



Military options in Iraq

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The UK Government is not planning a British military intervention in Iraq. The [Foreign Secretary](#) ruled out a military intervention in comments made after news emerged of the [takeover of Mosul](#) by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS).

The US President, Barack Obama, has [ruled out](#) sending US troops back into combat in Iraq. But he remains open to other military options that could help support the Iraqi security forces. He has tied military support to political reconciliation.

William Hague said the UK Government is looking at other ways to help, possibly offering “counter-terrorist expertise.” The [Guardian](#) quotes officials suggesting this could take the form of sending military and police as part of a ‘counter-terrorism’ package. The [Sunday Times](#) reports a small team of SAS officers and MI6 operatives are travelling to Baghdad to gain a better feel for the crisis and to ensure the evacuation plans at the British embassy are sound. The [Telegraph](#) points out that SAS forces were sent to Libya in 2011 despite the Prime Minister’s vow that there would be no “British boots on the ground.”

The former Prime Minister, [Tony Blair](#), has written of the need to counter extremists hard, with force. He added “this does not mean Western troops as in Iraq. There are masses of responses we can make short of that. But they need to know that wherever they’re engaged in terror, we will be hitting them.”

The Deputy Prime Minister, Nick Clegg, confirmed the Government does not intend to provide “active frontline military resources” to any action in Iraq. According to the [Guardian](#), Mr Clegg said “we should be very clear that we are not minded to – and that is across the coalition – start being embroiled in further military activities ourselves in Iraq.” However he added the UK would not “stand in the way of action that is well judged and well-targeted. I am not suggesting we will rule out passive assistance even if we are not going to embark on our own active role. We are not going to start deploying British military forces in Iraq. We will equally not stand in the way of America, in particular, seeking to take well-judged, targeted action. That is why it is sensible of President Obama to take his time to assess options. Obviously we will be comparing notes.”

Members of the House of Commons [voted against](#) possible UK military action in Syria in August. Mr Hague told the BBC [Radio 4 Today](#) programme “we did have a bad experience of being defeated in the Commons but I do not think ... people should conclude from that that the House of Commons is never prepared to authorise military action. That would be a misreading of parliament.”

The UK has in recent years provided logistical and surveillance support to allies. The UK provided military assets to French operations in Mali and the Central African Republic in 2013 and early 2014 in the form of strategic airlift and surveillance and reconnaissance

capabilities (C17 air transport aircraft in both Mali and the Central African Republic and Sentinel surveillance aircraft in Mali).

So what are the military options for the US? The US withdrew its forces from Iraq at the end of 2011, when the 2009 US-Iraq Security Agreement expired. Negotiations to extend the presence of US troops collapsed when Iraq refused to extend the legal protections contained in the existing Security Agreement, a red line for the Pentagon. [US Central Command](#) has about 35,000 US military personnel in the wider Middle East region.

[Reuter's](#) reports "US officials say options under consideration include air strikes on Sunni insurgents threatening the Shi'ite-led government, accelerated delivery of weapons and expanded training of Iraqi security forces. The U.S. already has increased intelligence-gathering flights by drone aircraft over Iraq."

US Rear Admiral [John Kirby](#) said the range of military options being developed will be designed "to help break the momentum of ISL's progress and bolster Iraqi security forces." He said the immediate goal is to present the President with options to break the momentum of ISIS. However he echoed the President's line that responsibility for security ultimately lies with the Iraqi government and security forces.

[Reuters](#) suggest one option is a phased approach, involving firstly trying to shore up Iraqi forces and possibly resorting to more direct military action if the situation deteriorates further. The [Wall Street Journal](#) expanded on this line, with officials suggesting the first moves will include "stepped-up intelligence sharing with the Iraqis, along with expanded tactical and operational planning help, locating targets and advising the top brass of the Iraqi military."

The US has bolstered its naval presence in the region – Bahrain is home to the Navy's 5th fleet. The US Defence Secretary [ordered](#) the [USS George H. W. Bush](#) Nimitz-class aircraft carrier into the Gulf, from the Arabian Sea, on 14 June 2014. It will be accompanied by the guided-missile cruiser USS [Philippine Sea](#) and the guided-missile destroyer USS [Truxtun](#). The George H.W. Bush was already in the region as the assigned Carrier Strike Group for the Navy's 5th fleet, which is permanently based in the Gulf, in Bahrain. On 16 June, 550 US Marines were deployed to the Gulf aboard the amphibious transport dock ship USS [Mesa Verde](#), according to [Reuters](#). The Congressional Research Service has written a briefing [on naval counter-terrorism operations](#). The US can of course deploy aircraft from land bases across the region, with appropriate permission.

However there are concerns about the use of airstrikes. The Pentagon said "kinetic strikes.. can be incredibly effective and powerful when done in the right way to achieve objectives." [Time](#) magazine quotes Stephen Biddle, a military analyst with the Council on Foreign Relations, who doesn't think air strikes will accomplish much. "We had a lot of troops on the ground in 2006 and we weren't able to bring this thing to a finale," Biddle says. "Now we think we're going to do it with airstrikes alone? Very unlikely."

The [Wall Street Journal](#) raises concerns by officials about whether Iraqi military units would be in a position to take advantage of an air strike on a militant target, thus questioning the purpose of an airstrike. [CNN](#) likewise quotes US officials who worry about the lack of good intelligence about where ISIS members might be. Air strikes can be very effective against military bases and command and control centres but targeting fighters spread out amongst population centres could cause civilian casualties and destruction of property. Simply put, the US doesn't currently have targets to hit, administrative sources told CNN.

In addition, the accuracy and effectiveness of an air strike can be significantly enhanced by spotters on the ground, who can guide missiles and bombs to the correct target. This can also reduce the risk of civilian casualties. A former chief of US Central Command, [Anthony Zinni](#), suggests US Special Forces could provide that level of intelligence, but that involves putting American soldiers on the ground. The [Sunday Times](#) suggests the SAS soldiers and MI6 operatives reportedly on their way to Iraq could be tasked with identifying possible targets.

The US has options with both manned and unmanned aircraft. MQ-1 Predators carry Hellfire missiles while MQ-9 Reapers also carry precision-guided 500-pound bombs. The advantage of unmanned aircraft is it removes the risk of loss of a pilot. [UK personnel](#), embedded at Creech Air Force base, have flown US Remotely Piloted Aerial Systems in support of operations in Iraq, Libya and Afghanistan.

The US has upped the level of SR (intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance) support it gives to the Iraqis in recent days in response to a request from the Iraqi Government.

[Nathan Freier](#), writing for the Centre for Strategic and International Studies, suggests an infusion of “command and control, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR), air- and sea-based precision fire support, and, perhaps most controversially, combat advising capabilities.” He also supports shoring up direct US military support to Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), by providing high-priority equipment and training, ISR, logistics and combat advising.

A further option is to bolster the Iraqi armed forces by speeding up and increasing the transfer of military equipment to Iraq. Earlier this year Iraq took delivery of a [range of equipment](#), including about 300 Hellfire missiles, M16 assault rifles, millions of rounds of small-arms fire, tank ammunition and helicopter-fired rockets. Previous deliveries include M1A1 Abrams tanks and vehicles.

The US has sought to bolster the Iraqi Air Force, amid concerns about its capabilities. US lawmakers have held up [planned deliveries](#) of [F-16 combat aircraft](#) and AH-64 Apache helicopters to Iraq because of concerns about their use by the Iraqi Air Force. Instead, the Iraqi government turned to Russia for attack helicopters, which began arriving in Iraq late last year. Jane’s Defence Weekly has monitored the delivery of Russian Mi-35s and 40 Mi-28 ‘Havoc’ attack helicopters to Iraq. Iraq has also signed a deal with South Korea for [FA-50 light fighter](#) aircraft.

The danger for Washington is knowing whether advanced equipment may end up in the hands of ISIS. Baghdad admitted that two divisions of Iraqi army soldiers, about 30,000 men, deserted their positions in Mosul in the face of ISIS. The [Guardian](#) reports insurgents had stripped al-Qayara, the main army base in Mosul, and that ISIS had released footage of large numbers of weapons and armoured military vehicles being moved to eastern Syria. Equipment is said to include armoured Humvees, rockets, ammunition and assault weapons.

[US officials](#) admitted they had limited intelligence on what was taken: “we don’t have a really perfect sense on exactly what they’ve got and their capabilities of using what they’ve got.” Rear Admiral Kirby added the US was disappointed in and didn’t expect the performance of the Iraqi soldiers who deserted their bases. A former US Ambassador to Iraq, James Jeffrey, [described](#) Iraq’s military as “ill-trained, badly led and not particularly competent.”

House of Commons Library related briefing: [Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant \(ISIS\) and the takeover of Mosul](#)