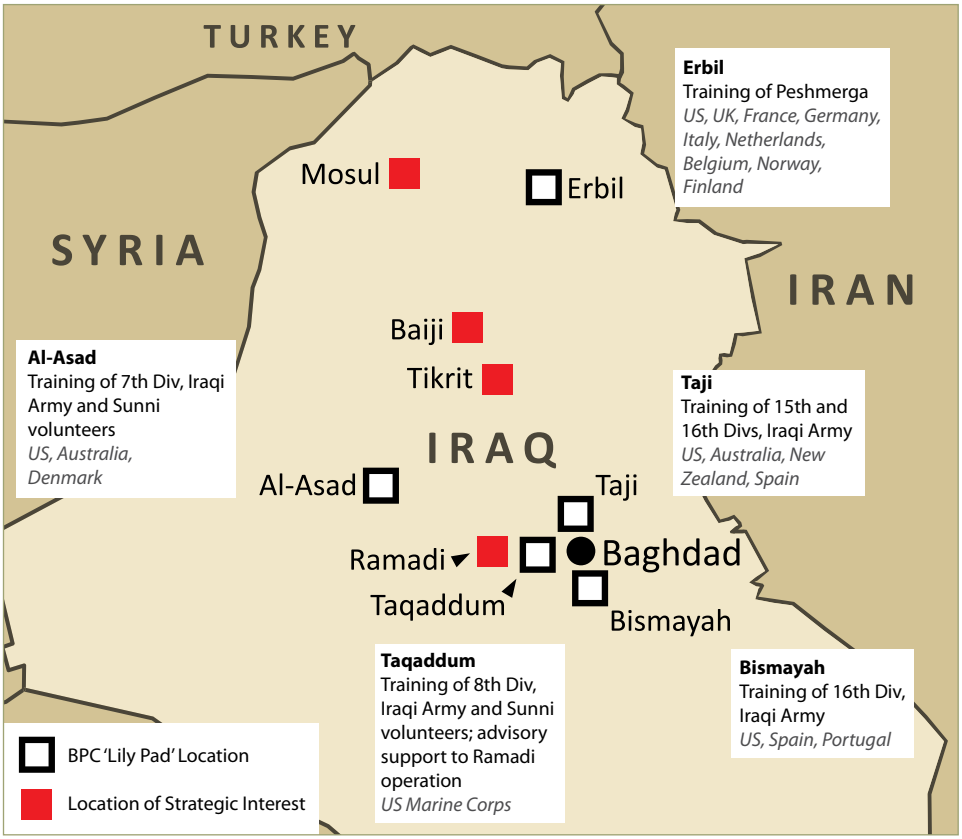
The UK is also the lead nation for co-ordinating specialist C-IED training across the country, offering a 'qualitative if not quantitative leadership ... exploiting [its] technical comparative

the Combined Joint Task Force (CJTF-OIR) headquarters in Kuwait (where the UK also occupies a deputy commander position at two-star level), to Central Command in Florida where over thirty UK staff are attached, including another two-star officer.

24. 275 is the figure officially pledged, although the answer to a recent parliamentary question suggested the number remained nearer to 200, as at 16 September 2015. See Penny Mordaunt, answer to 'Ministry of Defence: Iraq: Written Question – 9706', House of Commons, 16 September 2015.
25. Penny Mordaunt, answer to 'Kurds: Written Question – 4676', House of Commons, 6 July 2015.

advantage rather than numerical supremacy within the coalition'.[26] This effort to contribute in a meaningful, if not numerically significant, fashion has dictated the British effort thus far. The UK has provided only 100 or so of 300 C-IED personnel; however, the additional 125 troops announced at June's G7 summit (taking the UK total to 275) were intended to be deployed from Erbil across other BPCs to widen the British contribution in an as yet undetermined number of locations and mix of C-IED, medical and logistics training roles.

Map 1: Map of BPC Locations and Areas of Strategic Interest, Iraq.



Source: Open sources and Kathleen J McInnis, 'Coalition Contributions to Countering the Islamic State', Congressional Research Service, August 2015.

This increase in personnel numbers has highlighted both wider tensions within the coalition's counter-ISIS strategy as well as several issues in the BPC programme specifically. Despite the prime minister's reported desire to 'get in the game' following the UK general election in May,[27] the British personnel currently on the ground represent less than 5 per cent of the international force. And, although the land component has thus far not been subject to the same 'leader-board' scrutiny as the air component's mission rate, it represents a significantly reduced

26. Author interview with Ministry of Defence (MoD) official, London, 19 June 2015.
27. Author telephone interview with MoD official, London, 7 July 2015.

ambition from the UK's recent tradition of providing a force equivalent to at least 10 per cent of that fielded by the US when participating in US-led operations.[28] Yet, more tellingly, it is still not clear where and how the uplift in British troops is to add value, given that 'places on the team' have already been filled by other states.[29]

Furthermore, the ISF 'training audience' has already consistently failed to meet the coalition's supply of training capacity, as exemplified by reports in June from the US Marine Corps training team at the Al-Asad BPC, where there had been a gap of almost two months between intakes for the small-unit tactics course. In addition, although 1,000 troops of the Iraqi 7th Division had already received some form of training, all classes were running significantly under-capacity and trainees had frequently been removed mid-course.[30]

There are many reasons for this imbalance between supply and demand, often perfectly valid but all indicative of the challenges to building ISF capacity. For example, the provision of security for recent religious pilgrimages has been prioritised, justifiably, as a demonstration of both the will and capacity to protect the people of Iraq. However, another, more damning factor is that ISF commanders 'don't see the sense' in training, as highlighted by members across the coalition, from trainers to politicians, and most prominently claimed by Spanish Defence Minister Pedro Morenés on declaring that Spain will not provide further trainers until the 'training audience' stabilises.[31]

The shortage of ISF trainees is also the result of recruiting issues in a competitive 'marketplace' – with attractive, or even seemingly glamorous, alternatives for Shias in the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF),[32] and few incentives elsewhere for Sunnis – which have compounded the already-poor ISF retention rates as personnel desert to join volunteer forces, assessing them to be more effective and appealing organisations for countering ISIS.[33] So while five brigades have 'graduated' from BPC facilities, they have done so, at best, at one-third of their originally intended strength of 4,500 each,[34] suggesting that the envisaged 60,000-strong, reinvigorated ISF (as per the ITEF equipment lists, discussed above) may prove to be as small as 20,000, therefore representing only one-tenth of the total estimated counter-ISIS forces.[35]

28. Malcolm Chalmers, 'The Sinews of War', in Adrian L Johnson (ed.), *Wars in Peace: British Military Operations since 1991* (London: RUSI, 2014), p. 282.
29. Author telephone interview with MoD official, London, 7 July 2015.
30. Hope Hodge Seck, 'Marines at Al Asad Haven't Had Iraqi Troops to Train in Weeks', *Marine Corps Times*, 11 June 2015.
31. David Hunt and Jeremy Binnie, 'Iraqi Commanders "Don't See the Sense" in Officer Training', *Jane's Defence Weekly* (Vol. 52, No. 23, June 2015).
32. Competing influences include, for example, Abu Azrael (the self-styled 'Angel of Death'), a celebrity Shia militiaman who has widespread social-media presence, both domestically and internationally. Azrael has over 100,000 followers on Facebook alone, compared with just under 8,500 for the CJTF-OIR.
33. Michael Knights and Jabbar Jaafar, 'Restoring the Iraqi Army's Pride and Fighting Spirit', *Al Jazeera*, 8 July 2015.
34. *Ibid*.
35. Ahmed Ali, remarks on 200,000 counter-ISIS force, given during panel discussion, 'The ISIS War: Where are We?', Thomson Reuters, Washington, DC, 27 May 2015.

A Fragile Foundation

This gets to the heart of the ISF's frailties. These are multiple and often technical, but the greater share fall firmly within the conceptual and, especially, moral components of fighting power: the cohesion, motivation and leadership of the force that provides its foundation. The coalition's proposed remedies, however, continue to emphasise the physical 'façade' of ISF manpower and equipment, plus a limited conceptual element imposing a Western doctrine of infantry and urban-combat tactics and command processes. While ISIS steels its combatants with ideological zeal and provides (the majority of) them with only rudimentary combat skills, the coalition offers almost entirely technical military train-and-equip programmes (despite the accepted wisdom of the moral component's primacy, as held within Western military doctrine[36]), with the results speaking for themselves. This Western emphasis on the export of technology[37] and 'templated' military structures denies the ideological and human nature of both conflict and force generation,[38] and accounts, in part at least, for the previous failure in building sustainable ISF capacity. As true as it is that ISIS can only be defeated through discrediting its ideology, the ISF will only triumph once it has a coherent identity of its own and the unifying objective of a secure, non-sectarian and representative national government.

Instruction in the protection of civilians, as currently being conducted by British trainers, is an important ethical component to capacity building but alone does not represent balanced investment in the moral cohesion of the ISF. All coalition activity should be tailored to promote cohesion and confidence over technical competence, and there are means through which existing successes can be reinforced. These include, but are not limited to: advisory support at the institutional level for the Iraqi Ministry of Defence's governance reforms, in order to sustain the momentum generated through such acts as Prime Minister Haider Al-Abadi's near-immediate replacement of thirty-six generals to 'combat corruption';[39] conditional allocation of resources to effective and proactive commands (such as the CTS and Baghdad Area Command); and discretional coalition air support – an unmatched capability which can be used for leverage in Baghdad as much as fostering the ISF's resolve, and which has already been employed, with demonstrable effect, in Tikrit. Air strikes may give the appearance of a decisive coalition strategy, but now that they must target previously gifted military equipment, being employed as a tool

36. See MoD Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre, 'Joint Doctrine Publication 0-01: UK Defence Doctrine', 5th edition, 2014, p. 25. Or for the oft-quoted mantra that 'moral power is to physical as three parts out of four' see Napoleon Bonaparte quoted in Maturin M Ballou, *Treasury of Thought* (Boston, MA: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1899), p. 407.
37. Anthony Cordesman and Sam Khazai, 'Shaping Iraq's Security Forces', Center for Strategic and International Studies, 12 June 2014, p. 38.
38. This emphasis is not just a military weakness. However, 'commentators [also] still prefer to focus on political, financial, and physical explanations, such as anti-Sunni discrimination, corruption, lack of government services in captured territories, and ISIS's use of violence. Western audiences are, therefore, rarely forced to focus on ISIS's bewildering ideological appeal'. See Anonymous, 'The Mystery of ISIS', *New York Review of Books* (Vol. 62, No. 13, August 2015).
39. David D Kirkpatrick, 'In Shake-up, Iraqi Premier Replaces 36 Commanders', *New York Times*, 12 November 2014.

of ISIS suicide tactics against the very forces they were given to protect,[40] the 'train-and-equip' mission has surely reached an inflection point and the greatest role the coalition can play is in bolstering the ISF's own 'inherent resolve' through a demonstration of its strategic coherence rather than combat commitments.

Too Little, Too Lowly, Too Late... Too Bad?

The coalition efforts thus far appear to have been too little, with (re)supply of (re)trained ISF personnel being outstripped by the numbers of PMF and Peshmerga troops, as well as the Iraqi government's demand for such training; targeted too lowly, having prioritised rapid increases in ISF numbers to 'plate the tip of the spear', rather than addressing the problems at its institutional core; and too late, coming after ISIS had already fulfilled its strategic objective of securing the 'financial war chest' of Mosul,[41] and after Iranian influence was firmly established over counter-ISIS efforts. In February, a Pentagon spokesperson publicly stated what had so far been discussed only in private: that the Mosul offensive had been planned for the spring.[42] Yet this subsequently proved vastly optimistic and force generation has been running behind schedule ever since, to the extent that some commentators have gone so far as to suggest that 'no one talks about liberating Mosul anymore'.[43]

Yet the coalition cannot afford to simply step back from its efforts, as some commentators have suggested,[44] while others fill the void (as Iran and Russia are now doing most notably). Failure to demonstrate decisive commitment to the ISF and the Iraqi government amplifies uncertainty – ambiguity by default rather than design. So a longer-term Security Force Assistance approach, expanded in scope but limited in expectation, may prove the least-worst option for managing enduring Iraqi instability as much as countering ISIS; indeed, the ISF is 'fighting' on multiple fronts, many internal and political.

The revised approach must offer more than just tactics, techniques and procedures to complement the embarrassment of military riches already gifted to the ISF. Moreover, it needs to be founded on public acknowledgement that it will not just be slow and punctuated by inevitable setbacks, but that it is also an inherently political activity that is only possible with the insight and influence enabled by an enduring presence 'on the ground' *alongside* Iraqi decision-makers, rather than simply 'staring through straws' from air-based intelligence, surveillance and

40. Tim Arango, 'ISIS Suicide Attack Kills Two Iraqi Generals Near Ramadi', *New York Times*, 27 August 2015.
41. Gary Anderson, 'The Coming Battle for Ramadi; Checkers versus Chess', Small Wars Journal Blog, 14 August 2015, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/the-coming-battle-for-ramadi-checkers-versus-chess>, accessed 28 September 2015.
42. Michael Gordon, 'Iraqi Assault to Retake Mosul from Islamic State is Planned for Spring', *New York Times*, 19 February 2015.
43. Knights, 'No One Talks about Liberating Mosul Anymore'.
44. See, for example, the *Spectator* debate, 'Iraq and Syria are Lost Causes: Western Intervention Can't Help', London, 22 October 2014, summarised at <http://blogs.spectator.co.uk/coffeehouse/2014/10/iraq-and-syria-are-lost-causes-western-intervention-cant-help-or-can-it>, accessed 30 September 2015.

reconnaissance platforms. It is not boots on the ground that are required, but eyes, ears and brains. As such, the coalition's military efforts should:

- Adopt a broader and enduring Security Force Assistance approach, prioritising ISF moral cohesion (including Sunni and Shia militia integration) and institutional resilience. This should be done in conjunction with strategic political engagement, providing incentives and legislative advice for reform at government and ministry levels, as well as support to implementation at operational levels
- Facilitate this with an enhanced presence, in scale and seniority, of long-term embedded military advisers in relevant Baghdad locations and across divisions, wherever the provision of appropriate force protection is possible (albeit requiring recalibrated risk thresholds). Where this is not possible, this should be achieved remotely via the provision of communication links to enable routine 'virtual' engagement
- Prioritise this advisory network's generation of a clearer understanding of ISF profiles, plans, priorities and pitfalls (focusing not just on combat deficiencies but on vulnerabilities to corruption) to better negotiate and allocate subsequent coalition support while retaining Iraqi primacy in force structure and doctrine. Additional institutional lines of effort should include support to financial and logistic functions, as well as recruitment and vetting, and media communications for promotion of the ISF as a committed and competent national force
- Continue the equip programme, but only when possible through ISF structures for supply, pay and command (in particular for Sunni volunteer forces, as currently done at the Taqaddum BPC for operations to recapture Ramadi). This should also only be done on a demand-led basis, when clear capability gaps are identified (such as the recently expedited provision of 2,000 AT4 anti-armour weapons, which have helped to counter the threat from ISIS's use of armoured vehicles as suicide bombs[45])
- Maintain the five BPC locations as collective training centres for 'wholesale' force generation with an emphasis on ground holding and stabilisation (light role, checkpoints and cordon operations). Specialist and 'remedial' courses (such as the ongoing, enhanced C-IED courses) should be provided at divisional-level locations or by mobile training teams
- Strengthen the ISF's current fighting power by providing the Area Operation Commands with a 'steel spine'[46] of advisory support to intelligence and logistics functions, and operational planning and execution. This should include a joint ISF-coalition targeting cycle (in conjunction with providing signals equipment, training and authorities to fully bring to bear coalition air power)
- Train, advise and *accompany* the ISF at brigade-headquarters level wherever it has demonstrable strength and discrete operations for which advisory support would add value and the necessary force protection (including aviation and quick-reaction forces)

45. Philip Stewart, 'US to Deliver 2,000 Anti-Tank Weapons to Iraq, Pentagon Says', *Reuters*, 21 May 2015.
46. John Nagl, quoted in David Johnson, 'Fighting the "Islamic State": The Case for US Ground Troops', *US Army War College Quarterly* (Vol. 45, No. 1, Spring 2015).

can be designated.[47] The ISF does not benefit from advice and support on the drill square but in its deployed formations, where it is most needed but least present.

Off the Ground and against the Odds?

The UK defence secretary, Michael Fallon, recently described the British Army as 'frontline ambassadors'.[48] This perhaps sums up how an increase in numbers of British personnel – augmenting both their reach on the ground and remit for ISF institutional reform – may be able to add value as part of a wider coalition effort. As with all diplomacy, advantages are two-way and the combination of understanding and influence gained would enable an international force capable of co-ordinating, supporting and ultimately monitoring the mixed 'clearing' force of ISF, PMF, Peshmerga, and Sunni tribal forces (pending the formation of the National Guard) already in existence and irretrievable motion. In parallel, rebuilding of the ISF should progress from the foundations upwards, as a 'holding' force equipped physically, conceptually and (crucially) morally, for the stabilisation challenges sure to follow.

Whether efforts to counter ISIS in Iraq are at a 'stalemate',[49] or whether, indeed, 'the tide is turning',[50] the conflict is certain to endure and evolve, requiring adaptation of the coalition strategy based on accurate intelligence and ongoing campaign assessment. Yet the veracity of that intelligence remains in question and baseless measures emphasise international activity, not effect or outcomes.[51] If this is to be a 'long-haul' campaign,[52] there is at least time to overcome those challenges and firmly establish the coalition's own foundations. The UK's greatest contribution may well be in promoting commitment and coherence throughout CJTF-OIR by

47. As early, speculative reports have suggested, the US is now preparing to provide for the recapture of Ramadi; see, for instance, John Hall, 'Are US Boots Back on the Ground in Iraq? Secret American Fighting Force of 160 "Lands in Anbar Province" to Tackle ISIS', *Daily Mail*, 15 September 2015.
48. Michael Fallon, 'RUSI Land Warfare Conference 2015', speech given at RUSI, London, 1 July 2015.
49. General Raymond Odierno, in his final Pentagon news conference as the Chief of Staff of the US Army, stated 'we are kind of in a stalemate, frankly' and that the US should 'consider embedding some soldiers [with Iraqi forces] then see if that would make a difference', as reported in David Alexander, 'Some U.S. Troops May be Needed on Ground in Iraq: Retiring Army Chief', *Reuters*, 12 August 2015.
50. As coalition statements insist, such as that made by Brigadier James Learmont, reported in David Willetts, 'Jihad It: IS Close to Defeat in Iraq after Half its Fighters Wiped Out', *Sun*, 18 September 2015.
51. Author interviews with officials have repeatedly revealed frustrations with the ongoing challenges in establishing a robust and baselined campaign assessment plan, across all the coalition's lines of effort, to ensure campaign effectiveness and mitigate against 'mission creep'. In addition, there are claims that intelligence assessments have been improperly influenced by officials at CENTCOM, downplaying the ISIS threat and exaggerating ISF capability and performance, as reported in Mark Mazzetti and Matthew Apuzzo, 'Analysts Detail Claims That Reports on ISIS Were Distorted', *New York Times*, 15 September 2015.
52. Discussion of the conflict's duration have been vague, but General Odierno was most clear in stating that 'in my mind, ISIS is a ten to twenty year problem; it is not a two years problem', as reported in Dan Luce, 'Is the US Ready for an Endless War against the Islamic State?', *Foreign Policy*, 27 August 2015.

ceasing its renewal of military operations on an annual basis[53] and publicly placing itself on a long-term, cross-departmental campaign footing akin to Operation *Entirety*.[54] Demonstrating genuine resolve, through deliberate, targeted and enduring investment of additional resources and expertise – on the ground, alongside the ISF – will not make the Iraqi armed forces' triumph a certainty, but it shortens the odds in their favour and, right now, that represents the least-worst option available.

53. *BBC News*, 'Islamic State Crisis: UK to Extend Tornado Strikes in Iraq', 4 August 2015.
54. Operation *Entirety* was instigated by the British Army in January 2009 as an army-wide, and later MoD-wide, campaign to prioritise resources for operations in Afghanistan.

IV. The Battle of the Narrative

Ewan Lawson

The so-called battle of the narrative has been central in the campaign against ISIS. It is widely perceived in the West that the group has been running a successful public-relations campaign that has significantly contributed to recruitment, particularly of foreign fighters, as well as success on the battlefield. In contrast, it is less clear that coalition efforts have had the same coherence and effectiveness either strategically or tactically. This brief review will look first at the approaches adopted by ISIS before considering the coalition response. Finally, it will consider how efforts to influence relevant audiences – a key part of the campaign – might develop.

The Roots of Jihad by Narrative

As the inheritor of the legacy of Al-Qa'ida and in particular its offshoot in Iraq, ISIS has had a clear view of the importance of a narrative coherently and effectively delivered. However, unlike the often fairly amateurish efforts of its predecessors,[1] the group has brought a new level of professionalism to its output using modern production tools and combat-camera footage from GoPro cameras, as well as embracing the use of social media. It has also combined the centralised production of high-quality products with a willingness to see these dispersed by a network of sympathisers with little or no apparent formal direction. Efforts to control the circulation of material by shutting down social-media accounts have been akin to a game of 'whack-a-mole'.

The propaganda effort of ISIS appears to have three main purposes.

First, it seeks to build the image of a ruthless, successful military organisation willing to do anything for its cause, however violent and seemingly repugnant. This narrative, delivered ahead of advancing troops through conventional and social media, is a contemporary equivalent of air-delivered leaflets and is designed to spread terror and undermine the adversary's will to fight. As a technique it has undoubtedly contributed to the way in which elements of the Iraqi Army have collapsed in the face of ISIS forces that have usually been smaller and less well equipped.[2] It appears to reflect a developed understanding by ISIS of the significance of the moral component of fighting power.

Second, this narrative contributes to binding the militants together. This is further supported by a focus on the effectiveness of the state or caliphate as the deliverer of a fair and robust Sharia-

1. For an analysis of Al-Qaida's strategy, see Canadian Centre for Intelligence and Security Studies, 'Al Qaeda: Propaganda and Media Strategy', Integrated Threat Assessment Centre, 2007, <www.itac.gc.ca/pblctns/pdf/2007-2-eng.pdf>, accessed 18 August 2015.
2. Jett Goldsmith, 'How the Islamic State's Massive PR Campaign Single-Handedly Secured its Rise', Bellingcat, 11 February 2015, <www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2015/02/11/how-the-islamic-states-massive-pr-campaign-single-handedly-secured-its-rise/>, accessed 18 August 2015.

based social and legal environment. In spreading this message it has been willing to support its actions with billboards, posters and radio broadcasts as well as messaging on social media. In contrast to its better-known use of atrocity imagery on social media, it has also circulated images of children in what might be called ISIS 'fan gear' and even 'cats of the Jihad' on Twitter,[3] aimed primarily at women in the community for whom it has apparently developed a separate propaganda strategy to market its women's manifesto.[4]

Third, these narratives combine with messages traditionally used by radical Islam about Western exploitation of the disadvantaged *ummah* as a recruiting tool both internally and for foreign fighters. For the latter, ISIS has been prepared to appeal directly to Western youth beyond ideas of religious duty and the rewards of martyrdom, through what has been described as 'Jihadi-cool' imagery, even comparing its operations with video games such as *Call of Duty*.

Figure 1: 'Jihadi Cool'.

Source: Clarion Project, <http://www.clarionproject.org/>, accessed 17 August 2015.

In delivering its message, ISIS also uses three main forms of propaganda.

First, and most well known, is ISIS's social-media presence, which is particularly visible to Western audiences. At a superficial level, it might appear to be an especially effective medium – it is easily embraced and, depending on the way in which the statistics on Twitter and Facebook are analysed, the penetration of social media by both official ISIS accounts and a network of followers appears to be significant. It is of note that this social-media presence acts as a gateway to what has been described as the 'grooming' of potential volunteers, perhaps best evidenced by the recruitment of teenage girls as 'Jihadi brides'.

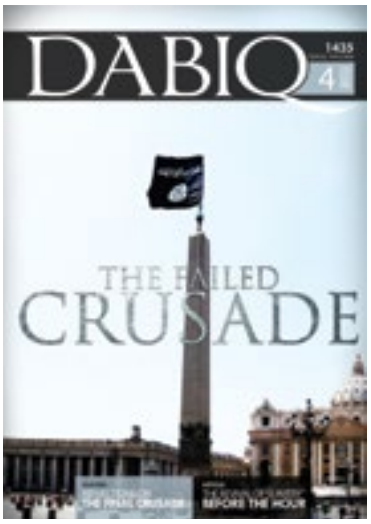
Second, ISIS uses a number of 'official media outlets' that are replaced as quickly as they are shut down. These outlets also contribute to the ISIS effort in the news and published media

3. Frances Martel, 'ISIS Now Selling Jihad with Twitter Account Full of Adorable Kittens', Breitbart, 26 June 2014, <www.brietbart.com/national-security/2014/06/26/isis-now-selling-jihad-with-twitter-account-full-of-adorable-kittens/>, accessed 18 August 2015.
4. Josh Halliday, 'Female Jihadis Publish Guide to Life under Islamic State, *Guardian*, 5 February 2015.

by placing stories without concern for accuracy. Rather, the aim is to get there first with the message, as was particularly notable during the battle for Tikrit in the summer of 2014. At that time, the only sources of information available were ISIS Twitter feeds and the equally unreliable reporting of the Iraqi government.[5] The group's official media outlets also contribute to the aforementioned billboards and posters in areas under its control. The ISIS information campaign is based on clearly targeting specific demographics. In the context of the recruitment of Western foreign fighters, it has produced an English-language news magazine – entitled *Dabiq* – which is designed to appeal to Western youth through its use of language and imagery such as references to the Crusades.

Last, all of this activity is supported by the high-quality media products generated by the Al-Hayat Media Center using up-to-date equipment and modern production tools. The mainstream media often simply retransmit these messages without question, such as in the battle for Tikrit,[6] which serves to reinforce perceptions of their veracity.

Figure 2: Cover of *Dabiq* Magazine, September/October 2014.



Source: Clarion Project, <http://www.clarionproject.org/>, accessed 17 August 2015.

The Coalition Response

In the face of this effort, the coalition appears to have struggled to deliver an effective response at either the strategic or tactical levels. The UK co-chairs the US Strategic Command (STRATCOM) Working Group, which seeks to co-ordinate efforts within the broad coalition to deliver both a counter-narrative to ISIS's and to support the building of the coalition itself.

5. Crispian Cuss, 'The Islamic State: Why Mainstream Media Didn't See It Coming', *Al Jazeera*, 2 July 2014.
6. This is often a process of reinforcement where a mainstream media outlet – either from within the region or more globally – will pick up a story from ISIS and publish it. This is subsequently picked up by the Western media.

Nationally, the UK has developed a plan based on five key objectives which informs its approach to the coalition STRATCOM effort:

- Impede and limit the ability of ISIS narrative(s) to gain traction
- Improve recognition of the global nature of the coalition
- Increase confidence in the capability of the Iraqi government both at home and abroad
- Increase understanding that the majority of Syrians are moderate and there is an outcome for Syria without Assad or ISIS (the idea of a Syria without Assad is not endorsed by all coalition partners)
- Increase British public support for the campaign against ISIS both in Iraq and more broadly.

These objectives are delivered through five pillars of activity:

- Defeating and countering the ISIS message through moderate voices in the region
- Bringing together the coalition
- Enabling the voice of the Iraqi government to be heard
- Raising awareness, both at home and in the region, of the potential for a better future for Syria
- Increasing awareness of the whole range of UK government activities in the campaign, including the role of humanitarian assistance, as a balance to the focus on the military effort.

Sharing the Effort

Within the coalition, states take responsibility for different aspects of the information campaign. For example, the Netherlands and Japan have funded a project to understand audiences in the Sunni areas of Iraq; Saudi Arabia and Egypt are using their religious institutions and scholars to counter the ISIS narrative; and the UK and the UAE are developing a centre in Abu Dhabi for distributing the counter-narrative in the Middle East.

Open-source reporting on the coalition campaign has primarily focused on US efforts at using STRATCOM to challenge ISIS's recruitment of foreign fighters. Specifically, a campaign by the State Department Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications (CSCC) run in 2014 called 'Welcome to "Islamic State" Land' has been the target of some pointed observations.[7] The centrepiece of the campaign was a video which mimicked the style of those produced by ISIS and showed pictures of kneeling prisoners being executed, severed heads and crucifixions. It then delivered a message that these were the skills that a new recruit to ISIS would learn – torturing and killing fellow Muslims. The campaign was criticised by experts both within and outside the US administration for both lowering itself to the standards adopted by ISIS and having no clear, measurable effect.[8] However, it is noteworthy that ISIS-linked accounts petitioned Twitter to have CSCC products removed. Although CSCC was only in receipt of some $6 million per year

7. For example, see Greg Miller and Scott Higham, 'In a Propaganda War against ISIS, the U.S. Tried to Play by the Enemy's Rules', *Washington Post*, 8 May 2015.
8. *Ibid*.

(compared to a Pentagon STRATCOM budget for the campaign of nearly $150 million), concerns in the administration about the potentially negative impact of its operations saw it joined by the Information Coordination Cell – another entity within the State Department – whose aim was to be more factual and to use testimony to highlight ISIS hypocrisy rather than be confrontational.

The primary challenge at the strategic level is ensuring coherence whilst addressing a variety of audiences for a range of different purposes. A specific narrative that is designed to dissuade Gulf-based sympathisers from contributing financially to ISIS delivered by one member of the coalition may conflict with the narrative delivered by another country aimed at discouraging foreign fighters. It is therefore critical that the coalition endeavours to identify priorities for its messaging and avoids the risk of simply responding to the most recent challenge.

At the tactical level, there have been airdrops of leaflets by the coalition seeking to undermine ISIS's cohesion and will to fight. For example, images have included the idea that ISIS volunteers are being fed into a meat grinder by their leaders, highlighting that coalition air power can strike at any time and in any place and that the 'hour of your destruction has approached'. Although these have been produced in colloquial Arabic appropriate to the area in which they are dropped, there is no clear evidence of their effectiveness. Whilst visibility of coalition tactical efforts is limited, it is likely to go beyond air dropping of leaflets. It is probable that the information campaign is using the full range of capabilities at the coalition's disposal including radio broadcasts, leaflets and social-media activity; but it should also develop at least some of those capabilities within the Iraqi security forces that were established during the period after Operation *Iraqi Freedom*. The local voice is much more powerful than that of the Western powers.

Figure 3: The Image from a Coalition Leaflet Air-Dropped over Syria.

Source: US Central Command; also available at <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2015/06/04/pentagon-propaganda-syria-isil/28470813/>, accessed 30 September 2015.

Looking Ahead

As the campaign against ISIS continues, the coalition's effectiveness in the battle of the narrative – which has so far been unconvincing – must catch up with its rival and then keep pace.

At the tactical to operational levels, the co-ordination of coalition efforts to counter the ISIS narrative in both Iraq and Syria – through the headquarters of Combined Joint Task Force *Inherent Resolve* in Kuwait – must continue to be developed. This will be achieved by maximising the utility of the Western states' messaging capabilities, drawing on the insights of regional coalition members.

At the strategic level, there is an apparent need to energise the coalition STRATCOM Working Group to ensure that individual states can contribute to the effort to challenge the ISIS narrative of military victory and successful governance. It will be interesting to see whether a more active Turkish involvement in the campaign will promote greater coherence in the coalition effort or further undermine it.

The challenge of developing a coherent narrative inside a complex coalition should not be underestimated, particularly when the strategic objectives are at the very least varied and in some cases contradictory.

However, the key is probably to recognise the need for a series of interlinked narratives directed at different audiences and delivered by those best suited to do so. Convincing the disenchanted Sunni population of Iraq that it is in its best interests to support the government in Baghdad is a particularly challenging task. Equally, the measures required to stiffen the resolve of the Iraqi Security Forces may not be exactly the same as those needed to discourage foreign fighters from volunteering: the main priority is to consistently challenge the ISIS narrative of being a successful organisation. This will require agility in being able to respond to inaccurate and sometimes outlandish claims, and a willingness to emphasise ISIS setbacks. Whilst it is often difficult to clearly identify success in a battle of the narrative, it should be possible to identify metrics of effectiveness such as a reduction in the flow of foreign fighters and their families. These would indicate when the credibility of ISIS is starting to be undermined.

Although challenging, efforts should be made to highlight evidence of where IS governance is failing in areas under its control, such as an inability to ensure supplies of food and water.[9] These narratives do not necessarily need to be entirely coherent as long as they are not contradictory. Going head-to-head in the manner of 'Welcome to "Islamic State" Land' can be counterproductive. In addition to countering the image of success, a simple counter-narrative already exists, focusing on ISIS's brutality and which seeks to delink Islam and violence, but this has not yet been delivered consistently and effectively. The authenticity of the messenger is key, and it is important for Western governments and militaries to understand how messages that are seen as coming directly from them are perceived. Whilst working through local voices and amplifying them are both critical, it is essential that in the process those voices are not believed to be compromised.

9. Christopher Holshek, 'The Islamic State's Phase-Four Failure', *Foreign Policy*, 16 April 2015.

V. ISIS, Terrorism and the UK

Raffaello Pantucci

ISIS has rapidly moved from being a group seen merely as an affiliate or offshoot of Al-Qa'ida to being recognised as one of the principal international terrorist threats faced by the UK.[1] The threat comprises various strands: the number of British citizens travelling to fight alongside ISIS in Iraq and Syria, and the possibility that they may return with the intent of undertaking an attack on British soil; possible attacks on UK territory by individuals who have not fought abroad but who are nevertheless inspired or facilitated by ISIS; and the possibility of attacks on British interests and citizens abroad.

It is true that ISIS remains part of a larger threat picture, and care needs to be taken to avoid exaggerating the domestic threat posed by the group, which would only serve to inflate its importance while potentially distracting the UK from other menaces both on and off the battlefield. Indeed, British citizens are travelling to the Middle East to fight not only with ISIS, but also with groups such as Jabhat Al-Nusra, Al-Qa'ida's principal affiliate on the battlefield in Syria. Nevertheless, the threat posed by ISIS, at home and abroad, remains a serious one that the UK must persist in addressing.

The picture is complicated as it remains unclear whether ISIS – or any of its affiliates in Africa or Asia[2] – has taken a strategic decision, at a senior level, to launch a large-scale campaign of terrorism outside its immediate territory (in contrast to the wave of more loosely linked incidents witnessed so far). Currently, those plots already disrupted in the UK have demonstrated a confused link to the battlefield in Syria and Iraq. Nevertheless, given the reach of ISIS via the Internet and the large numbers travelling to join its ranks, the problem remains a substantial one. Bolstering agency capacity and building community resilience will help to some degree, but the threat will only be eradicated once stemmed at source.

This chapter outlines the nature of the current threat posed by ISIS before exploring the response by the UK's police and security agencies, which involves disrupting the plans of both would-be attackers and aspiring travellers alike.[3] It will conclude by offering some ideas about how to counter the particular threat that the UK faces from ISIS at home.

Travellers

The connective tissue between the battlefield in the Levant and the UK is the flow of foreign fighters between them. Estimates suggest that between 700 and 1,000 British citizens are

1. The UK threat picture also includes Irish-related terrorism and a persistent threat posed by right-wing extremists.
2. For a complete list of all of the groups that have pledged allegiance to ISIS – and the group's response – see Combating Terrorism Center, 'ISIL, Syria & Iraq Resources', West Point, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/isil-resources>, accessed 27 August 2015.
3. Matt Chorley, 'We're Arresting Jihadi Suspects Every Day, Says Terror Police Chief as ISIS Recruits "Misfits, Criminals and the Vulnerable"', *Daily Mail*, 8 February 2015.

thought to have gone to fight in the region,[4] approximately 300 have returned,[5] and at least seventy are believed to have been killed fighting alongside ISIS and other groups.[6]

Over time, the flow of individuals travelling to the region has slowed down as the conflict in Syria has moved from being clearly about fighting the Assad regime to participating in the building of an Islamic state – or caliphate – under ISIS. Early stories suggested individuals could join the group with ease,[7] while more recent reports seem to indicate increased checks and closer scrutiny by the group.[8] However, the projected image of a state – rather than an occupying force, or terrorist or rebel group – has meant that those making the journey are from an increasingly broad sector of society, ranging from seventeen-year-old boys from Dewsbury,[9] to family groups comprising women, children and grandparents from Luton and Bradford.[10] While the number of people going to fight is decreasing, the nature of the flow is therefore more concerning in many ways.

The UK is not alone in this trend. Over the last year, those travelling from around the world to join ISIS have included young women and families from South Africa,[11] young men from the North Caucasus and Central Asia,[12] Southeast Asian warriors and even one individual who claimed, in an ISIS video, to be Latin American.[13]

Recruits are drawn via personal networks as well as through online engagement and contacts. Their reasons for travel vary considerably. Many are motivated by both ISIS's vision of an Islamic caliphate and feelings of disenfranchisement at home. Some seek a new identity; some have reasons that might be classed as sociopathic in nature. There are also likely to be specific local drivers. In Central Asia, for example, there is some suggestion that individuals are attracted by

4. Theresa May, 'Home Secretary: We Must Work Together to Defeat Terrorism', speech given at Metropolitan Police Counter-Terrorism Conference, London, 18 June 2015; Maajid Nawaz, chair of Quilliam, former member of Hizb ut-Tahrir; <http://www.clarionproject.org/content/maajid-nawaz-uk-muslims-not-joining-isis-vacuum>, accessed 30 September 2015.
5. Jonathan Owen, 'Syria Civil War: Hundreds of Radicalised Fighters are Already Back in the UK, Warns Former MI6 Chief', *Independent*, 22 June 2014.
6. Shiv Malik, 'The Toll of Extremism: 50 Britons Killed Fighting for Syria and Iraq Militants', *Guardian*, 29 July 2015.
7. Shiraz Maher, 'From Portsmouth to Kobane: The British Jihadis Fighting for ISIS', *New Statesman*, 6 November 2014.
8. Mohammed Al-Shafey, 'ISIS Tightens Up its Entry Requirements', *Asharq Al-Awsat*, 9 November 2014.
9. *BBC News*, 'Dewsbury Teenager is "UK's Youngest Ever Suicide Bomber"', 14 June 2015.
10. John Simpson, '"All 12 of Us Are Here": Luton Family Announce Arrival in ISIS-Held Syria', *The Times*, 4 July 2015; Kashmira Gander and Cahal Milmo, 'Bradford Fathers of Missing Children Beg Wives to Come Home Amid Fears They Have Joined ISIS', *Independent*, 16 June 2015.
11. *Guardian*, 'South Africa Detains Teenage Girl En Route to Join ISIS', 7 April 2015.
12. Joanna Paraszczuk, 'Kremlin Envoy Warns IS "Recruiting North Caucasus Students"', Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Under the Black Flag blog, 23 March 2015, <http://www.rferl.org/content/isis-recruiting-caucasus-students-russia-moscow-kremlin/26915795.html>, accessed 26 August 2015.
13. Angus McNeice, 'Police Launch Investigation into Chilean-Norwegian Jihadist in Syria', *Santiago Times*, 3 July 2014.

financial incentives; the national security adviser of Kyrgyzstan gave evidence in a parliamentary session in late 2014 that ISIS was paying fighters around $1,000 per month.[14] Others from Central Asia, meanwhile, seem to be encouraged by local frictions (such as longstanding inter-ethnic disputes between communities), and yet others appear drawn by the utopian image projected by ISIS – an improvement on their current situation.[15] This picture is further complicated by the multiple locations of recruitment, with some evidence suggesting that many are being radicalised and recruited from the substantial number of labour migrants from the region working in Russia.[16] These factors are not exclusive to Central Asia, with some evidence that Polish nationals, for example, have also been recruited to the group elsewhere in Europe.[17]

What is universal, however, is concern over what happens to these individuals when they return home. Thus far, although not every foreign fighter returns a terrorist, almost every battlefield with jihadist groups operating on it has produced problems beyond its borders through the vector of foreign fighters.[18]

Despite the numbers travelling, the UK has so far needed – according to public sources – to disrupt only one plot that had clear links with the battlefield in Syria and which possibly benefited from direct guidance in that country.[19] This, however, is only part of the threat picture: in September 2015, MI5 chief Andrew Parker told the BBC that British intelligence agencies had disrupted six plots in the previous year – the highest annual tally since 2001.[20]

The threat picture in continental Europe is far more menacing. Belgium has seen one large plot disrupted and a second succeed in the last fifteen months, both involving individuals who had reportedly fought alongside ISIS.[21] In France, in January 2015 the headquarters of the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* were attacked, an incident which appears to have been connected to

14. Cited in BBC Monitoring, *KyrTAg*, 'Kyrgyz Fighting in Syria Get Large Amount of Money', 29 September 2014.
15. International Crisis Group (ICG), 'Syria Calling: Radicalisation in Central Asia', Europe and Central Asia Briefing No. 72, 20 January 2015.
16. For a more detailed discussion, see Igor Sutyagin, 'Russia', in Jonathan Eyal and Elizabeth Quintana (eds), 'Inherently Unresolved: Regional Politics and the Counter-ISIS Campaign', RUSI Occasional Paper, September 2015; ICG, 'Syria Calling: Radicalisation in Central Asia'; Edward Lemon, 'Tajikistan's Counter-Productive Campaign Against Terrorism', *Terrorism Monitor* (Vol. 13, No. 15, July 2015).
17. Kacper Rekawek, 'So, It's Not the Islamic State after All? The Threat of International Terrorism in Poland', Bulletin No. 75, Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM), 14 August 2015.
18. Mohammad Sidique Khan, leader of the July 2005 attack on London, is the archetypal example, having travelled to Pakistan in the early 2000s.
19. Duncan Gardham, 'British Double Agent "Plotted to Kill His MI5 Handler and Attack UK" after Infiltrating Jihadist Group in Syria', *Mail on Sunday*, 29 March 2015.
20. *BBC News*, 'MI5 Boss Warns of Technology Terror Risk', 17 September 2015.
21. Ian Traynor, Julian Borger and Alexandra Topping, 'Two Dead in Belgium as Police Foil "Grand Scale" Terrorist Plot', *Guardian*, 16 January 2015; Scott Sayare, 'Suspect Held in Jewish Museum Killings', *New York Times*, 1 June 2014.

both Al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula and ISIS.[22] Most recently, Ayoub El-Khazzani, the terrorist whose attack on a train travelling from Amsterdam to Paris failed, was reported to have links to French ISIS members in Turkey who were themselves connected to other plots in France.[23]

That the UK has been spared such incidents so far is likely a reflection of the work of its counter-terrorism forces as well as the presence of fewer radicalised individuals operating without the freedom of movement afforded by the Schengen Agreement, as well as tighter controls on the availability of weaponry.

Nevertheless, ISIS's hand can be seen in numerous plots associated with foreign fighters – and not only in Europe. The group does not appear thus far to have prioritised attacks against the West. Instead, its aim seems to be to instigate or inspire them through constant exhortation to individuals to attack, likely as part of a strategy to weaken Western political resolve – and in this, foreign fighters may prove very useful.

Lone Actors

However, such attacks may also be pursued by lone actors within the UK. Soon after the announcement of the caliphate's establishment in June 2014, ISIS spokesperson Abu Muhammad Al-Adnani called on individuals to 'Rig the roads with explosives for [people living in non-ISIS territories]. Attack their bases. Raid their homes. Cut off their heads ... Turn their worldly life into fear and fire'.[24] This chilling call to arms appears to have had ever-greater resonance, with growing numbers of plots seemingly instigated or inspired by the group emerging around the world.

In the UK, this has been manifested in attacks such as that planned by a fourteen-year-old from Blackburn who, in July 2015, was convicted of inciting terrorism by encouraging the murder of police officers during an Anzac Day event in Melbourne in April.[25] The alleged Australian plotters were detained prior to action and it was claimed that they were supporters of ISIS.[26] The charges against one of the accused have now been dropped.

22. Senior figures within Al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula claimed responsibility for the *Charlie Hebdo* attack, while Amedy Coulibaly – the Kouachi brothers' confrère who launched the attack on a Jewish supermarket – claimed to be acting on behalf of ISIS. In the following weeks, ISIS videos emerged showing Coulibaly's girlfriend alongside the group. See also Kim Willsher, 'Islamic State Magazine Interviews Hayat Boumeddiene', *Guardian*, 12 February 2015.
23. See Paul Cruickshank, *The Situation Room*, CNN, 24 August 2015.
24. Abu Muhammad Al-Adnani Ash-Shami, 'Indeed Your Lord is Ever Watchful', statement made on 22 September 2014, published on Pietervanostaeyen blog, 23 September 2014, <https://pietervanostaeyen.wordpress.com/2014/09/25/abu-muhammad-al-adnani-ash-shami-indeed-your-lord-is-ever-watchful/>, accessed 26 August 2015.
25. *BBC News*, 'Anzac Day Terror Plot: Blackburn Boy Sentenced to Life', 2 October 2015.
26. Helen Pidd, 'Australian Terror Plot: UK Police Arrest 14-Year-Old Boy in Blackburn', *Guardian*, 20 April 2015; *ABC News*, 'Harun Causevic to Plead Guilty to Weapons Offences after Anzac Day Terrorism Plot Charges Dropped', 25 August 2015.

Just a few months earlier, Brusthom Ziamani, a long-term Al-Muhajiroun associate, was arrested while en route to kill, at random, a soldier or policeman in emulation of Woolwich murderers Michael Adebolajo and Michael Adebowale.[27] He was found to have written a letter in which he called for the establishment of the 'ISIB Islamic States of Ireland and Britain' and stated his intent to 'wage war against the British government on this soil'.[28] Ziamani appears to have been the archetypal lone-actor plotter who aspired to be a foreign fighter, was part of a network of radicals, but in action was largely self-directed and activated.

The Ziamani case also highlights the potential danger of blocked travellers – a threat that has matured in both Canada and France,[29] in particular, where individuals prevented from travelling to the Middle East have instead launched attacks at home.

Terrorism Overseas

The other facet of the threat posed to the UK by ISIS relates to the country's interests abroad. Most vividly brought to public attention through events in Tunisia in June,[30] the growth of ISIS affiliates or networks abroad has expanded the threat picture under scrutiny by British counter-terrorism officials. Given the implicit symbolism of attacks on Western targets, these local affiliates often seek out foreign nationals to generate greater attention. The result has been not only the specific targeting of locations such as the Sousse beach resort and Bardo National Museum in Tunisia, but also regular attacks on Western embassies or staff, for example.[31] With foreign fighters hailing from, and potentially returning to, so many countries around the world, the threat to British interests and citizens abroad is of great concern.

Linked to this threat in the media is the problem of growing refugee flows via North Africa to Europe. Some coverage has suggested that radicals might use this flow to conceal flows of fighters from ISIS's North African affiliates, or possibly even use it to send weapons and equipment to networks or individuals in Europe.[32] While this latter possibility cannot be discounted, the evidence so far has been very limited and European security agencies differ in their reports.

27. *BBC News*, 'Soldier Beheading Plan Teenager Brusthom Ziamani Jailed', 20 March 2015.
28. Tom Whitehead, 'Brusthom Ziamani: The Former Jehovah's Witness Who Was Radicalised Within Weeks', *Daily Telegraph*, 19 February 2015.
29. Allan Woods, 'How Martin Couture-Rouleau Became an Aspiring Islamic State Fighter', *Star*, 26 October 2014; Alex Boutilier and Bruce Campion Smith, 'RCMP Release Withheld 18 Seconds of Michael Zehaf-Bibeau's Cellphone Manifesto', *Star*, 29 May 2015; John Lichfield, 'France Gripped by Fear at Christmas after Third Street Attack in Three Days', *Independent*, 23 December 2014.
30. Loulla-Mae Eleftheriou-Smith, 'Tunisia Attacks: UK Police Find "Strong Evidence" of Links Between Bardo Museum Killings and Sousse Beach Massacre', *Independent*, 5 August 2015.
31. This has included South Korean and Japanese as well as European and North American targets. See Jack Kim, 'South Korea Moves Libya Embassy Staff to Tunisia after Attack', *Reuters*, 14 April 2015; *BBC News*, 'Islamic State "Behind Blast" at Italian Consulate in Cairo', 11 July 2015.
32. Mark Piggott, 'ISIS Militants are Being "Smuggled to Europe in Migrant Boats", Libyan Government Adviser', *International Business Times*, 17 May 2015.

It seems unlikely that a group of such substantial means would send tasked fighters on such a risky route when fake passports could be acquired relatively easily, enabling a circuitous set of flights or a legitimate (and safer) trip by boat across the Mediterranean. That said, migrant flows may be accompanied by social frictions resulting from the influx of people into Europe. An already-ascendant political right wing stands to benefit from such tensions, with the possible consequence of driving even greater numbers towards ISIS and its ideology.

The Response

So far, the counter-terrorism response to ISIS has in many ways been an extension of longstanding efforts to counter Al-Qa'ida-linked groups.

Previous counter-terrorism efforts designed to uproot insurgent organisations suggest it is difficult to eradicate groups using air power alone.[33] The largely US-led effort using drone strikes in Pakistan's tribal regions in 2004–13 is a good example of how such a targeted campaign can harass and substantially reduce a group's operating capacity; however, it has not eliminated Al-Qa'ida, and in some ways has merely displaced it. The Sri Lankan government's campaign against the Tamil Tigers is often cited as an example of success in using traditional military means to defeat a terrorist group, but its razed-earth campaign also raised numerous human-rights questions,[34] and it remains unclear whether the causes underlying the group's emergence have been eradicated. In short, while air strikes – whether manned or unmanned – can address individual threats or disrupt specific plots, a survey of past attempts suggests that a more holistic approach is required to destroy terrorist groups.[35]

It is still unclear whether the UK has established a complete strategy to counter ISIS propaganda and related online activity, or has yet come to fully understand how the particular threats emerging in terms of radicalisation, lone-actor terrorism or online instigation are developing. In some respects, online activity will always be difficult if not impossible to counter. There is a role for taking down content, but it is almost impossible to remove it from the Internet completely.

In many ways, the increasing reliance of ISIS on the Internet and social media does represent an opportunity: once networks are known and understood, they can be penetrated and potentially disrupted. However, it should be borne in mind that the Internet and social media are merely tools for terrorist groups, rather than root causes of radicalisation. While monitoring and gaining access to such communication can assist in the disruption of individual plots, this will not eliminate the problem. Other practical responses are therefore required.

33. The military aspects of the counter-terrorism response are covered in greater detail in the Introduction of this occasional paper.
34. Human Rights Watch, 'Sri Lanka: US War Crimes Report Details Extensive Abuses', 22 October 2009.
35. Audrey Kurth Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends: Understanding the Decline and Demise of Terrorist Campaigns* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).

Counter-Radicalisation

British efforts to counter radicalisation have been enhanced in response to ISIS, with great emphasis placed on foreign fighters. There has been an increase in the number of referrals to the Channel programme (an element of the UK government's Prevent counter-terrorism strategy).[36] Community-engagement efforts have been bolstered and there has been an attempt to define violent extremism in contrast to extremism.[37] Authorities across the country have reached out to Muslim communities to convince them of the negative consequences of their young men and women going to Syria and Iraq, including their possible death there or incarceration upon their return.[38] The focus of police and local-government efforts has been on family outreach,[39] institutionalising counter- and de-radicalisation efforts through the government's Prevent strategy as a statutory requirement,[40] and raising awareness among educational establishments of the problems around radicalisation and ISIS.[41] The government has also made it clear that schools and universities must take responsibility for the speakers, amongst others, who are on their campuses.[42] However, there has been some pushback on this suggestion by educational establishments, and absent an agreed definition of an 'illegal speaker', it remains unclear how this will be enforced.

Unfortunately, this outreach has been undermined by the use of emotive language to characterise the threat as well as counterproductive accusations that communities are failing to respond to a threat within.[43] It is clear that there are some elements within the UK's Muslim communities whose use of Manichean perspectives and polarising language – characterising the British government as anti-Muslim – are deliberately provocative. In some extreme cases, they may help to create the context in which some will explore more violent extremist ideas. However, these individuals are a minority who speak for few. Ultimately, many in these communities enjoy living in the UK's free and multicultural society and do not want their fellow citizens to die

36. Home Affairs Select Committee, 'Counter-Terrorism: Foreign Fighters', 26 March 2015, <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmselect/cmhaff/933/93305.htm>, accessed 30 September 2015.
37. David Cameron, 'Extremism: PM Speech', speech given at Ninestiles School, Birmingham, 20 July 2015.
38. Tom Whitehead, 'Parents Urged to Inform on Would-Be Jihadist Children', *Daily Telegraph*, 25 June 2015.
39. *BBC News*, 'Police Make Syria Plea to UK Muslim Women', 24 April 2014.
40. David Cameron, 'Letter to the Chair of the Committee from the Rt Hon David Cameron MP, Prime Minister', 2 March 2015, <http://www.parliament.uk/documents/commons-committees/liaison/Letter-from-the-PM-in-response-to-evidence-on-24-February-2015.pdf>, accessed 26 August 2015.
41. Department for Education and Nicky Morgan, 'New Safeguarding Advice for Schools and Childcare Providers', 1 July 2015, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-safeguarding-advice-for-schools-and-childcare-providers>, accessed 26 August 2015.
42. Prime Minister's Office, 'PM's Extremism Taskforce: Tackling Extremism in Universities and Colleges Top of the Agenda', 17 September 2015, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/pms-extremism-taskforce-tackling-extremism-in-universities-and-colleges-top-of-the-agenda>, accessed 30 September 2015.
43. Peter Dominiczak, Gordon Rayner and Ben Farmer, 'Tunisia Attack: David Cameron Calls on UK Muslims to Act if They Suspect Someone of Being an Extremist', *Daily Telegraph*, 29 June 2015.

alongside ISIS. Garnering their support is something that will only be possible in an environment where the government uses less confrontational language.

There is also the problem of a growing right wing within British society that has taken advantage of the emergence of a new generation of radicalised young men and women to strengthen its own 'clash of civilisations' narrative. Groups like the English Defence League continue to fuel community tensions.[44] Some cases are particularly contorted, such as Nazi-obsessive Zachary Davies, claim to have been 'inspired' by ISIS's 'Jihadi John' videos to seek revenge for the May 2013 murder of Lee Rigby by attacking at random an Asian individual at his local Tesco while shouting about 'white power'.[45] Despite the contradictions of the case, it nevertheless highlights the dangerous mix of ideologies related to ISIS present in the UK. The right wing has taken advantage of this situation (as an extension of the continuing threat from violent Islamist terrorism more broadly) to construct its socially divisive narrative of 'Muslims versus others', alienating British Muslim communities further. For government officials also to talk publicly in such terms only appears to breathe life into these narratives.

Dealing with Foreign Fighters

With regards to foreign fighters, to complement counter-radicalisation work and community engagement, a major focus has been on the prevention of travel to Syria or Iraq. For those already believed to be fighting abroad, royal prerogative has been deployed to withdraw or refuse passports[46] – something that happened twenty-one times in the year prior to November 2014, according to Home Office Minister Lord Bates.[47]

These measures are not necessarily fundamental solutions: although individuals' lives are made more difficult by the fact that they are stranded abroad, other countries will then have to deal with them. Confiscating the passports of individuals who want to travel but are still in the UK is a more effective strategy. This is not always easy to implement, however, and there are additional actions that could be taken, such as engaging these individuals through programmes like Channel.

Another question that remains unanswered is what to do with those foreign fighters returning from Iraq or Syria who do not pose a threat to British society. Not every foreign fighter will end up a domestic terrorist.[48] Ascertaining who is of concern is a pressing issue,[49] as is answering

44. For one recent example, see Gael Stigant and Alex Evans, 'EDL and Anti-Fascist Groups Demonstrate in Sheffield', *Star*, 4 July 2015.
45. Jennifer Newton and Liz Hull, 'White Supremacist Who Called Jihadi John an "Inspiration" is Found Guilty of Trying to Kill Asian Dentist with Machete and Hammer in Front of Horrified Tesco Shoppers', *Mail Online*, 25 June 2015.
46. May, 'Home Secretary: We Must Work Together to Defeat Terrorism'.
47. Michael Bates, 'Written Answers', *Hansard*, House of Lords, 18 November 2014, Col. WA108.
48. Thomas Hegghammer, 'Should I Stay or Should I Go? Explaining Variation in Western Jihadists' Choice between Domestic and Foreign Fighting', *American Political Science Review* (Vol. 107, No. 1, February 2013).
49. Determining who is a threat is a difficult task primarily undertaken by intelligence services, with the possible involvement of psychologists. There are a number of aspects to these assessments,

the question of what should be done with those who are not of concern but otherwise require management due to conflict-associated psychological issues. During the British election campaign of spring 2015, the Labour Party suggested it wanted to develop de-radicalisation and re-integration programmes aimed at returnees, but did not specify what these might look like beyond emulating what has been tried in other countries such as Denmark.[50] Currently, British legislation is almost entirely focused on detention and prevention. Consideration needs to be given to dealing with those who do not pose a threat, potentially using the less expensive process of de-radicalisation.

Dealing with Lone Actors

The related problems of lone actors and online instigation are the most difficult aspects of the threat posed by ISIS to understand and track. It is an unfortunate reality that it is impossible to identify every individual attracted to the group's ideas who might ultimately mature into a terrorist plotter. Nevertheless, deeper understanding is required of the dynamics of online instigation and how ISIS uses this channel of mass communication. Currently, it appears to be largely opportunistic in its efforts to inspire followers and initiate plots, more likely seeking to confuse than pursue a more significant strategic goal. Nevertheless, considering the group's success so far,[51] this should be an area of focused analysis for the UK government, exploring in particular whether the group might eventually be more targeted in its online outreach. Having achieved a consistency of success that Al-Qa'ida could not, ISIS's ability to inspire and facilitate lone actors is a key counter-terrorism question that must be addressed.

Activity Beyond the UK's Borders

Looking overseas, the principal vehicle for engagement – beyond air operations in Syria and Iraq – is building capacity among local friendly forces to counter ISIS and its affiliates. There has been mixed success in this so far,[52] but the UK would benefit from greater engagement and co-ordination at a European level to ensure that limited resources are allocated effectively. Large conferences that focus on individual at-risk countries have a role to play. However, at the heart of efforts to protect British nationals and interests overseas is the provision of on-the-ground training and support in countering violent extremism, as well as mitigating the risk of returnee foreign fighters, whether through their detention, developing local security forces, establishing de-radicalisation courses or providing more intelligence-based support.

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such as an individual's personal history; who he interacted with and his location when in Syria or Iraq; any weapons or training received; his views on the conflict; any ongoing contact with those on the battlefield; and his honesty in recounting experiences and providing information on others. All of this can be ascertained through (observational) interviews and supporting evidence. The process would likely be based on imperfect information, however, making long-term, probationary-type engagement necessary in most cases.

50. Tim Mansel, 'How I Was De-Radicalised', *BBC World Service*, 2 July 2015.
51. Given the confusing nature of such plots, and the purposefully opaque coverage in the media, it is unclear how many attempted attacks can be characterised as such. One example is the case of the boy from Blackburn convicted in Australia in July 2015.
52. *Al Jazeera America*, 'US Behind on Training Syrians for ISIL Fight', 8 July 2015.

As the ISIS threat evolves and potentially connects with other security challenges, such as the European migrant crisis, activity overseas will have to be increased. This might take the form of action to deal with the root causes of instability abroad. However, it might also involve exploring kinetic options in response to specific threats, including the disruption of human-smuggling networks, securing areas where terrorists have established bases, or rescuing nationals overseas under threat from terrorist groups.

Conclusion

In little over a year, ISIS has grown into a multidimensional, international terrorist threat to the UK. At home, British counter-terrorism forces have proven adept at penetrating and disrupting networks. However, the locus of the threat has now moved to the periphery of known networks, and understanding these new dynamics is difficult. The issue of returning foreign fighters preoccupies the British government and its security forces, but of equal concern is the domestic threat posed by potential lone-actor terrorists, inspired and facilitated by both sources at home and material online. Moreover, managing the threat posed by ISIS as it evolves will remain a principal concern of the British security services for the foreseeable future.

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