



Military and Humanitarian Assistance to Iraq

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1 Background

In June 2014 the then [Foreign Secretary](#), William Hague, ruled out British military intervention in Iraq in comments made after news emerged of the [takeover of Mosul](#) by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS/ISIL), more recently referred to as the Islamic State. Instead he confirmed that the UK Government was looking at other ways to help, in terms of counter-terrorist expertise and ways to alleviate the unfolding humanitarian crisis. According to the [Guardian](#), the Deputy Prime Minister, Nick Clegg, also confirmed that while the Government did not intend to provide “active frontline military resources” to any action in Iraq, the UK would not “stand in the way of action [by the US] that is well judged and well-targeted”.

At the time the US President, Barack Obama, also [ruled out](#) sending US troops back into combat in Iraq. He did however state that the US remained open to other military options that could help support the Iraqi security forces, following a request for assistance from the Iraqi Government. President Obama did specifically suggest, however, that any military support should be tied to political reconciliation.

Related Library Briefings:

- SN6915: [Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant \(ISIS\) and the takeover of Mosul](#), 20 June 2014
- SN6917, [Military Options in Iraq](#), 16 June 2014.

2 Recent Developments

The substantial gains made by Islamic State fighters in the last few months, which has seen ISIL forces advance on the northern city of Irbil and forced thousands of people from religious minorities to flee their homes, prompted the US, UK and other governments to take more concerted action in Iraq.

On 7 August 2014 the US President [announced](#) the authorisation of two operations in Iraq:

- Targeted airstrikes to halt the advance of IS forces on Irbil, where significant US personnel are based, and the provision of “urgent assistance to Iraqi government and Kurdish forces so they can more effectively wage the fight against ISIL”;
- Humanitarian assistance to those civilians who have fled their homes and become stranded on Mount Sinjar. As part of that operation the President also authorised

“targeted airstrikes, if necessary, to help forces in Iraq as they fight to break the siege of Mount Sinjar and protect civilians trapped there”.

Once again the President reiterated that “American combat troops will not be returning to Iraq, because there’s no American military solution to the larger crisis in Iraq”.¹ Approximately 820 military and security personnel have, however, been deployed, on the ground in Baghdad, and elsewhere, in order to provide diplomatic security for US facilities and personnel.²

Following a [meeting of COBR on 11 August](#) the UK Foreign Secretary set out three objectives for the UK’s government’s response to events in Iraq:

- alleviating the humanitarian suffering of those Iraqis targeted by ISIL terrorists
- promoting an inclusive, sovereign and democratic Iraq that can push back on ISIL advances and restore stability and security across the country
- working with the international community to tackle the broader threat that ISIL poses to the region and other countries around the world, including the UK.

The government’s immediate priority was to address the humanitarian situation. An emergency [£8 million aid package](#) for Iraq was announced, including the provision of supplies and support for charitable organisations, and NGOs, on the ground. A further [£10 million aid package](#) was announced on 27 August 2014. The majority of that funding (£6.5 million) has been allocated to NGOs already working on the ground to enable them to continue to provide shelter, food and clean water, and provide emotional support, in particular to women and children.

Since the crisis began the UK government has provided £23 million in aid overall.³ While the Department for International Development has been leading the humanitarian response, RAF assets have been utilised. Transport aircraft have been involved in the delivery of aid with further assets, including fast jet aircraft and helicopters, deployed to the region in order to assist with that humanitarian effort.

On 16 August the Defence Secretary reportedly suggested that the Government’s mission had gone beyond the humanitarian effort and that the surveillance capabilities that had been deployed to the region, including a Rivet Joint surveillance aircraft, were now being used to monitor the activities of Islamic State fighters.⁴ However, the UK Government’s website on the crisis in Iraq stated on 18 August that the Rivet Joint aircraft had been deployed to support the humanitarian mission:

UK humanitarian aid air drops have been run out of Akrotiri, as have surveillance flights. Also supporting the humanitarian mission is the recent deployment of the Rivet Joint intelligence gathering aircraft by providing operational and tactical level intelligence.⁵

¹ [Statement by the US President](#), 7 August 2014

² This includes the deployment announcement of 350 military personnel on 2 September 2014.

³ [Iraq: UK Government Response](#), 27 August 2014

⁴ [“UK jets deployed to stop advance of Islamic State in Iraq”](#), *The Daily Telegraph*, 18 August 2014

⁵ [Iraq: UK Government Response](#), 18 August 2014

The Government has consistently stated that British combat forces will not be deployed on the ground.⁶

On 24 August the Government confirmed the appointment of Lieutenant General Sir Simon Mayall as the government's Security Envoy to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, alongside his existing role as the government's senior defence adviser for the Middle East.

At the NATO Summit on 5 September the Foreign Secretary suggested that while the UK currently does not participate in airstrikes alongside the US, the possibility of taking part would remain under consideration.

2.1 US Airstrikes

Targeted airstrikes against ISIL forces near Irbil began on 8 August 2014. To date US Air Force and Navy aircraft, including F-15, F/A-18 aircraft and MQ-1 Predator drones have conducted airstrikes in order to protect US citizens and forces in and around Irbil, to assist with the evacuation of civilians trapped on Mouth Sinjar, and more recently in support of efforts by the Iraqi security forces and Kurdish defence force to counter ISIL forces, including in the recent operation to retake the Mosul Dam.⁷ As of 6 September the US had conducted a total of 133 airstrikes across Iraq.⁸

Intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance missions have also continued using a mixture of manned and unmanned systems. Director of Operations for the Joint Staff, Lt Gen William Mayville, confirmed in a Pentagon press briefing on 11 August that "about 50 to 60 ISR flights are being conducted daily by US aircraft".

In a press briefing on 21 August US Defense Secretary, Chuck Hagel, stated that "overall, these operations have stalled ISIL's momentum and enabled Iraqi and Kurdish forces to regain their footing and take the initiative. As Iraqi and Kurdish forces continue to take the initiative, the United States will continue to support them".⁹ However, the Pentagon has also acknowledged that "while US airstrikes in northern Iraq have slowed ISIL's operational tempo... the strikes are unlikely to affect ISIL's overall capabilities or its operations in other areas of Iraq and Syria".¹⁰ Indeed, the Pentagon has stated that, at present, it remains unclear exactly what ISIL's full intent is.¹¹ However, should it become necessary, the US has made clear that it will conduct airstrikes anywhere in Iraq, including Baghdad, in order to protect US personnel and facilities and in support of the humanitarian operation.¹² Responding to allegations that the recent airstrikes in support of the operation to retake the Mosul dam represented 'mission creep' the Pentagon stated:

Mission creep refers to the growth or expansion of the goals and objectives of a military operation ... that the goals and objectives change, morph into something bigger than they were at the outset. Nothing has changed about the missions we're conducting inside Iraq. Airstrikes are authorized under two mission areas – humanitarian assistance and the protection of US personnel and facilities. The airstrikes in and around Mosul Dam fit into both of those categories, both helping

⁶ See Downing Street Press Release, [COBR Meeting on Iraq](#), 18 August 2014

⁷ Department of Defense Press Briefing, 14 August 2014 and US Central Command press release, 17 August 2014

⁸ [US Central Command new release](#), 6 September 2014

⁹ Department of Defense Press Briefing, 21 August 2014

¹⁰ "Humanitarian assistance continues in Iraq", *American Forces Press Service*, 11 August 2014

¹¹ Department of Defense Press Briefing, 14 August 2014

¹² *ibid*

prevent what could be a huge humanitarian problem should the dam be blown... and to protect US personnel and facilities.¹³

Going forward Secretary Chuck Hagel set out the US' position during the 21 August press briefing:

addressing the threat posed by ISIL to the future of Iraq requires political reform in Iraq. The country's peaceful transition of power last week was important, and the United States will continue urging Iraq's new prime minister to establish an inclusive government that is responsive to the needs of all Iraq's citizens. A united Iraq will be a more secure and prosperous Iraq.

Political reform will make it harder for ISIL to exploit sectarian divisions. The United States and the international community will increase support for Iraq in tandem with political progress.

The president, the chairman and I are all very clear eyed about the challenges ahead. We are pursuing a long-term strategy against ISIL because ISIL clearly poses a long-term threat. We should expect ISIL to regroup and stage new offenses.

And the U.S. military's involvement is not over. President Obama has been very clear on this point. Our objectives remain clear and limited -- to protect American citizens and facilities, to provide assistance to Iraqi forces as they confront ISIL, and to join with international partners to address the humanitarian crisis.¹⁴

Professor Gareth Stansfield at RUSI has warned over the longer term consequences of such action:

Recent precedents suggest that limited air strikes could serve to further legitimise ISIS, giving rise to longer-term consequences of these short term, reactive measures designed to protect the Kurdistan Region and throw a life-line to minorities at risk.

this is a very dangerous balancing act indeed, not least because ISIS may well prove to have the strength in depth to cope with the setbacks caused by the limited US air attacks.¹⁵

Writing in *Foreign Affairs*, Robin Simcox has also argued that the US needs to reconsider its military approach in Iraq:

Obama has said that there is no specific end date for US military involvement. But a senior US official has also clarified that Washington is not undertaking a sustained campaign against ISIS. Obama's plan seems to be to use the US military to assist Iraqi and Kurdish forces in fighting ISIS to a draw, while encouraging the formation of a new Iraqi government that can take the lead militarily. But he seems unaware that this plan sends a counterproductive message to Iraqis. Not only does it promise to leave ISIS in a position of relative strength and enable it to claim victory over the might of the US military; it also signals that Washington is ultimately indifferent to helping shape Iraqi domestic politics in the future.¹⁶

Speaking at the NATO Summit on 5 September the UK Foreign Secretary confirmed that while "we in Britain have made no commitment to take part in any air strikes as yet... we'll

¹³ Pentagon statement, 19 August 2014

¹⁴ Department of Defense Press Briefing, 21 August 2014

¹⁵ Professor Gareth Stansfield, [RUSI Commentary](#), 11 August 2014

¹⁶ Robin Simcox, "Go big or go home", *Foreign Affairs*, 12 August 2014

certainly consider that possibility if we think that it is the best and most effective way to support a credible and inclusive Iraqi government".¹⁷

2.2 Humanitarian Assistance

On 7 August the US air force began undertaking airdrops of food, water, shelter and medical supplies to assist those civilians stranded on Mount Sinjar. A USAID Disaster Assistance response team had also been deployed to provide assistance. On 13 August the Department of Defense confirmed that 130 additional military advisers, primarily US Marines and Special Forces personnel, had been sent to northern Iraq in order to assess the humanitarian situation and identify where further assistance could be provided.

That assessment concluded, however, that there were far fewer stranded civilians on Mount Sinjar than previously feared and those that remained were in better condition than originally believed. On that basis the Pentagon confirmed that humanitarian assistance would continue, as necessary, but that an evacuation mission was now far less likely.¹⁸ The humanitarian situation in Iraq as a whole would also continue to be monitored.¹⁹

Indeed, the US confirmed on 30 August that it had undertaken a number of humanitarian airdrops to the town of Amirli, which had been under siege by ISIL for two months. A number of airstrikes against nearby ISIL positions were also undertaken in coordination with that humanitarian effort.²⁰

Under the UK aid package RAF C-130 aircraft also conducted a number of humanitarian airdrops on Mount Sinjar.²¹ A small number of RAF Tornado aircraft have also been pre-positioned in Cyprus in order to provide a surveillance capability that will allow for increased situational awareness to help with the humanitarian effort.²²

On [12 August](#) the government also confirmed that a number of Chinook helicopters would be deployed to the region in order to provide further humanitarian relief options, should it become necessary.

In light of the US assessment of humanitarian need on Mount Sinjar, the UK Government confirmed on 14 August that it would keep the need for additional airdrops under review; while continuing to provide humanitarian support across the region. A humanitarian adviser has been embedded with the Kurdish regional Government in order to assist with their response to the crisis. Chinook and Tornado aircraft will also remain in the region to provide assistance, should it become necessary.²³ On [16 August](#) the Defence Secretary stated that a Rivet Joint surveillance aircraft had also been deployed to the region. A number of British Special Forces personnel are also reported on the ground in northern Iraq.²⁴

However, the deployment of the Rivet Joint has led to speculation that the intelligence gathering mission has evolved beyond the humanitarian effort to assisting in monitoring the activities of Islamic State fighters. BBC Defence Correspondent, Jonathan Beale, commented:

¹⁷ [FCO press release](#), 5 September 2014

¹⁸ [Statement by Pentagon Press Secretary Rear Admiral John Kirby](#), 13 August 2014

¹⁹ Department of Defense Press Briefing, 14 August 2014

²⁰ Statement from Pentagon Press Secretary Rear Admiral John Kirby, 30 August 2014

²¹ The Department for International Development has also chartered a number of aid flights.

²² [COBR Meeting on Iraq](#), 11 August 2014

²³ Downing Street Press Release, [COBR Meeting on Iraq](#), 14 August 2014

²⁴ ["Britain is dragged deeper into the Iraq conflict"](#), *The Daily Mail*, 18 August 2014

The British military role in Iraq has already morphed from providing humanitarian relief to gathering intelligence. It could easily change again to more direct intervention.

Even now one can assume that surveillance being carried out by the RAF's latest spy plane - the Rivet Joint - is being used to help the US military to identify potential IS targets.²⁵

France and Australia have also been conducting humanitarian aid drops.

2.3 Assistance for Kurdish Forces

The US, France, Albania, Canada, Croatia, Denmark and Italy have begun supplying military equipment to Kurdish forces in response to requests from the Kurdish regional authorities.²⁶ Germany has also announced its intention to supply military equipment to Kurdish forces, including armoured vehicles, rifles and anti-tank systems.²⁷

At the [COBR meeting of 11 August](#) the UK Government agreed to examine how the “UK could play a role, alongside others, in getting equipment to Kurdish forces so they are better able to counter ISIL forces and critically so that they can continue to protect the large number of displaced persons who are seeking safety in Iraqi Kurdistan”. On 12 August the Government announced that it had agreed to transport critical military re-supplies to Kurdish forces, from other contributing states”.²⁸

The Government has consistently stated that it would “favourably” consider any requests for the provision of military equipment made by either the Iraqi or Kurdistan Regional Government.²⁹ That position was reiterated following a COBR meeting on 18 August after which a spokesman said “we remain open to supplying equipment directly and work is underway to identify what we could usefully provide”.³⁰ On 24 August the Government confirmed that work was underway “to supply non-lethal equipment to Kurdish forces in the coming days, including night vision equipment and body armour”.³¹

The Government also announced the appointment of a Special Envoy to the Kurdistan region, in order to “support Kurdish and wider Iraqi efforts to counter ISIL and work with Iraq’s leaders as they establish a unity government”.³²

2.4 NATO Summit Communiqué

The NATO Summit in Wales at the beginning of September addressed current events in Iraq and the threat that ISIL poses more broadly. NATO allies reaffirmed their commitment to the NATO-Iraq partnership and outlined a number of areas for further co-operation including the training of Iraqi security forces. The Summit Communiqué stated:

32. We are deeply concerned by the growing instability and mounting transnational and multi-dimensional threats across the Middle East and North Africa region. These threats directly affect the security of the people living there, as well as our own security. Peace and stability in this region are essential for the Alliance. Therefore, we emphasise the need for lasting calm and an end to violence. We continue to support

²⁵ [“David Cameron defends ‘clear’ Iraq Strategy”](#), *BBC News Online*, 18 August 2014

²⁶ Statement by Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel on Kurdish Resupply Effort, 26 August 2014

²⁷ [“Germany to supply arms to Kurds fighting IS in Iraq”](#), *BBC News Online*, 1 September 2014

²⁸ [COBR Meeting on Iraq](#), 12 August 2014

²⁹ Downing Street Press Release, [COBR Meeting on Iraq](#), 15 August 2014

³⁰ Downing Street Press Release, [COBR Meeting on Iraq](#), 18 August 2014

³¹ [Downing Street Press Release](#), 24 August 2014

³² *ibid*

the legitimate aspirations of the peoples in this region for peace, security, democracy, justice, prosperity, and the preservation of their identity. We will continue to closely monitor the situation and explore options for possible NATO assistance to bilateral and international efforts to promote stability and contribute to the response to the growing crisis in, and threats from, the Middle East region.

33. The so-called Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) poses a grave threat to the Iraqi people, to the Syrian people, to the wider region, and to our nations. We are outraged by ISIL's recent barbaric attacks against all civilian populations, in particular the systematic and deliberate targeting of entire religious and ethnic communities. We condemn in the strongest terms ISIL's violent and cowardly acts. If the security of any Ally is threatened, we will not hesitate to take all necessary steps to ensure our collective defence. The rapid deterioration of the security situation in Iraq and ISIL's expanding threat underline the necessity for a political solution based upon an inclusive Iraqi government with cross-sectarian representation. Additionally, in light of the dramatic humanitarian consequences of this crisis and its repercussions on regional stability and security, many Allies have already provided, and are offering, security and humanitarian assistance to Iraq on a bilateral basis.

34. We re-affirm NATO's continued commitment to the NATO-Iraq partnership, through which we will revitalise our effort to help Iraq build more effective security forces. That partnership encompasses, within the existing Individual Partnership and Cooperation Programme, cooperation in the areas of: political dialogue; education and training; response to terrorism; defence institution building; border security; and communications strategy. Allies and partners should continue to help coordinate humanitarian assistance to Iraq through the appropriate channels. We welcome the role that the Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre is playing. We have also agreed that NATO will help coordinate among Allies and partners security assistance support to Iraq; this could also include helping coordinate the provision of lift to deliver assistance. Should the Iraqi government request it, NATO will stand ready to consider measures in the framework of NATO's Defence and Related Security Capacity Building Initiative with an eye to launching such an effort in the near term. NATO will support ongoing bilateral efforts of Allies and partners by soliciting and coordinating, on a voluntary basis, Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance assets. Additionally, Allies will seek to enhance their cooperation in exchanging information on returning foreign fighters.³³

In his end of Summit press conference, Prime Minister David Cameron welcomed the commitment to Iraq expressed by NATO Member States. He commented:

Everyone remembers the divisions around the world over the Iraq War ten years ago. There were no real divisions here.

The NATO Alliance is clear about the threat that we face. The scale of that threat and the fact that we must use all the instruments at our disposal – humanitarian, diplomatic and military. We have agreed to offer a NATO training mission for Iraq as soon as the new Iraqi government is in place.

The fight against ISIL must be led by the Iraqis themselves. But we will continue to encourage countries in the region to support this effort and we'll continue to work with our partners on the ground to take all necessary steps to squeeze this barbaric terrorist organisation out of existence. This will take time and it will take resolve.

³³ [Wales Summit Declaration](#), September 2014

We will proceed carefully and methodically, drawing together the partners we need, above all in the region, to implement a comprehensive plan.³⁴

US President, Barack Obama also stated:

I also leave here confident that NATO Allies and partners are prepared to join in a broad, international effort to combat the threat posed by ISIL. Already, Allies have joined us in Iraq, where we have stopped ISIL's advances; we've equipped our Iraqi partners, and helped them go on offense. NATO has agreed to play a role in providing security and humanitarian assistance to those who are on the front lines. Key NATO Allies stand ready to confront this terrorist threat through military, intelligence and law enforcement, as well as diplomatic efforts. And Secretary Kerry will now travel to the region to continue building the broad-based coalition that will enable us to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL.³⁵

2.5 International Strategy to Counter the Threat from ISIL

Foreign and Defence Ministers from ten countries³⁶ met on the fringes of the NATO Summit to discuss an international strategy to counter the threat from ISIL. Convened by the UK and US, the meeting was intended to formulate a comprehensive response to the challenges posed by ISIL, specifically:

- The provision of military support to Iraqi partners
- Stopping the flow of foreign fighters into Syria and Iraq
- Countering ISIL's financing and funding, including any trade in petroleum products
- Addressing the humanitarian crisis
- De-legitimising ISIL's ideology.

In the immediate term the ten countries agreed to engage with a new Iraqi government over the potential for additional training and equipping of the Iraqi security forces at the federal, regional and provincial level. A multinational task force will also be formed to share more information about the flow of foreign fighters into Syria and from Syria into Iraq.

The meeting recognised that "the formation of a new and inclusive government in Iraq will be a critical step in this effort" and that "the effort to degrade and destroy the threat posed by ISIL will take time and persistence" and will "require a unified approach at the international, regional and local level – combining military, law enforcement, intelligence, economic and diplomatic tools".³⁷

This effort is also intended to be the focus of a UN General Assembly meeting that is due to be held toward the end of September, with a view to establishing a "truly global coalition" to counter ISIL.

³⁴ [NATO Summit 2014: PM end of summit press conference](#), 5 September 2014

³⁵ [Remarks by President Obama at NATO Summit press conference](#), 5 September 2014

³⁶ US, UK, Canada, Australia, Turkey, France, Germany, Italy, Denmark and Poland

³⁷ [Joint Statement by secretary Kerry and Secretary Hagel on the ISIL Meeting](#), 5 September 2014

3 Initial Criticisms of the UK's Response to the Iraq Crisis

The extent of the UK's response to the crisis initially prompted criticism from some quarters. General Sir Richard Shirreff, until recently the UK's most senior officer in NATO, is reported to have accused the government of "meaningless posturing" designed to "be seen to be doing something rather than having a serious effect". He reportedly suggested that the government was "terrified" of putting British troops on the ground before the 2015 election, while warning that "the longer we sit on our hands and prevaricate, the more dangerous the situation is going to become".³⁸

Several former military officers also joined calls for the UK to take greater action. Writing in *The Daily Telegraph* Colonel Tim Collins argued for the UK to take part in airstrikes and arm Kurdish fighters suggesting that otherwise "ancient civilisations will be extinguished". General Sir Mike Jackson, has also suggested that the UK has a "moral duty" to help the humanitarian response with the provision of airpower, alongside the US.³⁹

Former Defence Secretary, Dr Liam Fox, has also called for the UK to join the US campaign of targeted airstrikes.⁴⁰

However, while several commentators have called for greater British military involvement, others have argued against any sort of 'mission creep'. Graham Allen MP is quoted in *The Daily Mail* as stating that "Many MPs who voted for the Iraq war, started this blood-letting and the creation of Isis, have learnt nothing and bay for yet more violence".⁴¹ The decision to deploy the Rivet Joint surveillance aircraft, in particular, has been seized upon by a number of commentators as evidence of the UK's expanding military role in this crisis.

As such a number of MPs argued that Parliament should be recalled so that the current crisis in Iraq, and the UK's role within it, could be debated. However, the Government refused to do so, suggesting that the Government's course of action in Iraq had not changed. On 11 August the Foreign Secretary stated:

I don't think it's necessary at this time. We are talking about a humanitarian intervention. We have a very clear convention about consulting Parliament before British forces are committed into any kind of combat role. We are not talking about that here... we don't envisage a combat role at the present time.⁴²

On 18 August the Prime Minister reiterated this position, stating "I don't think it is necessary to recall parliament. I think that we are not contemplating things that would require that. But I am very happy to keep that under review..."⁴³

³⁸ "Iraq crisis: General says UK 'commitment-phobic", *BBC News Online*, 12 August 2014

³⁹ "UK troops must help the Kurds", *The Daily Telegraph*, 12 August 2014

⁴⁰ "UK must bomb Iraq fanatics", *The Daily Mail*, 12 August 2014

⁴¹ "Cameron chairs Iraq crisis meeting", *The Daily Mail*, 13 August 2014

⁴² "Iraq crisis: RAF aborts air drop amid safety fears", *BBC News Online*, 11 August 2014

⁴³ "UK should be prepared to use military prowess against ISIS, says Cameron", *The Guardian*, 18 August 2014