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The UK's Creeping Intervention in Syria

Paul Rogers

Summary

This briefing summarises Britain's recent involvement in the war against Islamic State (IS) in the context of the progress of the movement and questions whether a commitment to continuing and extending air and drone strikes is the most appropriate and useful response that the UK can make to the crisis.

In doing so, it seeks to develop the analysis in recent ORG briefings, specifically the July briefing, [Responding to the Tunisia Attack](#), and August's briefing, [Islamic State and Revolts from the Margins](#). The first of these argued that an enhanced UK military role might be counterproductive and suggested that a far greater focus on humanitarian support and diplomatic initiatives would be more appropriate. The second pointed to a worrying trend of IS success in Syria and also its expansion into new regions.

Incremental UK role in Syria

Two years ago the House of Commons voted against British involvement in any western bombing campaign against the Syrian government. With a change in focus to combating IS rather than Assad's forces, that issue is now returning to parliament. It does so in the wake of the election to the Labour Party leadership of Jeremy Corbyn, an opponent of the current air war, and at a time when Prime Minister David Cameron appears confident that he will get a majority in the Commons in favour of extending UK air and drone strikes against IS from Iraq to Syria. This is also happening when there is a major refugee crisis affecting the European Union, Russia is increasing its support for the Assad regime, and Australia and France seem likely to extend their air attacks from Iraq to Syria.

Over the past year, the UK government has been able to increase UK forces involvement in Syria in three ways, all the time acting in such a way as to avoid parliamentary disapproval.

- RAF pilots embedded with the Royal Canadian Air Force have been engaged in airstrikes in Syria, most likely flying CF-18 strike aircraft. The Ministry of Defence described this as being part of regular exchange programmes and that it did not mean an escalation of UK involvement, although Mr Cameron did agree that he was aware of this development.
- British Special Forces, probably members of the Special Reconnaissance Regiment, were involved with US Special Forces in a raid earlier this year on a compound near Deir ez-Zor in Syria that was intended to capture a senior Islamic

State logistics organiser, Abu Sayyaf. The aim was to bring him into custody for appropriate interrogation, given that he had direct knowledge of the whole IS organisation. Although the raid was represented by the Pentagon as a success, it failed in its main task when Abu Sayyaf was killed during the raid.

- A British MQ-9 Reaper drone attack with Hellfire missiles was used to kill two British IS paramilitaries, Reyaad Khan and Ruhul Amin, in August, the justification being that Khan was orchestrating major attacks in the UK. The government made it clear that there might be further such raids.

These incremental developments appear to have helped prepare the way for a political climate at Westminster which would be more conducive to giving approval for an escalation in UK involvement. From a governmental perspective this might serve the added political purpose of demonstrating divisions within the Labour Party between a new leadership adamantly opposed to an escalation and a number of backbenches likely to rebel.

The State of the War

At the end of the first year of the air war in early August the Pentagon estimated that US forces and their coalition partners had killed 15,000 IS supporters. There were no figures given for civilian casualties or for the make-up of IS supporters killed – whether they were armed paramilitaries, support personnel or paid employees serving transport and other functions. While the overwhelming majority of the deaths were as a result of US actions, other states were significant. In [response to a parliamentary question](#), Defence Secretary Michael Fallon has just given an official estimate of “around 330” IS fighters killed by UK air strikes up to end of August.

In spite of the very heavy losses for IS, assessments from US intelligence agencies were that the overall strength of IS had not decreased at all, meaning that the losses were being made up either with recruits travelling from other countries or by increased recruitment within Iraq and Syria. In Iraq, in particular, there was abundant evidence that the Iraqi Air Force, now operational with F-16 strike aircraft, was engaged in air operations against IS units located in Sunni towns and villages, especially in Anbar Province, and the operations so lacked discrimination and resulted in high civilian casualties that there was increased antagonism to the Abadi government in Baghdad and support for IS.

The level of activity of IS appeared to have been limited in Iraq through to early August but during the course of the month a much-heralded Iraqi Army assault on the provincial capital of Ramadi failed to make progress while IS itself made some gains around the town and important oil processing centre of Baiji. More significantly, IS has gained substantial new territory in Syria, especially the strategically important town of Palmyra with its location on a key transport route between southern Syria and Iraq.

While the United States and its western partners have put substantial efforts into training and equipping armed opposition groups in Syria and governmental forces in Iraq, the performance of both sets of forces has been consistently weak, especially with Iraqi Army units that have acquired a reputation for brutality.

In the context of the current Iraq and Syria operations IS is aided by a decreased involvement of Arab Gulf States because of commitments to the recent Saudi-led war in Yemen. Furthermore, even over the last month, increased involvement of IS in Libya has been reported, anti-government actions by extreme Islamist groups in Egypt have increased, an IS affiliate has claimed to have conducted a raid against a Russia Army camp in the Caucasus and the US Air Force has had to substantially increase its actions against a greater IS presence in Afghanistan.

Western Escalation

In short, the western coalition air war against IS is not succeeding and IS itself is succeeding at presenting the entire war as a western assault on Islam, repeatedly citing offensive western military action in recent years against Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Yemen, Pakistan and Syria.

The attitude of the Obama administration is key in anticipating what will now be done, and all the indications are that there will not be a reorientation towards a full-scale ground war but that there will be a substantial escalation in air operations. Indeed, this is already happening with the recently acquired availability of the large air base at Incirlik in southern Turkey which is only twenty minutes flight time from northern Syria.

With the likely addition of France and Australia to the air war in Syria, and the possibility of UK involvement, this enables the United States to present an intensified air war as the correct and united response, even though the evidence of more than a year of air strikes is that this approach is simply not working. The problem is that this appears to be still the only policy that the coalition is prepared to implement.

Moreover, Russian support for the Assad regime is currently being strengthened, not least because the Putin government sees a closer relationship developing between western states and its most important regional ally, Iran. Moscow sees this rapprochement as threatening to its regional and international standing and is attempting to bolster its standing by increasing its presence and role in Syria.

Alternative Approaches

The ORG briefing in July concluded that UK military retaliation to the Sousse attacks would not be helpful and that much more could be done to provide far greater humanitarian relief and also use Britain's undoubted regional diplomatic skills and experience to bring the proxies to the conflict closer together. There was also a need to work intensely with states that were seeing an increase in extreme Islamism, including Kenya and Nigeria, avoiding persistent repression while responding to underlying social conditions that so aid jihadist groups' recruitment potential.

In the past months that approach has receded and the prospect is for an intensifying war in which the UK is going to play a more prominent role. What has to be remembered here is two consequences that follow from this. The first is that IS positively wants war and will be particularly pleased if the UK increases its involvement, using this to improve its recruitment base within the UK. The second is that an expanded air war will inevitably mean more destruction and even more dislocation of populations. At a time when there is a rapidly increasing problem of refugee flows into Europe as more people become desperate, adding to the war will only exacerbate the problem.

In the current state of UK politics, it is unlikely that such views will have much traction with government and in the short term we should expect an intensification of the war. There is some hope that an Obama-Putin meeting during the forthcoming UN General Assembly might lead to new policy initiatives but the prospect is not good. In the current political climate Britain, in particular, seems unlikely to play a helpful role. That does not mean that critical analysis should be neglected, nor that positive alternatives should not be publicised with vigour. Indeed, the need for such actions is actually heightened at a time of an increasingly war-orientated mood.

About the Author

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