



## BRIEFING PAPER

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# Iraq and Syria update October 2016

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## Summary

In both Iraq and Syria there has been some progress in the fight to push back ISIS/Daesh. Fighting the extremist group in both countries remains a slow process, however.

In Syria, the situation has deteriorated sharply in recent days, as the ceasefire established in September 2016 quickly fell apart as Syrian government forces were struck accidentally and a UN humanitarian convoy was destroyed.

Observers had hoped that it might be the basis for pushing ahead with negotiations on a political solution; its collapse led to airstrikes on an unprecedented scale in Aleppo, causing many civilian deaths. Aleppo may be in for a humanitarian crisis of horrifying proportions. Relations between the US and Russia over Syria are particularly frosty.

In Iraq, the Iraqi government supported by international coalition forces and Iran-backed Shiite militias has had more success in retaking territory from ISIS, and an operation to push ISIS out of Mosul is said to be imminent.

The way that ISIS is being tackled has only underlined the fact that the fundamental problems besetting Iraq are not being resolved, and could be made worse.

Pushed out of territory in Iraq and Syria, ISIS may turn increasingly to mass-casualty attacks elsewhere; a string of recent atrocities in Europe made that possibility clear.

The UK continues to participate in the international military coalitions acting in Iraq and Syria, and to be among the forefront of giving humanitarian assistance to the refugee relief effort.

# 1. Syria

## 1.1 Cessation of hostilities

US Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov reached a broad deal on 9 September 2016, involving a ceasefire and access for humanitarian agencies to besieged cities. The deal was to come into force on 12 September.

### Assad forces attacked

On 17 September, anti-government forces struck Assad government forces near Deir ez-Zour, an accident according to Western sources. The Ministry of Defence says:

On Saturday 17 September, a Reaper joined other coalition aircraft in a strike against a reported Daesh position south of Dayr az Zawr in Syria, but this was later alleged to have in fact been a position held by Syrian regime forces; a detailed investigation into the incident is being conducted by the coalition.<sup>1</sup>

The US side, too, said that the strikes were a mistake.<sup>2</sup>

### Ceasefire collapses

On 19 September, the latest cessation of hostilities agreed between Russia and the US collapsed. The Syrian government announced the end of the freeze during the day on 19 September,<sup>3</sup>

It had in any case been violated by both sides regularly and aid had been blocked by pro-Government forces, particularly around Aleppo. From that date on the level of violence in Aleppo reached unprecedented new heights as pro-government forces intensified their attacks in and around the east of Aleppo, presently held by the rebels. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said that the “heaviest airstrikes on rebel-held areas of the northern city in five years” had taken place, with some 320 civilians dead and 765 injured in the first days after the collapse of the ceasefire.<sup>4</sup>

The Syrian Foreign Minister said that the Damascus Government was willing to consider a power sharing government with representatives of the opposition, something which they had previously ruled out.

### UN aid convoy attacked

On 19 September, a United Nations convoy and warehouse with aid for residents of the Aleppo region were attacked in sustained airstrikes, resulting in 20 deaths including the head of the Syrian Arab Red Crescent in Urum al-Kubra, and the destruction of 18 of the 31 convoy trucks and severe damage to a nearby clinic Western sources suspected Russia.

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<sup>1</sup> [‘Update: air strikes against Daesh’](#), Ministry of Defence press release, 29 January 2016

<sup>2</sup> John Kerry, [Remarks at a UN Security Council High-Level Briefing on Syria](#), US Delegation to the UN, 21 September 2016

<sup>3</sup> [‘Syrian army declares end of ceasefire’](#), *Deutsche Welle*, 19 September 2016

<sup>4</sup> [Daily press briefing by the Office of the Spokesperson for the Secretary General](#), 29 September 2016

The UN, the Red Crescent and other aid groups suspended all their aid operations in Syria after the attack on the convoy and UN described the attack as a possible war crime. The Secretary-General called for an immediate, impartial and independent investigation.

The US said that it had reached a preliminary conclusion that Russia had carried out the attack. Secretary of State said that the Russian government had changed its story several times, saying at various points that the attack was justified, denying that there had been one, and saying that neither Russia nor Syria had been involved.<sup>5</sup>

In a story from the *Russia Today* news website on 20 September, the Russian defence minister said:

We have closely studied the video footage from where the incident took place and we did not find any signs of any ammunition having hit the convoy. There are no craters, while the vehicles have their chassis intact and they have not been severely damaged, which would have been the case from an airstrike. All of the video footage demonstrates that the convoy caught fire, which strangely happened almost at exactly at the same time as militants started a large scale offensive on Aleppo.

Russia also said that Syrian air forces did not carry out any attack.

Anti-government militants on the ground said that it was unlikely that the Syrian air force had carried out the attack because it was so accurate even though it was carried out at night.<sup>6</sup> Russia supported the call for a UN investigation, but there are suggestions that there might be disagreement among Security Council member states as to the scope of the investigation and whether its findings would be reported back to the Security Council.<sup>7</sup>

On 30 September the Secretary General set up a UN Board of Inquiry.<sup>8</sup>

## Health services

Syria faces an escalation of violence and even more difficulties for agencies trying to alleviate the suffering of civilians. At the same time, there is increasing concern about the destruction of medical facilities as two hospitals in Aleppo were deliberately attacked. UN Secretary General said on 28 September that war crimes were being committed:

This morning, we awoke to reports of strikes on two more hospitals in Aleppo. Let us be clear. Those using ever more destructive weapons know exactly what they are doing. They know they are committing war crimes.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> John Kerry, [Remarks at a UN Security Council High-Level Briefing on Syria](#), US Delegation to the UN, 21 September 2016

<sup>6</sup> [‘Syria aid convoy attack: what evidence is there that Russia is to blame?’](#), *Guardian*, 21 September 2016

<sup>7</sup> What’s in Blue, [Syria: Briefing on Humanitarian Situation](#), 28 September 2016

<sup>8</sup>

<sup>9</sup> [‘After Strikes on Syrian Hospitals, Secretary-General Says ‘Even Slaughterhouse Is More Humane’, Urging Action as Security Council Debates Health Care in Conflict’](#), United Nations Secretary General statement, 28 September 2016

On 3 May 2016 the Security Council adopted resolution 2286 (2016) on the protection of medical care in armed conflict around the world, and the Security Council debated the problem on 28 September.

## 1.2 Control of terrain

The Institute for the Study of War published a [control of terrain map for 8-22 September 2016](#) showing that the Kurds hold significant amounts of territory in the north and east of the country.<sup>10</sup> The territory controlled by the respective forces has not changed radically in the last few months, according to the ISW,<sup>11</sup> although 'moderate' opposition forces have increased the area they control along the Turkish border, at the expense of ISIS.

ISW's researches indicate that pro-regime airstrikes in the middle of September took place predominantly against the yellow-marked opposition forces' areas while US/Coalition airstrikes take place in areas held by ISIS/Daesh, especially along the borders of areas held by Kurdish forces.

Such maps do not tell the whole story, however, since much of the battle has centred on Aleppo in recent months. The regime and its supporters are prioritising the fight for the eastern suburbs of Syria's commercial capital, leading to very high civilian casualties.

## 1.3 Turkish intervention

Another dramatic development in northern Syria has been the military intervention by Turkey. The attempted coup in July by elements of the military was followed by wide-ranging purges of the military as the government of Recep Tayyip Erdogan asserted much stronger control. Some commentators suggested that the coup would weaken Turkey's commitment to the fight against ISIS, as the Turkish President would be concentrated on shoring up his rule.

The opposite seems to be the case, however. Previously reluctant to get involved, the army has intervened strongly since the coup, helping Syrian rebel forces (not Kurdish ones) take the border town of Jarabalus from ISIS, with air cover from Turkish and US warplanes.<sup>12</sup>

The Turkish intervention, called Operation *Euphrates Shield*, has also been made possible by Turkey's warming relations with Russia, which were damaged by the shooting down of a Russian warplane by Turkey in 2015. Erdogan recently expressed his regret for the attack, which resulted in the death of one of the pilots and one serviceman sent to the rescue. Since the improvement in relations, Russian and Turkish forces are less likely to come into conflict in Syria.

Turkish forces have also come into conflict with Kurds; as well as pushing ISIS back from their borders, the Turks are keen to prevent Kurds from unifying the eastern and western areas they hold along the

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<sup>10</sup> Institute for the Study of War, [Syria Situation Report: September 8 - 22, 2016](#)

<sup>11</sup> Institute for the Study of War, [Syria Situation Report: June 18 - 24, 2016](#)

<sup>12</sup> ['With Operation in Syria, Erdogan Shows His New Power Over Turkey's Military'](#), *New York Times*, 25 August 2015

Turkish border, aiming at present to clear Kurds from the border area west of the River Euphrates and consolidate that split.

In September, Erdogan announced Turkey's intention to push further south to the town of Bab, some 20km south of the Turkish border, in territory held by ISIS.

## Turkish border

The fact that ISIS lost the last of its territory along the Turkish border at the beginning of September 2016 is crucial. By far the easiest route for supplies and new recruits to reach ISIS has been across the Turkish border; Turkish, US and Kurdish efforts against the radicals have closed that route off. The Turkish push towards Bab will threaten the ISIS 'capital' of Al-Raqqah and the anti-ISIS coalition hopes that the core of the ISIS 'caliphate', the area around Raqqah and to the north and west of the city, could be broken up.

## 1.4 Prospects for a negotiated settlement

The collapse of the September 2016 cessation of hostilities was a blow to the hopes for a political settlement for Syria. The deal, which had been arrived at in Geneva in early September after months of talks, provided for Russia and the US to carry out coordinated attacks on ISIS and Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, affiliated to al-Qaeda and formerly known as Jabhat al-Nusra. Diplomats hoped that Russia and the US could then build on the ceasefire to move towards a negotiated settlement. The deal, however, did not have a robust enforcement mechanism and, violated from the start, certainly did not provide a platform for any such progress.

### Aleppo assault

After the collapse of the cessation, relations between Moscow and Washington became very frosty. Moscow offered only vague support for substituting the failed cessation with limited truces to allow aid to reach particular destinations.<sup>13</sup>

As intense bombardment of Aleppo continued, US Secretary of State John Kerry said that he would withdraw from talks with Russia unless Syria and Russia stopped their military action. Kerry stressed that it was Russia's responsibility to stop the assault and allow humanitarian access to rebel areas of Aleppo.<sup>14</sup>

The assault by Syrian Government forces, backed by militias, Iranian ground forces and Russian air power, on Aleppo intensified at the beginning of October.<sup>15</sup>

Although the Syrian government has said that it would consider a transitional government with the participation of opposition figures (see

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<sup>13</sup> Institute for the Study of War, [Syria Situation Report: September 8 - 22, 2016](#)

<sup>14</sup> [Secretary Kerry's Call With Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov](#), US State Department press release, 28 September 2016

<sup>15</sup> ['Syrian government forces advance on rebel-held Aleppo'](#), *al-Jazeera*, 5 October 2016

above) many, particularly Syrians on the ground, are sceptical about such statements.

In September the Syrian opposition's High Negotiating Commission set out its proposals for a transition, including a ceasefire, the establishment of a transitional government that would not include "Assad and his clique" and would last for a year, and a national dialogue; and elections leading to a final settlement bringing government based on:

- separation of powers
- independence of judiciary
- freedom of the press
- political impartiality of the military and armed forces which shall be under the control of the legitimate government
- government supported by a parliamentary majority.<sup>16</sup>

The High Negotiation Commission proposals envisage the preservation of Syria's territorial integrity.

Talks remain deadlocked on the fate of President Assad and the fact of the continued military campaign against rebel-held areas.

Some commentators think that the scale of destruction now means that divisions are ever more entrenched, on sectarian, ethnic and geographic lines. That might mean that radical decentralisation might be the only way to save the Syrian state.<sup>17</sup>

Although the ceasefire collapsed, however, there are some who argue that, aware that a conclusive military victory in Syria would be impossible, Russia intended to find a way out of the conflict. Although the ceasefire might have presented opportunity for pro-Syrian Government forces to re-group, it also gave Russia the chance to remind the Assad government that its support could end, and that it could reach a solution bypassing the interests of Iran, the other big external backer of the Assads.

Negotiations give Russia both prestige on the international stage and options to pursue in the future. The Russian Government described the US threat to withdraw from talks as "somewhat awkward", but refused to stop its "struggle with terrorists."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Executive Framework for a Political Solution Based on the Geneva Communiqué Syrian High Negotiation Commission, [Summary](#), September 2016

<sup>17</sup> Jihad Yazigi, [No going back: Why decentralisation is the future for Syria](#), European Council on Foreign Relations, 6 September 2016

<sup>18</sup> ['Moscow dismisses US calls to end Aleppo airstrikes'](#), Financial Times, 30 September 2016

## 2. Iraq

### 2.1 Control of terrain

The Institute for the Study of War published [a control of terrain map in August 2016](#).<sup>19</sup> Ramadi, the capital of the largely Sunni Anbar province, fell to Iraqi forces at the end of 2015. The city and much of its surroundings were left in ruins after a long siege, however, and it is a long way from recovering from the conflict. In August 2016, a UK bomb disposal expert died while dealing with a device in the city, while another UK national was injured.

In June ISIS lost control of the city of Fallujah, a Sunni stronghold not far from Baghdad. The Iraqi government had said that Shiite militias would not enter the centre of the Sunni-majority city, but this turned out not to be the case. There were reports of hostile incidents, houses being set on fire and Shiite graffiti being written on walls in the centre of the city, although leaders of the militia denied them.<sup>20</sup>

The alleged incidents underlined the fragile nature of the Iraqi state, helping to explain why it has been so difficult to dislodge ISIS from Sunni areas in both Iraq and Syria.

As displaced persons began to return to the city, heavy screening took place to try to ensure that the families of ISIS fighters were not among them, to prevent extrajudicial punishments taking place.

### Mosul

The most important Iraqi city held by ISIS remains Mosul. Suggestions that an attack on Mosul was imminent have emanated from Iraqi sources over the course of 2016 but, late in September, Western officials said that moves against the city would begin "in weeks".<sup>21</sup>

The Iraqi Government continues to rely on controversial Shiite militias, including for the planned assault on Mosul. Observers worry that some of the (mainly Sunni) residents of Mosul may be reluctant to be 'liberated' by these forces.

Michael Fallon said that a plan for cooperation between official Iraqi government forces, Sunni Kurdish fighters and the Popular Mobilisation Unit militias had been agreed:

There is now a plan in place agreed by all the parties that will ensure the liberation begins and will be done in a way to reassure all the different groups in Mosul. We expect the encirclement operation to begin in the next few weeks and Mosul to fall thereafter ... We ought to be able to get Daesh [ISIS] out of Iraq in the next few months — the remaining months of this year and next year.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> [‘Shiite militias accused of executions in Fallujah’](#), *The National* (United Arab Emirates), 14 June 2016

<sup>21</sup> [‘Coalition drive to recapture Mosul from Isis to begin ‘in weeks’](#)’, *Financial Times*, 23 September 2016

<sup>22</sup> [‘Coalition drive to recapture Mosul from Isis to begin ‘in weeks’](#)’, *Financial Times*, 23 September 2016

Given the very destructive nature of the retaking of Ramadi and Fallujah, questions have been asked about preparations for the coming battles for Mosul. Rory Stewart for the UK's Department for International Development, says that his department is working with other UK departments and the Iraqi government, the Kurdistan Regional Government and the United Nations to "address existing humanitarian needs and support preparations for the humanitarian response in and around Mosul."<sup>23</sup>

## 2.2 Sectarian problems

Despite the successes in taking terrain from ISSI in Iraq, the problems of the Iraqi state remain. The influence of Iran, partly wielded through the Shiite militias, is likely to have been increased by the battles against ISIS and this will make the disaffection of the Sunni minority even more difficult to deal with.

ISIS retains strongholds in several areas of Iraq and has been successful at harassing the Iraqi security forces, stretching them thin. Iraq's army and police are in any case plagued with problems, including corruption, indiscipline and lack of training.

As ISIS has lost much Iraqi territory, it has turned to mounting spectacular bomb attacks, often by suicide operatives, in Baghdad and elsewhere.

It is not only the Sunni-Shia split that threatens Iraqi security. Iraq has also been afflicted by inter-tribal conflicts in the south of the country. More importantly, there is much to be settled between the Kurds and the Arabs. Since the fall of Mosul in 2014, Kurdish forces control far more Iraqi territory than is officially part of the Kurdish Region. There were proposals to hold a referendum in the disputed city of Kirkuk, for example, but they were never acted upon.

Kurdish forces now control the city and much of the governorate. Areas under their control also play host to some 700,000 largely Sunni refugees from areas to the south controlled by ISIS.<sup>24</sup> What happens to those refugees and to Sunni towns held by ISIS when the battle for them takes place is not clear, and whether the towns are liberated by The Shiite militias or by the Kurdish Peshmerga, many fear that the end result will be the destruction of the town and reprisals against its inhabitants. And if the final defeat of ISIS comes, will pro-Iraqi government forces attempt to push back Kurdish forces to the official borders of the Kurdish Region?

## 2.3 Financial problems

Iraq has had to deal with the added problem of a fiscal crisis, as the government has been hit by the fall in the oil price at the same time as having to deal with the ISIS surge.

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<sup>23</sup> [HC Written question – 46166](#), 13 September 2016

<sup>24</sup> Joost Hilteerman, [The perils of post-ISIS Iraq](#), *Foreign Policy*, 22 September 2016

In July 2016 a donors' conference pledged \$2 billion for Iraq's response to ISIS and in September 2016 a conference was held in Baghdad to try to coordinate and fund the reconstruction of areas formerly held by ISIS. Reconstruction will be an important part of the pacification of these areas, which have seen so much conflict in recent decades. Ramadi is reported to be 80% destroyed.<sup>25</sup>

## 2.4 Politics in Baghdad

Iraq's inter-communal problems are not the only ones. Nouri al-Maliki, the ousted former Prime Minister, remains a power in Shiite politics in Baghdad and has recently sharpened his attacks against Haider al-Abadi, his replacement. The Maliki faction managed to get two of Abadi's cabinet ministers removed in August and September 2016 and is now aiming for the Foreign Minister Jafari, according to reports.

Add to this the level of corruption in Iraqi politics, and winning against ISIS is

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<sup>25</sup> 'International Conference in Iraq for Reconstruction of Liberated Areas',

## 3. Progress against ISIS?

IHS Conflict Monitor says that ISIS had lost about 26% of its territory in Iraq and Syria between January 2015 and July 2016. In a map entitled [Islamic State territorial losses between January 2015 and July 2016](#) the group indicates that ISIS lost substantial amounts of territory around the Syrian cities of Manbij, Shaddadi, and Palmyra and the Iraqi cities of Rutba and between Ramadi and Haditha, also in Iraq. There were a few very small ISIS gains.

### ISIS leaders

Several important ISIS leaders have also been killed in air strikes, including the ISIS propaganda and overseas operations chief Abu Mohammed al-Adnani, who was killed at the end of August in Syria.

The group's second-in-command and its military chief were also killed in strikes earlier in 2016.

### 3.1 Attacks outside Iraq and Syria

The attacks in Belgium and France in 2016 have underlined fears that, with the loss of territory in Iraq and Syria, ISIS will increasingly turn to mass-casualty attacks in Europe.

ISIS' unique attribute, in comparison with other terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda, was that it intended to start setting up what it termed a caliphate or Islamic state immediately. For a time in 2014, that strategy looked very effective and succeeded in attracting adherents.

If that strategy now fails, and some commentators say that is already happening, ISIS leaders may feel increasing pressure to promote their 'brand' by inspiring spectacular attacks against majority-Muslim countries with governments it does not like, and in Europe or other Western countries. That has been al-Qaeda's strategy all along and John Sawyer, former head of MI6 in the UK, argues: "In the long term, al-Qaeda is a more sustainable organisation than Isis and remains a major problem."<sup>26</sup>

Sawyer says that the fight will move to the internet as ISIS loses physical territory, and that the security services coordinating with other security agencies will be essential, alongside sustained military action. Efforts to deal with the root causes in the Muslim world would be the responsibility of those countries themselves, according to the former security official.

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<sup>26</sup> John Sawers, '[Isis is down, but not yet out](#)', *Financial Times*, 2 September 2016

## 4. UK position

In September 2016 Leader of the Opposition Jeremy Corbyn reiterated his doubts about the effectiveness of the bombing campaign and argued in favour of a political solution.<sup>27</sup>

The UK Government continues, nevertheless, to be part of the international coalition of forces against ISIS in Iraq and Syria.<sup>28</sup> The UK has conducted far more sorties and strikes against targets in Iraq than in Syria.<sup>29</sup>

The UK has been at the forefront of donors to the international effort to help with the refugee crisis in the region. International Development Secretary Priti Patel said in September 2016:

The UK led the way with the Syria conference. We have pledged more than £2.3 billion in response to the humanitarian crisis in Syria and the region. We have the UN General Assembly next week, where we will again make the case for the donors to do more to raise more money, and for greater partnership working, to alleviate many of the hardships that we see in the crisis in Syria.<sup>30</sup>

As far as Syrian refugees coming to the UK is concerned, the Government is working to resettle up to 20,000 Syrian refugees in the UK by the end of this Parliament, under its Syrian Vulnerable Person Resettlement scheme.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> 'Corbyn queries bombing of Isis', *Daily Telegraph*, 28 September 2016

<sup>28</sup> See the Commons Briefing Paper [ISIS/Daesh: the military response in Iraq and Syria](#), 1 August 2016

<sup>29</sup> [HC Written question – 43647](#), 14 September 2016

<sup>30</sup> [HC Deb 14 Sep 2016, c881](#)

<sup>31</sup> For more detail see the Commons Briefing Paper [Syrian refugees and the UK response](#), 10 June 2016

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