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Syria and Iraq: update July 2017

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Summary

ISIS has now lost over 70% of the territory it once held in Iraq, and 51% of its territory in Syria. In a significant blow to ISIS, the Iraqi city of Mosul was liberated by Iraqi Security Forces on 10 July 2017, after nine months of fighting.

Attention is now turning to the remaining areas of Iraq under ISIS control including the cities of Tal Afar and Hawija in Western Iraq and smaller towns in the Euphrates River Valley; and ISIS' self-declared 'capital', al-Raqqa, in Syria. The fight there is being led by the Kurdish YPG, in charge of a multi-ethnic force.

The Trump Administration [intends to](#) speed up the anti-ISIS campaign, although there has been no large extra contingent of troops.

NATO has now officially become a member of the coalition.

Syrian opposition forces are still being trained by both the US and the UK, while US special forces are helping Kurdish forces in Syria.

There are about 1,350 UK personnel based in the region supporting the campaign in Iraq and Syria, although UK personnel are not deployed in a combat role. The RAF is operating at a tempo not seen since the first Gulf War – more than 1,000 airstrikes had been carried out by February 2017, making the UK the second largest contributor to the air campaign against ISIS.

Many analysts [now think](#) that President Assad will remain in power for the foreseeable future. With the immediate threat to the Assad government eliminated, some commentators suggest that the prospects for a general de-escalation may have improved, although not on terms that Western countries would have preferred.

A conflict reduction agreement, negotiated in Astana and with similarities to the US/Russian ceasefire effort of September 2016, was agreed between Russia, Iran and Turkey in December 2016. It is being widely ignored, however.

The Astana process could be the basis for progress. But the situation remains unpredictable and could deteriorate.

The Syrian government still does not have the resources to [hold all of the territory](#) of Syria, however. Resistance to the government is likely to continue in the north (particularly from Kurds) and in many areas including the south and east from Sunni Arab rebel forces.

As Mosul and other areas of Iraq are cleared of ISIS fighters, attention has turned not only to the terrible cost of the military campaign for the city, but also to the likelihood that sectarian conflict in Iraq will continue in different forms, particularly as the prospects for establishing effective and responsive governance remain poor, in Sunni-majority areas especially. In both Iraq and Syria, government-supporting militias have become increasingly powerful; some have become known for sectarian abuse. Is this just another phase in Iraq's cycle of repression and rebellion?

The Kurds remain central to pro-Western efforts in Syria and are leading the push to re-take Raqqa. There could be increasing trouble between Syrian Kurds (who are aligned to the terrorist-designated Turkish PKK) and Turkey. Turkey has already attacked Kurdish positions in northern Syria and the Turkish government is [increasingly re-aligning](#) its policy towards Russia, with unpredictable results.

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The US has made cautious moves towards re-engagement with Russia on Syria, but mistrusts Russia's ability to ensure that Syria lives up to any commitments towards a negotiated settlement.

The [re-election in May](#) of reformist President Rouhani in Iran is unlikely to moderate Iranian policy in the short to medium term, and the dispute between Saudi Arabia and its allies and Qatar could undermine further Sunni support for both 'moderate' and more extreme rebels in Syria.

Meanwhile, many [analysts are worried](#) that the territorial defeat of ISIS may make the group more dangerous internationally than it is at present. Fighters and leaders could be dispersed, other 'provinces' of ISIS, for example in Egypt, could be strengthened and the group could turn to inspiring and organising more attacks outside Iraq and Syria.

The violation of international humanitarian law in Iraq and Syria has been widespread. The [UN Commission of Inquiry](#) was particularly critical of the Syrian Government for its attacks on civilians. It also found that other actors, particularly ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra/Jabhat Fatah al-Sham, were guilty of IHL violations.

Chemical weapons were also being used in Syria by the government, in violation of the Chemical Weapons Convention, although that appears to have stopped since the cruise missile attacks.

Although there is little prospect of prosecutions in international courts at present, evidence is being gathered. Some commentators said that the allegations of a crematorium at a Syrian prison indicate that the Syrian government is trying to hide evidence.

The casualty toll continues to rise: the [Syrian Observatory for Human Rights](#) says that 96,000 civilians have died, of a total of 470,000, between the beginning of the conflict and March 2017. Other groups give different figures.

Many sources say that the Syrian government and its supporters have caused by far the most casualties. Aerial bombardment is reported to have caused fewer casualties, although the number caused by the US-led coalition is increasing.

Over half of the Syrians have been forced out of their homes. Displaced Syrians are finding it increasingly [difficult to cross](#) into safety in neighbouring countries, as Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon seal their borders.

\$3.4 billion are needed for the [Syria response plan 2017](#). The UK was the third largest bilateral donor for the Syria crisis in 2016. At present the UK Government is committed to spending 2.3 billion by 2020.

1. ISIS situational report

ISIS has now lost over 70% of the territory it once held in Iraq, and 51% of its territory in Syria. In a significant blow to ISIS, the Iraqi city of Mosul was liberated by Iraqi Security Forces on 10 July 2017, after nine months of fighting.

Attention is now turning to the remaining areas of Iraq under ISIS control including the cities of Tal Afar and Hawija in Western Iraq and smaller towns in the Euphrates River Valley; and ISIS' self-declared 'capital' al-Raqqa, in Syria. The fight there is being led by the Kurdish YPG, in charge of a multi-ethnic force.

As of 21 June 2017 Coalition aircraft have conducted 156,651 sorties in support of operations in Iraq and Syria. Of those, a total of 22,671 have been airstrikes against ISIS targets in Iraq and Syria (Iraq – 12,996 and Syria – 9,675). Approximately 68% of airstrikes in Iraq and 95% of airstrikes in Syria have been conducted by US aircraft.¹

According to the Pentagon, ISIS has lost 73% of the territory they controlled in Iraq in August 2014, and 58% of their previous territory in Syria.² In the last five months those gains have focused on:

Key Daesh battlefield losses in the period March 1st – May 31st were to Iraqi forces in the Ninawa Governorate, the majority of which were in Western Mosul, and in the region near the Iraq-Syria border. In Syria, Daesh lost additional territory in Ar Raqqa, the Damascus countryside, Dayr-az-Zawr, Halab and Homs provinces. The majority of these losses were in Ar Raqqa and Dayr az Zawr, as the Syrian Democratic Forces and Syrian Arab Coalition isolated Raqqa city.³

A recent Pentagon assessment of ISIS capability suggested:

We [have] reduced ISIS-held territory, limited their freedom of movement, destroyed a great deal of their leadership, reduced the flow of foreign fighters into and from the region, diminished their financial resources and...perhaps most importantly, we've undermined the credibility of their narrative that there's a physical caliphate in Iraq and Syria.⁴

It concluded:

Our objective is to drive down ISIS's capability to a point where local forces, with tailored support from the international community, is able to provide security.⁵

US [Central Command](#) provides updates on operations. Estimates released by the Department of Defense on 30 April 2017 state that the US has spent \$13.1 billion, or an average of \$13.2 million per day, on operations related to ISIS since August 2014. Over that period airstrikes

¹ [US Department of Defense](#), accessed 17 July 2017

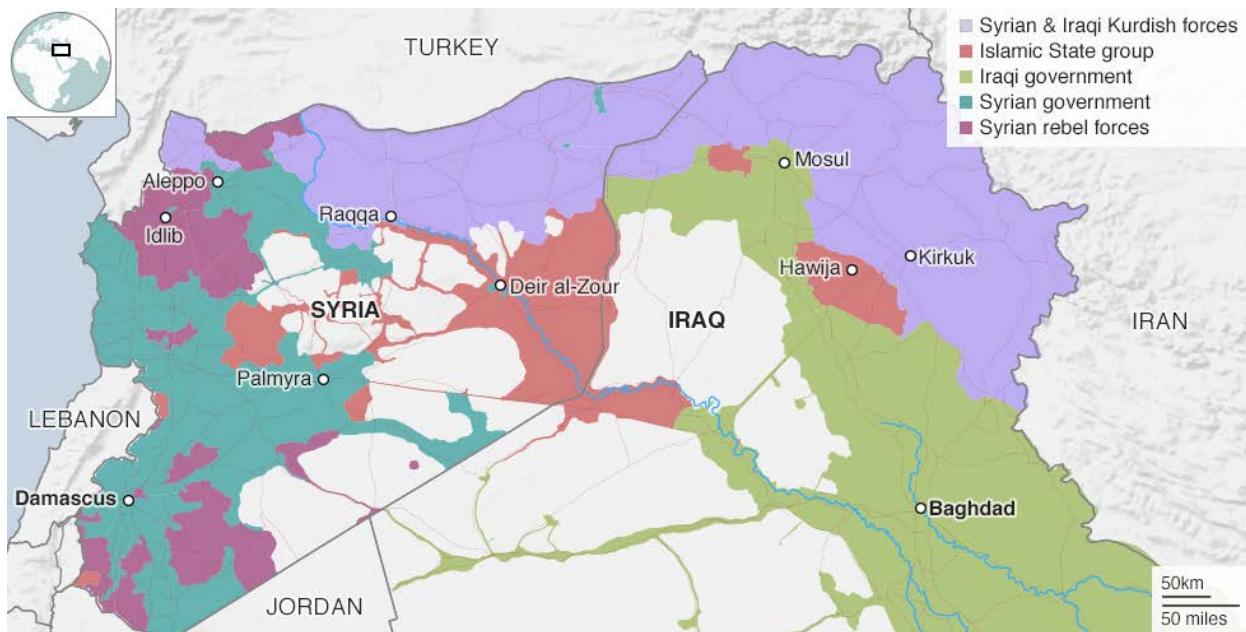
² The Global Coalition, [Daesh areas of influence – June 2017 Update](#)

³ ibid

⁴ US Department of Defense Press Briefing, 19 May 2017

⁵ ibid

have accounted for between 38% and 50% of those costs, excluding munitions, which have accounted for a further 22% - 24% of costs.⁶



[Source: IHS Conflict Monitor \(17 July 2017\)//BBC](#)

Iraq

The recapture of Mosul

After months of preparation the operation to liberate Mosul began on 17 October 2016. A coalition of 35,000 Iraqi security forces, Kurdish Peshmerga, Sunni Arab tribesmen and Shia paramilitary forces participated in the operation, supported by Coalition intelligence and surveillance and airstrikes and 100 US Special Operations personnel advising on the ground.

Initially Turkey had also been pushing for a role in the campaign,⁷ a proposal which the Iraqi Prime Minister, Haider al-Abadi, firmly rejected. On a visit to Baghdad in October 2016 the then US Defence Secretary, Ash Carter, sought to reaffirm "the vital importance of every country operating with full respect for Iraqi sovereignty",⁸ a comment thought by many to be directed at Turkey.⁹

From the outset the operation was expected to take several weeks, if not months. As Pentagon Spokesman Peter Cook succinctly put it at the time: "this is going according to the Iraqi plan – but...it's early, and the enemy gets a vote here. We will see whether [IS] stands and fights".¹⁰ The Pentagon had estimated that between 3,000 and 5,000 ISIS fighters

⁶ US Department of Defense, [Cost of operations update](#), June 2015- June 2017

⁷ Turkey has been maintaining a military base at Bashiqa, to the north-east of Mosul, since December 2015 and has been training local forces, largely comprised of Sunni Arabs, Turkmen and Kurds.

⁸ [Remarks by Secretary Carter following his meeting with Iraqi Prime Minister Abadi in Baghdad](#), 22 October 2016

⁹ See "[Will Turkish ambitions complicate fight for Mosul?](#)", BBC News Online, 24 October 2016

¹⁰ As [reported by the BBC](#), 18 October 2016

were in Mosul at the onset of operations. Outlining the UK's role in October 2016, Defence Secretary Michael Fallon said:

Daesh are on the back foot. The beginning of the encirclement of Mosul today is a big moment in our efforts to rid Iraq of Daesh. Mosul is a large and complex city and operations there will be tough but with Coalition support Iraqi forces will prevail. Alongside our Coalition partners, the UK will continue to play a leading role in the air and on the ground, including through our strike missions, specialised surveillance, humanitarian support and the mentoring and training of Iraqi forces.¹¹

After three and half months of fighting, the Iraqi Government announced on 24 January 2017 that the city to the east of the River Tigris had been liberated from ISIS.¹² Iraqi security forces now controlled all areas inside the eastern part of the city and the eastern bank of the river for the first time in two and a half years. As such attention increasingly shifted toward the west of the city.

Operations to clear ISIS from the western part of the city began on 19 February 2017. The dense urban environment of the Old City and the number of civilians in western Mosul¹³ was recognised as a significant challenge to Iraqi security forces moving forward.

By mid-May 2017 Iraqi forces, backed by the coalition, were reported to have taken approximately 90% of Western Mosul, with ISIS fighters concentrated in just three neighbourhoods on the banks of the River Tigris. On 18 June Iraqi commanders announced the start of the "final chapter" in efforts to liberate Mosul, as Iraqi forces launched an offensive on those areas. The Iraqi government declared victory on 10 July 2017, although Iraqi security forces have continued to hunt down any residual ISIS forces in the west of the city.

Beyond Mosul

With the liberation of Mosul questions have now begun to be asked about the focus of Coalition forces in Iraq now that campaign is complete. In a press briefing on 14 June 2017 the US Commander on the ground, Major General Joseph Martin, reiterated that the campaign to defeat ISIS in Iraq is being led by the Iraqi government and the focus of the campaign, beyond Mosul, would be their choice. However, he stated:

It's tough to tell exactly where we'll go next, but if you look there's other areas in Iraq, urban areas that have yet to be liberated. And so lots of work to do. The city of Tal Afar comes to mind; the city of Hawijah. And then when you move down to the Euphrates River valley, you get cities- smaller cities but cities nevertheless of Rihana, Rawah, Al-Qaim and Husaiba along the border of Iraq and Syria.

And so those areas have to be cleared [...]

¹¹ MOD, [Defence in the Media](#), 24 October 2016

¹² US Department of Defense, [Iraq announces liberation of Eastern Mosul](#), 24 January 2017

¹³ The UN estimated that there were 750,000 civilians remaining in west Mosul at the start of operations to clear the West of the city (Department of Defense press briefing, 17 January 2017)

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And we're going to continue to do what we're doing now, and that's advise, assisting and enabling the Iraqi Security Forces.¹⁴

Defence Secretary Michael Fallon also made this point in a statement to the House on 13 July 2017:

Daesh has now lost more than 70% of the territory that it once occupied in Iraq, but the liberation of Mosul does not mean that Daesh has been defeated in Iraq, or indeed in Syria. We in this country need no reminding of the danger that Daesh still poses. In the past few months, our nation has suffered three appalling attacks inspired by the ideology shared by Daesh. We must continue our comprehensive strategy to defeat it [...]

We must ensure that there are no safe havens for Daesh in Syria and Iraq. That is why Iraqi security forces, with United Kingdom support, will go on to defeat Daesh in Tal Afar and Hawija, uproot it from the Euphrates river valley, and clear the area of the improvised explosive devices that threaten the lives of so many innocent civilians. As Iraq is secured—we have some months to go—we will in Syria continue supporting the Syrian Democratic Forces, who have so far ejected Daesh from around 51% of the territory it once held in Syria.¹⁵

He also acknowledged:

The campaign goes on and may well become more complex as Daesh spreads out and moves to some of the less populated areas.¹⁶

In terms of timing for future operations, at a Pentagon press conference on 14 July Iraqi Brigadier General Yahya Rasool, Spokesperson for Joint Operations Command, stated:

Regarding the remaining time to liberate the -- sorry -- the required time to liberate the remaining areas, can I say that we'd like to assure everybody that coming shortly, or very soon, we'll start military operations to liberate the remaining Iraqi areas under occupation.

And the Iraqi military leadership, after consulting the commander in chief of armed forces, of course we will follow his directive, of if we're going to go towards Hawija or Tal Afar or other areas. And we could start military operations towards different areas at the same time. Currently, we're confident that we are capable of having a number of operations simultaneously.

And that's what we've done in the battle of Fallujah, when -- where we arrived at the center of Fallujah, and then they spread towards al-Jahara and other places. And we liberated the airport of al-Jahara .

We leave it to the Iraqi leadership -- military leadership. And God willing, I know it's going to be very soon to liberate the remaining occupied territory of Iraq.¹⁷

¹⁴ US Department of Defense press briefing, 14 June 2017

¹⁵ HC Deb 13 July 2017, c445

¹⁶ *ibid*, c448

¹⁷ US Department of Defense press briefing, 14 July 2017

Syria

Over the summer of 2016 operations by Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a Kurdish YPG-led alliance of approximately 50,000 opposition and local forces, including the Syrian Arab Coalition and other Syrian Kurdish forces, focused on liberating the town of Manbij, on Syria's northern border with Turkey.¹⁸ Assisted by Coalition forces¹⁹ Manbij was taken in mid-August 2016 after two months of fighting.

Efforts to secure the region along Turkey's border were advanced significantly after an offensive led by an alliance of Syrian rebel groups (the Free Syrian Army), and supported by Turkey, was launched in late August (Operation *Euphrates Shield*). Described as "the most concerted ground advance of the past two years",²⁰ and supported by air cover from Turkish fighter jets, key towns have been liberated from ISIS including al-Rai and Jarabulus. Turkish involvement in the campaign to take Jarabulus represented Turkey's first full-scale incursion into Syria since the civil conflict began.²¹

While striking a blow against ISIS, Turkey's actions were also motivated by a desire to secure its regional sphere of influence and stop the Kurds from advancing into areas in north eastern Syria, thereby unifying the eastern and western areas that they currently hold along the Turkish border.

After the success of Operation *Euphrates Shield*, in September 2016 President Erdogan announced Turkey's intention to push further south to the town of al-Bab, some 20km south of the Turkish border, in territory held by ISIS. In mid-October Turkish backed Syrian opposition forces, supported by coalition air strikes, liberated the town of Dabiq, a town considered to have great symbolic relevance to ISIS.²² Al-Bab was subsequently liberated by Turkish-led forces in March 2017. Although not supported by coalition forces in its initial stages, the campaign to re-take al-Bab was increasingly backed by coalition intelligence and surveillance, and eventually airstrikes. Russian warplanes also conducted joint airstrikes with Turkey in the region.

Despite concerns that Turkey would turn its attention to other areas in northern Syria under the control of Kurdish forces, in order to secure its

¹⁸ Manbij was regarded as a strategically important location for ISIS as it is the main hub through which foreign fighters entered Syria, and in turn Iraq, and was a key line of communication between Raqqa and the outside world (Department of Defense press briefing, 30 June 2016)

¹⁹ As of 22 July 2016 coalition forces had conducted more than 500 airstrikes in support of this operation (Department of Defense press briefing, 22 July 2016)

²⁰ "[Losing ground, fighters and morale – is it all over for ISIS?](#)", *The Guardian*, 7 September 2016

²¹ Some reports suggest that the President Erdogan was freed to take action by the failure of the coup attempt against him in July 2016. Officers who had been delaying an operation in Syria were removed from their posts. An improvement in relations with Russia was also a prerequisite due to Russian air force activity in Syria.

²² Dabiq features in Islamic apocalyptic prophecies as the site of an end-of-times showdown between Muslims and their "Roman" enemies. The town has featured heavily in ISIS propaganda since 2014 and was also the name of its English-language magazine.

sphere of influence,²³ in early April 2017 the Turkish government announced that Operation *Euphrates Shield* had come to an end. It did, however, reserve the right to re-deploy forces if necessary. Turkey is also reported to be considering establishing a permanent military base close to al-Bab.²⁴

Towards Raqqa

Attention has increasingly turned to the campaign to liberate Raqqa.

On 6 November 2016 the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) announced that the campaign to “isolate”, and eventually liberate, Raqqa had begun. Operations are being led by the SDF and are supported by coalition intelligence and reconnaissance and airstrikes. In mid-February 2017 the Pentagon confirmed that the Arab element of SDF forces isolating Raqqa had grown to 50% of the force, reflecting the desire to make it “more ethnically diverse and more reflective of the population area that it’s moving into”.²⁵

After several months of ‘isolation’ and clearance operations, including the liberation of the strategic town of Tabqa to the southwest of Raqqa in early May, coalition-backed SDF forces formally began operations to liberate Raqqa on 6 June 2017. The battle for Raqqa is expected to be “long and difficult” with approximately 2,500 ISIS fighters estimated to be inside the city.²⁶ The US has been providing equipment and munitions to the SDF²⁷ and coalition forces continue to provide air strikes against ISIS targets, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance and advisers on the ground. RAF aircraft have been providing close air support to the SDF.²⁸ As of 13 July 2017 SDF forces control approximately 20% of the city.

Turkey has continued to push for a role in the campaign to liberate Raqqa, although has called for Syrian Kurdish forces, specifically the YPG, to be excluded from any operation. The US has consistently made clear that while it welcome any potential role by Turkey it would not accept any caveats on involvement.

Russia is not currently a participant in the plans to liberate Raqqa,²⁹ although questions have begun to be asked about what Russia, and indeed Iran, may perceive their role to be once ISIS has been driven from the city.

Increasing tension with Russia/Iran

Indeed, conflict between the Coalition and Syrian government, Russian and Iranian forces has been on the increase, and particularly in the

²³ [“Turkey asks US to force Kurd fighters to quit Syrian town”, Bloomberg](#), 2 February 2017

²⁴ “Turkey considers establishing military base in Syria’s Idlib”, *Iran Press TV*, 16 May 2017

²⁵ [“Counter-ISIL forces prepare to drive terrorists from Raqqa”](#), DoD News, 10 February 2017

²⁶ [US Department of Defense press briefing](#), 8 June 2017

²⁷ Approved by the US administration in May 2017

²⁸ Ministry of Defence, [Update: air strikes against Daesh](#), updated 13 July 2017

²⁹ [Joint Press Conference by Secretary Carter and minister Le Drian in Paris](#), 25 October 2016

south of the country around the at-Tanf base, on the border with Iraq, which is used by coalition forces for training. On 1 June the Pentagon stated that the “continued armed and hostile presence of forces inside the deconfliction zone [around at-Tanf] is unacceptable and threatening to our coalition forces. We are prepared to defend ourselves if pro-regime forces refuse to vacate the de-confliction zone”.³⁰ On 8 June the US shot down an armed pro-Syrian government drone after it fired on Coalition forces in the region. A Coalition statement released in the aftermath of the incident stated:

The Coalition’s mission is to defeat ISIS in Iraq and Syria. The Coalition does not seek to fight Syrian regime, Russian or pro-regime forces partnered with them. The demonstrated hostile intent and actions of pro-regime forces near Coalition and partner forces in southern Syria, however, continue to concern us and the Coalition will take appropriate measures to protect our forces.

The Coalition presence in Syria addresses the imminent threat ISIS in Syria poses globally, which is beyond the capability of the Syrian Regime to address. Coalition forces have been located at At Tanf for more than a year. The garrison is a temporary Coalition location to train vetted forces to defeat ISIS and will not be vacated until ISIS is defeated.

As long as pro-regime forces are oriented toward Coalition and partnered forces the potential for conflict is escalated. Coalition forces are oriented on ISIS in the Euphrates River Valley. The Coalition calls on all parties to focus their efforts in the same direction to defeat ISIS, which is our common enemy and the greatest threat to regional and worldwide peace and security.³¹

The commitment of Coalition forces to defend both themselves and Coalition-backed opposition forces on the ground in Syria was also recently demonstrated with the shooting down of a Syrian military aircraft after it dropped a number of bombs in close proximity to SDF forces operating near Tabqa, which was recently liberated by the SDF. The US stated that the plane was shot down “in accordance with rules of engagement and in collective self-defence of coalition-partnered forces”.³²

The Syrian government condemned the move, calling it a “flagrant attack” that would have “dangerous repercussions”. The Russian government said the action was “a flagrant violation of international law” and “act of military aggression against the Syrian Arab Republic”. Russia refuted US claims that attempts were made by the Coalition to prevent the attack through the US-Russian deconfliction channel. As a result it suspended its participation in deconfliction measures and stated that any Coalition aircraft, including unmanned aerial vehicles, operating west of the Euphrates River will be tracked by Russian anti-aircraft forces, both in the sky and on the ground, and treated as targets.³³ In response Coalition allies stated that “air operations continue and de-confliction measures are ongoing. They called on

³⁰ US Department of Defense press briefing, 1 June 2017

³¹ Operation Inherent Resolve, [Coalition statement on At Tanf](#), 8 June 2017

³² Operation Inherent Resolve, [News Release](#), 19 June 2017

³³ [Statement by the Russian Ministry of Defence](#), 19 June 2017

Russia to continue to use these measures and for “all parties to focus on the fight against Daesh in Iraq and Syria”.³⁴



Increasing clashes between Coalition and Syrian government forces, backed by Russia and Iran, particularly in the region surrounding al-Tanf, suggests that Eastern Syria, which is largely under the control of ISIS at present, is the next likely flashpoint. Indeed, on 20 June the US shot down an armed drone near al-Tanf, the second such incident in as many weeks. The Syrian government, backed by Russia is seeking to consolidate its grip on power following the fall of Aleppo and therefore needs to curtail the territorial gains of the SDF; while Iran is motivated by its need to secure its regional sphere of influence and retain control over a land corridor that links Iran, through Iraq and Syria to Lebanon.

³⁴ Ministry of Defence, *Defence in the media*, 20 June 2017

2. The military campaign

The Trump Administration has indicated its desire to speed up the counter-ISIS campaign, although there has been no large extra contingent of troops.

Although there are 68 coalition countries engaged in international efforts to counter ISIS, only a handful of nations are directly involved in offensive air combat operations. The number of countries involved in the train and assist programme is more substantial, although still represents less than half of the Coalition's members. In total 29 nations contribute 4,000 troops to the counter-ISIS operation. NATO is now officially a member of the coalition.

Syrian opposition forces are still being trained by both the US and the UK, while US special forces are helping Kurdish forces in Syria.

There are about 1,350 British military personnel based in the region supporting the campaign in Iraq and Syria. UK personnel are not deployed in a combat role. The RAF is operating at a tempo not seen since the first Gulf War – more than 1,400 airstrikes had been carried out by mid-July 2017, making the UK the second largest contributor to the air campaign against ISIS.

2.1 The Trump administration's comprehensive military strategy

Following his inauguration in January 2017 US President Donald Trump stated that "defeating ISIS and other radical Islamic terror groups will be our highest priority" and that "to defeat and destroy these groups, we will pursue aggressive joint and coalition military operations when necessary".³⁵ To that end, on 28 January President Trump signed a [Presidential Memorandum](#) directing the US administration to develop, within 30 days, a comprehensive plan to defeat ISIS.

The Pentagon presented its plan to the US National Security Council's Principals Committee on 27 February 2017. The plan had been described as a "preliminary framework" that extends both beyond the military and beyond the immediate theatre of conflict in Iraq and Syria. In comments to the media Pentagon Spokesman, Captain Jeff Davis, said:

This is not just a military plan. It draws upon all elements of national power -- diplomatic, financial, cyber, intelligence [and] public diplomacy, and it's been drafted in close coordination with our interagency partners [...]

This plan is truly transregional. This is not just about Iraq and Syria, it is about defeating ISIS around the globe and other transregional violent extremist organizations, such as al-Qaida.³⁶

Beyond those comments, however, few official details of the options set down in that plan were made publicly available. However, on 19 May the Pentagon announced that there would be an acceleration in the counter-ISIS campaign. Specifically, the focus of the campaign will shift from "shoving ISIS out of safe locations in an attrition fight, to

³⁵ White House, [America First Foreign Policy](#), January 2017

³⁶ [Department of Defense News](#), 27 February 2017

surrounding the enemy in their strongholds so we can annihilate ISIS. The intent is to prevent the return home of escaped foreign fighters".³⁷

In an effort to accelerate the campaign in Raqqa, as outlined above, the US is now equipping the SDF with weapons and munitions. In Iraq President Trump also approved a decision to allow US advisers on the ground to "accompany down to the battalion level".³⁸ However, the Pentagon has been clear that US rules of engagement have not changed:

It doesn't change the fundamental rule that applies to all of our forces that are conducting partnered ops that they would be at the last cover and conceal position, and not actually the ones closing with the enemy.....³⁹

Despite speculation in the media that several thousand additional US personnel could be deployed to Syria to support the SDF in re-taking Raqqa there has been no announcement by the Trump administration, thus far, of significant additional resources on the ground.⁴⁰

While the Trump administration has had little incentive to switch strategies in the campaign against ISIS, as outlined above, there has been an increasing willingness by the US to engage Syrian government forces, both on the ground and in the air, in defence of Coalition and partnered forces fighting ISIS. The potential for such action to draw the US further into the broader civil conflict in Syria has not gone unnoticed by many commentators.

2.2 Who are the main players in the campaign?

Although there are 68 coalition countries engaged in international efforts to counter ISIS, only a handful of nations are directly involved in offensive air combat operations. The number of countries involved in the train and assist programme is more substantial, although still represents less than half of the Coalition's members. In total 29 nations contribute 4,000 troops to the counter-ISIS operation.

Air campaign

The countries currently conducting air strikes in both Iraq and Syria are:⁴¹

- United States
- France

³⁷ [US Department of Defense press briefing](#), 19 May 2017

³⁸ [US Department of Defense press briefing](#), 19 May 2017

³⁹ ibid

⁴⁰ In early March 2017 the US deployed an additional 400 troops to Syria to support ongoing SDF operations. However, the Pentagon also announced that month that it would stop providing troop numbers for Iraq and Syria, suggesting that "it's about capabilities not numbers".

⁴¹ More detail on country contributions, up to March 2017, is set out in Library briefing paper SN06995, [ISIS/Daesh: the military campaign in Iraq and Syria](#), 8 March 2017

- Australia⁴²
- Jordan
- United Kingdom
- Belgium

Denmark withdrew its combat aircraft, for the second time, in December 2016.

The countries conducting air combat operations solely in Syria are:

- Turkey
- Saudi Arabia
- United Arab Emirates

Participation by Saudi Arabia and UAE is, however, considered to have been minimal.

A number of other coalition countries, notably Canada, Germany and Poland, are providing force-enabling capabilities such as air-to-air refuelling and surveillance and reconnaissance assets in support of coalition air operations. NATO is also providing direct AWACS support to the coalition, in order to increase situational awareness. That support began at the end of October 2016 with one E-3 aircraft currently based in Turkey.

Previously NATO leaders had highlighted that such assistance did not "make NATO a member of this coalition". At a meeting at the end of May 2017, however, NATO leaders agreed an action plan to do more in the fight against terrorism. As part of that plan NATO will now become a full member of the global coalition against ISIS. NATO personnel will not engage in combat operations but it will enable the Alliance to participate in political deliberations, including on the coordination of training and capacity-building. NATO will also expand its support to the coalition with the commitment of more air-to-air refuelling capabilities to support its existing AWACS mission.

Train, advise and assist mission

Iraq

In November 2014 a number of coalition countries announced a package of training and support for Iraqi security, and local, forces in order to assist them in countering ISIS forces and re-taking territory that had fallen under ISIS control. The training programme is being led by the United States and involves a number of other countries, including the UK.⁴³ These are not combat troops and are not deployed in an offensive role.

⁴² Australia temporarily suspended its air operations in Syria, in response to Russia's warning that it would treat Coalition aircraft as "targets" following the shooting down of a Syrian air force jet by the US on 19 June 2017. Australian air operations resumed on 22 June 2017.

⁴³ Including Italy which is leading the police training effort; Denmark; Australia; New Zealand; France; Canada; Spain; Norway; the Netherlands; Belgium; Germany; Finland; Sweden; Hungary, Slovenia and Turkey.

NATO has also been training Iraqi officers in Jordan and Turkey since 2014, as part of NATO's Defence Capacity Building Package for Iraq. Iraqi officers receive training in key areas including countering IEDs, military medicine and civil-military planning. Following a request from the Iraqi government, at the NATO summit in Warsaw in July 2016 Alliance leaders announced that counter-IED, medical, civil-military cooperation and security training would be expanded into Iraq itself. That new training and capacity building mission was launched on 5 February 2017.

To date, 106,000 Iraqi personnel have been trained, including Iraqi troops (40,000), Peshmerga (21,000), police (15,000), counter-terrorism forces (14,000), border forces (6,000) and other tribal fighters (9,500).⁴⁴ The number of Iraqi forces being trained has also increased three-fold since October 2016, with approximately 3,000 Iraqi forces being trained every month.⁴⁵

In addition to training, the US is also leading efforts to advise and assist the Iraqi Security Forces and Peshmerga at the command level.

Several coalition countries have also been providing Iraqi and Kurdish forces with logistical help and resources, including arms, ammunition and other military equipment. Financial assistance for the payment of Peshmerga salaries has also been provided.

Syria

The US is also leading a programme of training for moderate opposition forces in Syria. The focus of that programme is on "equipping and enabling" "selected groups of vetted leaders and their units so that over time they can make a concerted push into territory still controlled by ISIL".⁴⁶ The US is providing equipment packages and weapons, and providing air support as and when necessary. In October 2016 the UK announced that it would resume its training of Syrian opposition forces, outside Syria, following a request for support from the US. By mid-July 2017 the US confirmed that over 8,500 Syrian partner forces had been trained and that weapons, ammunition, vehicles and personal equipment for over 40,000 troops had been delivered.⁴⁷

The US has also deployed special forces personnel in northern Syria and in Iraq in order to provide logistical and planning assistance to Iraqi, Kurdish and other local forces at the command level.

Turkey continues to provide support and assistance to local opposition forces in northern Syria.

⁴⁴ [US Department of Defense press briefing](#), 6 July 2017

⁴⁵ In total, 12 Iraqi brigades are expected to be trained: nine from the Iraqi security forces and three from the Kurdish Peshmerga. Military training is currently taking place at four training sites at Al-Asad, Irbil, Besmaya and Taji.

⁴⁶ [US Department of Defense press briefing](#), 9 October 2015

⁴⁷ [US Department of Defense press briefing](#), 6 July 2017

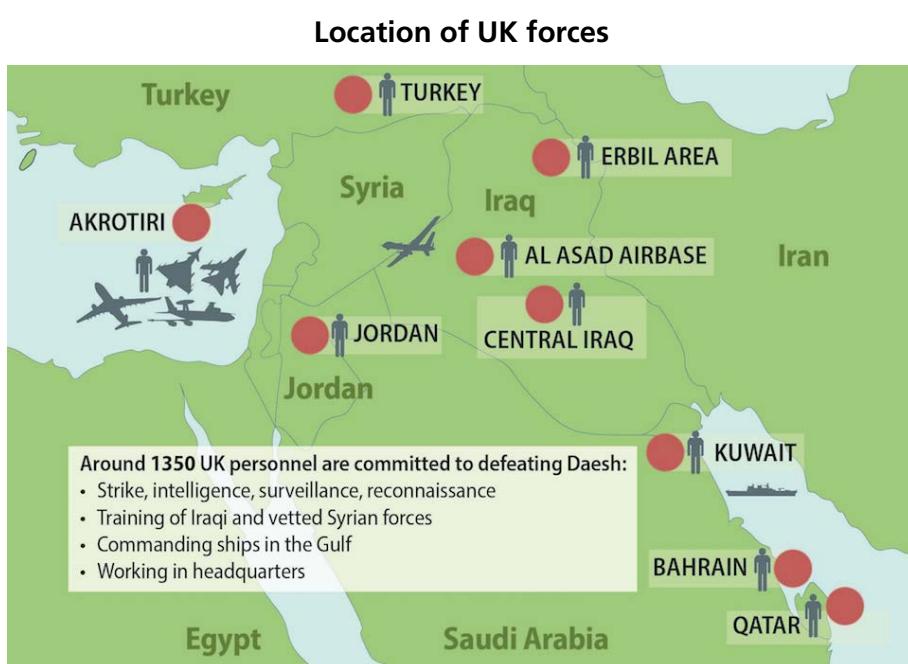
2.3 British participation

British military forces have been operating in Iraq and Syria since September 2014 and December 2015, respectively.

At present, approximately 850 UK personnel are supporting Operation *Shader* in Iraq and Syria, conducting airstrikes in support of local forces on the ground and providing intelligence and surveillance to Coalition operations. With the UK's training contingent in Iraq (500 personnel), the UK's total footprint across the region in support of this operation is approximately 1,350 personnel. Those personnel on the ground are not combat troops.

In answer to a Parliamentary Question on 2 February 2017, the MOD confirmed that:

...the UK has no current plans to increase the number of troops deployed in Iraq. However, we keep this under review to ensure we have the right number of troops deployed with the appropriate permissions to support the training of Iraqi forces.⁴⁸



Source: [Ministry of Defence](#), June 2017

The RAF operation is substantial. The UK has been the second largest contributor to the air campaign in Iraq and Syria, conducting operations at a tempo not seen since the first Gulf War. As of mid-July 2017 the UK had conducted over 1,400 airstrikes against ISIS targets in Iraq and Syria.⁴⁹

Deployed RAF assets include a mixture of combat, surveillance, reconnaissance, and refuelling/transport aircraft:

⁴⁸ [PQ HL4891](#), *Iraq: military intervention*, 2 February 2017

⁴⁹ HC Deb 10 July 2017, topical question 1

- 8 Tornado GR4 fast jet aircraft
- 6 Typhoon combat aircraft (from 2 December 2015)
- Reaper Remotely Piloted Air Systems
- Airseeker surveillance aircraft
- Voyager air-to-air refuelling aircraft
- 2 C130 transport aircraft.
- E3-D sentry aircraft
- Sentinel surveillance aircraft.

RAF Akrotiri in Cyprus is serving as the main operating base for aircraft in the region.

Royal Navy vessels have also periodically deployed to protect French and US carriers deployed in the region.⁵⁰

Training

Since October 2014 the UK has been providing training to Kurdish Peshmerga forces and military advice to the Iraqi security forces.

Specifically, the UK is co-ordinating the coalition's counter-IED training programme. At the end of June 2016 the MOD confirmed that it would expand its training assistance, with the deployment of an additional 50 military trainers to the al-Asad airbase in Western Iraq to provide counter-IED, infantry skills and medical training. More recently the MOD confirmed that UK personnel would expand its training to other locations in Iraq.

The total UK training contingent based in Iraq comprises 500 personnel.

The UK has trained over 50,000 Iraqi security forces personnel, including Kurdish Peshmerga, in Besmaya, Taji and al-Asad. Many of those trained personnel are currently conducting operations in Mosul.⁵¹

On 25 October 2016 the Defence Secretary announced that the UK would resume training of vetted moderate Syrian opposition groups following a request by the US for support of its train and equip programme. 20 UK personnel are thought to be deployed at a number of locations in the region, outside of Syria. Training will focus on basic infantry tactics; command and control; medical training and explosive hazard awareness training.

⁵⁰ Further detail is available in Library briefing paper, CBP06995, *ISIS/Daesh: the military response in Iraq and Syria*, last updated 8 March 2017

⁵¹ HC Deb 10 July 2017, topical question 1

3. Political analysis

Many analysts now think that President Assad will remain in power for the foreseeable future. With the immediate threat to the Assad government eliminated, commentators suggest that the prospects for a general de-escalation may have improved, although not on terms that Western countries would have preferred.

A conflict reduction plan, negotiated in Astana and with similarities to the US/Russian ceasefire effort of September 2016, was agreed between Russia, Iran and Turkey in December 2016. It is being widely ignored, however.

The Astana process could be the basis for progress.

The Syrian government still does not have the resources to hold all of the territory of Syria, however, and intervening forces may be jockeying to influence zones of the country they see as important to their interests.

As Mosul and other areas of Iraq are cleared of ISIS fighters, attention has turned not only to the terrible cost of the military campaign for the city, but also to the likelihood that sectarian conflict in Iraq will continue in different forms, particularly as the prospects for establishing effective and responsive governance remain poor, in Sunni-majority areas especially. In both Iraq and Syria, government-supporting militias have become increasingly powerful; some have become known for sectarian abuse. Is this just another phase in Iraq's cycle of repression and rebellion?

The Kurds remain central to pro-Western efforts in Syria and are leading the push to re-take Raqqa. There could be increasing trouble between Syrian Kurds (who are aligned to the terrorist-designated Turkish PKK) and Turkey. Turkey has already attacked Kurdish positions in northern Syria and the Turkish government is increasingly re-aligning its policy towards Russia.

The US has made cautious moves towards re-engagement with Russia on Syria, but mistrusts Russia's ability to ensure that Syria lives up to any commitments made in pursuit of a negotiated settlement.

The re-election in May of reformist President Rouhani in Iran is unlikely to moderate Iranian foreign policy in the short to medium term, and the dispute between Saudi Arabia and its allies and Qatar is likely to undermine further Sunni support for 'moderate' rebels in Syria.

Meanwhile, many analysts are worried that the territorial defeat of ISIS may make the group more dangerous, internationally, than it is at present. Fighters and leaders could be dispersed, other 'provinces' of ISIS, for example in Egypt, could be strengthened and the group could turn to inspiring and organising more attacks outside Iraq and Syria.

Although the Astana ceasefire is nominally in place, suffering continues largely unabated for Syrians. And the capacity of neighbouring countries to absorb refugees is being severely tested. Displaced Syrians are finding it increasingly difficult to cross into safety in neighbouring countries.

Syria

The prospects of forcing the Syrian Government, or President Bashar al-Assad, to step down are now very distant indeed. Specialists at the RAND Corporation argued in February 2017:

Barring a complete reversal of the U.S. approach toward large-scale military involvement, military and political confrontation with Russia, and willingness to provide more support to Islamist opposition groups – all of which seem unlikely in a Trump administration – it is now virtually certain, and widely accepted, that Assad will remain in power for the foreseeable future.

In September 2016 the US and Russia had tried to collaborate on de-escalating the conflict, both aiming to focus on fighting ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra, now renamed Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (JFS). The bombing raid by US forces that killed dozens of Syrian Government forces (the US military said it was accidental) was followed by the bombing of a UN aid convoy by (probably) Syrian warplanes and attempts at cooperation between Russia and the US ended. This left the US somewhat on the sidelines of efforts to find a solution.

The outlook in Syria is also clouded by the weakness of the Syrian Government, which, like the Iraqi Government, has relied on militias to do much of the fighting. Syrian militias loyal to the Government may be difficult to disempower when and if the fighting stops, and this could leave Syria divided into areas controlled by different militias.

Astana process

Meetings in Astana, the Kazakh capital, began in December 2016. They have had a more military focus than the Geneva meetings aiming to set up ceasefire agreements, and have included armed groups in Syria rather than the political opposition, as the Geneva talks have done. Further rounds were held in March, May and July 2017.

The Astana meetings have laid out a plan for de-escalation zones roughly based on areas held by 'mainstream' rebels against the Syrian government, that is to say around Idlib, just north of Homs and in the south around Dera'a.

The implementation of the plan was agreed between Russia, the Syrian Government and the Syrian opposition, Turkey and Iran in Astana, the Kazakh capital, in January 2017. The US was not a party to the talks.

In May 2017 the latest talks took place in Astana. Syrian opposition representatives walked out of the meeting but returned the next day. Significantly, the US sent a high-ranking diplomat to the talks, signalling a readiness to engage on the part of the Trump Administration, while Iran also joined the process as one of the guarantors of the ceasefire agreements.

The Astana Agreement was signed on 4 May by Russia, Iran and Turkey, providing for 'de-escalation areas' in Syria, and with Russia, Turkey and Iran setting up checkpoints and observation posts to ensure that the conditions of the ceasefire are being observed. It empowers Iran, Turkey and Russia to take military action to expel ISIS and JFS (the former Nusra front) and other groups not signed up to the ceasefire. The United Nations welcomed the de-escalation zones plan.⁵²

⁵² [Transcript of press encounter with the UN Special Envoy for Syria, Mr. Staffan de Mistura, in Astana, Kazakhstan](#), 4 May 2017

Such ceasefires and peace talks, however, have been used in the past by the Russian and Syrian governments to discredit opponents of the Syrian regime, who lose credibility with their supporters if they participate while Syrian and Russian armed forces continue to bombard those civilians.⁵³

The fifth round of the Astana talks took place in July 2017. To facilitate the participation of the rebel side, the Syrian Government ceased its combat operations in southern Syria. There had been talk in June of Kyrgyz or Kazakh troops on the ground in Syria to enforce the de-escalation zones, but neither country was enthusiastic. Similar ideas for former soviet state members of the Commonwealth of Independent States have also been discussed, although those countries may be too close to Moscow.⁵⁴

The US sent a middle-ranking official from the State Department to the talks and the United Nations Special Envoy, Staffan de Mistura, also attended and reaffirmed the UN's support for the Astana process.

The talks ended without significant progress, however.

One analyst argues that,⁵⁵ with increased intermingling of rebel groups with Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (formerly Jabhat al-Nusra), Russia and Iran will be empowered by the agreement to take action against rebel groups within the zones or will encourage 'mainstream' rebel groups to clash with Fatah el-Sham and, with increased conflict in the areas, Russia and Iran will declare that it is not possible to deliver humanitarian assistance.

None of these outcomes would have the effect of de-escalating the conflict. Instead, they would continue a well-worn strategy to use agreements as a pretext for advancing the interests of the Assad regime and its backers. Don't be fooled.⁵⁶

So, while the Astana arrangements may not directly make civilians much safer or bring in a more acceptable or accountable government in Syria, there does seem to be a consensus that the conflict may at least cool down, partly on the basis of the Astana provisions. The fact that the Trump Administration sent an envoy in May signalled a willingness to explore working with Russia again on Syria, although the Administration still has its doubts that Russia can get the Assad government to deliver on its commitments.⁵⁷ The alleged use of chemical weapons in April 2017 by the Syrian government, after a commitment by the Russians to organise their disposal, would be an example of Russia's failure to deliver the Syrians.

⁵³ Lina Khatib, '[Putin's 'safe zones' in Syria are nothing of the kind'](#)', Chatham House, 9 May 2017

⁵⁴ '[5th Round of Astana Syria Peace Talks End Without Agreement](#)', *The Diplomat*, 7 July 2017

⁵⁵ Lina Khatib, '[Putin's 'safe zones' in Syria are nothing of the kind'](#)', Chatham House, 9 May 2017

⁵⁶ *Ibid*,

⁵⁷ '[US to send senior envoy to Syria talks after Trump-Putin call](#)', *Al-Monitor*, 2 May 2017

Geneva process

On 16 May 2017 the sixth round of the UN-sponsored Geneva process took place. Staffan de Mistura, the UN Special Envoy, denied that the talks were in competition with the Astana process, but the spokesman for the Syrian opposition's High Negotiating Committee dismissed the Astana talks, while the Syrian President told a newspaper that the Geneva talks were 'just for the media'.⁵⁸ Hopes for the Geneva talks were correspondingly low.

The talks concentrated on preparations for a system for drafting a new constitution, transitional governance, anti-terrorism and the electoral process. They were short – intentionally according to de Mistura – but technical meetings continued with representatives of the Syrian Government and the opposition.

US policy

As mentioned above, the Trump Administration has signalled a cautious opening to collaboration with Russia by sending an envoy to the Astana talks. US policy, however, remains unclear. The idea of a strong anti-terrorist coalition in the Middle East that would fight ISIS and other violent *jihadi* groups is attractive to the Russians, and to Iran, which has its own worries about terrorism, underlined by the attacks, claimed by ISIS, on the Iranian Parliament and the Khomeini mausoleum in June 2017. The anti-terrorist plan would be plagued by contradictions and complications, however.

US forces were involved in several air strikes on Syrian government forces in April, May and June. The Syrian forces were in a threatening positions near bases held by Syrian rebel forces supported by the US. The clashes, in south eastern Syria, underlined the dangerous tensions in the region, particularly as competing internationally-backed forces try to control territory ceded by ISIS. The US is alleged to be spreading its engagement in the area. Analysts worry that the area, which offers control of the Baghdad-Damascus road and can be used by Iran to supply the Syrian Government and Hezbollah, could become a major flashpoint.⁵⁹

The downing of a Syrian fighter jet in June added to tensions. The US said that it was defending US-supported forces battling to re-take Raqqa from ISIS. The attack could herald increasing direct conflict between US and Syrian government forces, and may increase the chances of US-Russian clashes.

The crisis between Qatar and Saudi Arabia and its allies (see below) puts a question mark over the existing collaboration between Gulf allies in Syria; the Gulf states have in any case been concentrating on the war in Yemen over the last nearly two years – one of the reasons for the weakness of the 'mainstream' Syrian rebels. An 'Arab NATO', informally proposed by Administration officials as a means to resist Iran's drive for

⁵⁸ '[Low expectations as Syria talks resume in Geneva](#)', Al-Jazeera, 16 May 2017

⁵⁹ '[US-led coalition warns Syrian forces as tensions rise ahead of Isis battle](#)', Financial Times, 29 May 2017

regional hegemony,⁶⁰ would not be welcome in Tehran or Moscow. Nor would the sale of arms to Saudi Arabia (although the announcement of \$110 billion of contracts after the US President's tour of the Arabian Peninsula was described as 'fake news' by one expert).⁶¹

All of these developments point towards deepening sectarian divisions in the region and heightened conflict between the US and Iran and Russia, and that is likely to make a genuine resolution of the Syria crisis more difficult.

In July 2017, shortly before the G20 meeting in Hamburg, when Trump and Putin would meet for the first time, US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson offered more cooperation with Russia on de-escalation zones:

The United States is prepared to explore the possibility of establishing with Russia joint mechanisms for ensuring stability, including no-fly zones and on-the-ground ceasefire observers.⁶²

The US Administration has several veterans of the 2003 invasion of Iraq among its senior members, including James Mattis the Secretary of Defense. That, combined with the decision to leave troop number decisions to the Department of Defense, may imply a longer and bigger commitment to Iraq, according to one report.⁶³

However, that sustained commitment from the US (and other Western countries) may need Iraqi Prime Minister Abadi to survive the 2018 Iraqi general election, since US forces are in Iraq on the basis of a letter of invitation from Abadi rather than a Status of Forces Agreement

Kurds

The Kurds remain central to the conflict, in both Iraq and Syria. YPG forces, close to the terrorist-designated PKK of Turkey, have been essential to military successes against ISIS in places such as Kobane, near Syria's border with Turkey. But that has brought yet more complication to the conflict, as Turkey's participation has increasingly been shaped by hostility to the PKK and the YPG, particularly in the light of the more nationalist and authoritarian tone of the Turkish government in recent years.

The Kurdish Democratic Union Party is the political wing of the YPG and has established a federal region in northern Syria. Its links with the PKK remain close, however, and Turkish military has attacked a base in the Kurdish area of Syria after there were reports that the base was sheltering PKK members.⁶⁴ As Turkey has moved towards Russia in the conflict, the possibility of much stronger Turkish intervention against Kurdish forces in Syria should not be underestimated.

⁶⁰ [Trump to unveil plans for an 'Arab NATO' in Saudi Arabia](#), *Washington Post*, 17 May 2017

⁶¹ Bruce Riedel, [The \\$110 billion arms deal to Saudi Arabia is fake news](#), Brookings, 5 June 2017

⁶² [US ready to work with Russia on no-fly zones in Syria peace bid](#), *Daily Telegraph*, 7 July 2017

⁶³ 'The next insurgency beckons after Mosul, rebooting Iraq's cycle of violence', *Gulf States Newsletter*, 20 July 2017

⁶⁴ [The PKK's Fateful Choice in Northern Syria](#), International Crisis Group, 4 May 2017

The campaign to re-take Raqqa is being led by the YPG's Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), against the wishes of the Turkish Government. The US Administration has approved the SDF's leading role but has not yet, contrary to expectations, assigned more US military personnel to the campaign.

Iran

In May 2017, the reformist incumbent Irania President Hassan Rouhani was re-elected easily, with 57% of the vote in the first and only round. This gave a clear mandate to continue trying to open up the economy to the world and generally strengthened the hand of reformists. In the medium term, however, it is unlikely to bring changes to Iran's interventionist policy in Iraq and Syria. Foreign and security policy remain in the hands of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC).⁶⁵

IRGC Qods force commander Qasem Soleimani has a high profile role organising Shiite militias in both countries and there have been allegations of atrocities by some militiamen against Sunni civilians. As ISIS loses territory the problem of how to govern formerly ISIS-held Sunni centres is likely to become more acute.

Land corridor near al-Tanf

Iran continues to prioritise establishing a land corridor through Iraq and Syria which would ease continuing Iranian to support the Assad government and Hizbollah, the Lebanese Shiite militia. It is also important psychologically for Tehran not to be isolated from Beirut and Damascus. Many Iranian strategists see Hizbollah as Iran's best defence against attack or possible regime-change attempts by Israel (or the US). The land corridor issue will come to the fore if a settlement in Syria means dividing the country into zones of control, which some analysts think is likely.

The Syrian government has increasingly targeted US-supported rebels groups in the east of the country, leading US forces to strike Syrian official forces. The clashes happened near the military base at al-Tanf, not far from the Iraqi border and used by US and UK special forces for training rebels, according to reports.⁶⁶ That area of Syria is increasingly a focus of the conflict because it forms part of the land corridor that Iran wants to maintain between Iran and Damascus/Lebanon. Russia and Syria condemned the attack.

On 12 June newspapers reported that forces backing the Syrian Government had reached the Iraqi border, near the Tanf base, despite attacks by US warplanes, showing the relative weakness of the US in the area, with no combat ground troops.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ For more on Rounhani's re-election, see the Commons Briefing Paper [Iran and the re-election of Rouhani](#), 8 June 2017

⁶⁶ 'Assad troops close on UK base', *Daily Telegraph*, 16 May 2017

⁶⁷ 'Assad forces advance to cut off rebel base near Iraq border', *Financial Times*, 12 June 2017

Rouhani

In the longer term, Rouhani's re-election may strengthen the hand of reformists when it comes to choosing the next Supreme Leader. A reformist or pragmatist Supreme Leader could transform Iranian relations with other Middle Eastern countries.⁶⁸

Tehran attacks

Meanwhile, tensions rose another notch after the bomb attack on the Iranian Parliament and the Mausoleum of Ayatollah Khomeini on 7 June. The attacks were claimed by ISIS; the leader of the IRGC said that the attacks were ordered by Saudi Arabia.⁶⁹

Iran launched surface-to-surface missiles at alleged ISIS bases in eastern Syria on 18 June and claimed that "many terrorists" had been killed and their equipment had been destroyed.⁷⁰ It was a rare example of a direct attack by official Iranian forces abroad and could be a foretaste of deeper Iranian involvement.

Iraq

The fate of Iraq's third city, Mosul, has dominated the Iraqi political scene since 2014 when it fell to ISIS. It fatally weakened the then Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. In October 2016 the battle to re-take it began, and has taken up much of the weakened Iraqi state's resources. Official Iraqi forces have re-grouped since their failures in 2014, and their improved performance has now strengthened the hand of Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, Maliki's successor.

Shiite militias

The Shiite militias, Popular Resistance Units or Popular Resistance Forces, have become central to the future of Iraq. They are about 60,000 strong in total but far from monolithic, with some supported by Iran and close to former Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki, some loyal to the Shiite cleric Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, and some to Muqtada al-Sadr, the Shiite cleric and politician whose militia was once the Mahdi Army.

The cleavages in Iraqi politics are mirrored in the positions of the militias, and in disagreement about their future. Several militia sub-groups have political ambitions and will stand candidates in the 2018 election, hoping to capitalise on their military successes against ISIS.⁷¹

The Abadi government has recognised the militias as official Iraqi entities, to try to bring them under control of the government, and left them intact. Supporters of Maliki, (the "godfather" of the militias) want them to be given free rein. Muqtada al-Sadr thinks they should be disbanded. Some analysts argue that Iran would like them preserved as

⁶⁸ For more information see the Commons Briefing Paper [*Iran and the re-election of Rouhani*](#)

⁶⁹ [*'Revolutionary Guards blame Saudi Arabia for Tehran terror attack'*](#), Financial Times, 7 June 2017

⁷⁰ [*'Tehran fires medium-range missiles against Isis in Syria'*](#), Financial Times, 18 June 2017

⁷¹ Renad Mansour and Faleh A Jabar, [*The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq's Future*](#), Carnegie Middle East Center, 28 April 2007

independent entities that can serve as Iranian proxies, in a role similar to that of Hezbollah in Lebanon.

The role of the militias in re-taking Mosul has been controversial, with the Iraqi Government holding them back, partly influenced by international pressure. The government is conscious of the need to avoid atrocities against Sunni civilians. In Tel Afar, Hawija and al-Qaim, the most important of the few remaining ISIS strongholds in Iraq, the militias are likely to have a bigger role.

One recent analysis sums up their importance: "Key challenges involving the PMF [Iraqi Shiite militias] will shape Iraq's political and security future."⁷²

Governance after ISIS

Kirkuk, a multi-ethnic city in the centre of Iraq, has largely been cleared of ISIS fighters but has suffered several bomb attacks in recent months. Arguments continue, however, about who will have Kirkuk; the Kurdish governor raised a Kurdish flag over the city in May, provoking tensions with the Turkmen and Arab communities. Hawija is likely to be the last major Iraqi centre to be re-taken from ISIS. The city is a Sunni area and a 'hotbed' of ISIS support.⁷³

Iraqi-led forces are largely in control of Mosul, but that does not mean the end of ISIS, or of trouble, as Kirkuk shows. There has been renewed bombing in Baghdad and observers fear that Shiite pilgrimages could be targeted again, as ISIS returns to terrorist tactics.

There are few plans for what to do with Mosul when it is in Government hands again.⁷⁴ Reconstructing cities such as Fallujah has been difficult; Mosul will be a far bigger challenge, and the Iraqi Government has severe financial problems after the oil price fall and the cost of the fight against ISIS, although these have been alleviated by loans from international institutions.

After the Iraqi Prime Minister had declared victory in Mosul on 9 July, human rights organisations have called for those responsible for the catastrophe in Mosul not to go unpunished.⁷⁵ Simply restoring some sort of normal life in cities such as Mosul will be a massive task, however.

The problem of governing Iraq's Sunni areas (as well as the rest of the country) will remain, while Iran's influence in Iraq has been expanded, particularly by the role that Iranian-funded militia have played in fighting ISIS in Iraq. Meanwhile, much of southern Iraq has been left in the hands of tribal and Shiite militias and criminal gangs. The prospects for

⁷² Renad Mansour and Faleh A Jabar, '[The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq's Future](#)', Carnegie Middle East Center, 28 April 2007

⁷³ '[Dispatch from Iraq: The anti-ISIS fight, economic troubles, and political maelstrom](#)', Brookings Institution, 5 May 2017

⁷⁴ '[Dispatch from Iraq: The anti-ISIS fight, economic troubles, and political maelstrom](#)', Brookings Institution, 5 May 2017

⁷⁵ '["We lost our houses, our cars, our men": call to protect Mosul civilians](#)', *Guardian*, 11 July 2017

improving governance and better relations between the different groups, the underlying drivers of instability in Iraq, remain poor.

Sectarian strife, while important, is far from being Iraq's only problem. There is a protest movement, active across the country, campaigning about the low standards of governance, rampant corruption and poor service delivery. The movement was started off by leftist and secular groups but there is now some collaboration with religious groups such as the Sadrists. The way that government functions are shared out between sects and ethnicities and become fiefdoms is at the root of many problems.⁷⁶

There is an argument that the Sunni, Shiite and Kurdish blocs in Iraqi politics have become less monolithic since the conflict.⁷⁷ However, this fragmentation is unlikely to result in more representative and effective public institutions.

One analyst argues that victory over the "caliphate" could simply return Iraq to the security situation prevalent in 2012:

Even when all the terrain is liberated, the war against IS is simply likely to reset at something approximating the 2012 level and start all over again. This means Iraq will continue to suffer as one of the world's most challenging security environments.⁷⁸

Shifting alliances

The multifaceted nature of the Iraq/Syria conflict has always made it difficult for outside powers to intervene effectively – one of the reasons why Western powers have been reluctant to get too involved. As ISIS loses territory, this complexity makes it difficult to predict the outcome.

Exemplifying the confusing, shifting alliances in the conflict was collaboration on the ground between the Shiite militias and the Syrian/Turkish PKK/YPG Kurdish force.⁷⁹ In northern Iraq they are working together to capture territory to contribute the Iranian corridor to Damascus and Hezbollah. This sets them against the Peshmerga, the military force of the Iraqi Kurds. Around Raqqa, the YPG is nevertheless working with the US, as is the Peshmerga in Northern Iraq. The Peshmerga, of the Kurdish Region of Iraq, has relatively good relations with the Turkish Government, cemented by a lucrative oil trade. Meanwhile, the Turks are implacably opposed to the PKK and the YPG.

Qatar

The effect of the dispute between Qatar and Saudi Arabia and its allies is unpredictable at present, but it could become quite significant. A failure to coordinate between the supporters of Sunni 'mainstream' rebels has already contributed to their weakness, along with the Saudis and their allies being focused on the Yemen conflict at present. The

⁷⁶ Saad Aldouri, '[What to Know About Iraq's Protest Movement](#)', Chatham House, 6 June 2017

⁷⁷ Renad Mansour, '[Iraq After the Fall of ISIS: The Struggle for the State](#)', Chatham House, 4 July 2017

⁷⁸ "The next insurgency beckons after Mosul, rebooting Iraq's cycle of violence", *Gulf States Newsletter*, 20 July 2017

⁷⁹ Raed al-Hamid, '[The PKK in Sinjar at the Center of Many Conflicts](#)', Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 6 July 2017

present row with Qatar may further reduce the Gulf Sunnis' support for rebel groups in Syria and further distance Saudi Arabia and the UAE from Turkey, which has sided with Qatar in the Gulf crisis.

It could even increase the level of conflict between rebel groups on the ground if they become proxies for the Qataris and the Saudis, respectively, even if tensions do not escalate into military confrontation on the Arabian Peninsula itself. The dispute also has sectarian undertones, with the Qataris accused by the Saudis of collaborating with Iran – deepening sectarian tensions will not help with the search for a political solution in Syria.

Future of ISIS

The Trump Administration has promised to speed up the fight against ISIS, and the Pentagon has offered plans to accelerate operations around Raqqa over the next six months or so.

Winning the territorial battle would deprive ISIS of important practical and propaganda advantages. The taxes and other resources available to ISIS because it controls territory and a civilian population will be gone. The idea that ISIS victories are ordained by God and that therefore Muslims should join it will be undermined.

Analysts warn, however, that ISIS may become more dangerous outside (and inside) Syria and Iraq after those countries are 'cleared'.

- Long-term guerrilla campaigns could continue in Iraq and Syria. Although ISIS has largely been removed from its city strongholds, it remains a presence in sparsely-populated desert areas
- ISIS leaders and fighters could disperse to other 'provinces'. Libya, Egypt, Afghanistan and Yemen all have areas held by forces that have declared themselves to be part of ISIS. Those 'provinces' could be strengthened
- ISIS fighters could return to their home countries in the Middle East and Europe particularly and use their experience to mount attacks at home
- ISIS could become more like Al-Qaeda, inspiring and organising attacks rather than holding territory and prioritising the 'far enemy' rather than the 'near enemy' – meaning that Western countries would be more at risk. ISIS has already claimed responsibility for several attacks in Europe, including that at London Bridge in June 2017.⁸⁰

The US is conscious of these dangers and has adjusted strategy to try to prevent the dispersal of ISIS operatives, by isolating such centres as Raqqa before attacking them, as mentioned above. Nevertheless, the outlook is difficult. Paul Rogers, professor of peace studies at Bradford University says: "IS and its related groups are in it for the long haul. Any

⁸⁰ ['London terror attack: Isis claims responsibility amid group's 'call for increased attacks'](#), *Independent*, 4 June 2017

idea that military suppression by the US or anyone else will work is wishful thinking.”⁸¹

Many commentators argue that aggravating rivalries would be counterproductive and that the only real solution is good governance in Syria, Iraq and other conflict-ridden countries.⁸² Whether Western publics have much appetite for supporting that is open to question.

⁸¹ Paul Rogers, '[Even if Raqqa and Mosul fall, Islamic State is far from finished](#)', *The Conversation*, 15 June 2017

⁸² Counter-terrorism Pitfalls: [What the U.S. Fight against ISIS and al-Qaeda Should Avoid](#), International Crisis Group, 22 March 2017

4. International humanitarian law

The violation of international humanitarian law in Iraq and Syria has been widespread. The UN Commission of Inquiry was particularly critical of the Syrian Government for its attacks on civilians. It also found that other actors, particularly ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra/Jabhat Fatah al-Sham, were guilty of IHL violations.

Chemical weapons were also being used in Syria by the government, in violation of the Chemical Weapons Convention, although that appears to have stopped since the cruise missile attacks.

Although there is little prospect of prosecutions in international courts at present, evidence is being gathered. Some commentators said that the allegations of a crematorium at a Syrian prison indicate that the Syrian government is trying to hide evidence.

From late 2016 until April 2017, Human Rights Watch reports that the Syrian government was systematically using chemical weapons, both those banned by the Chemical Weapons Convention and chlorine weapons, which are not. Some attacks seemed targeted at civilians, according to the group, which also contravenes international humanitarian law.⁸³

According to the UN Commission of Inquiry into international humanitarian law in Syria, the Syrian Government and its supporters continue to violate international law.⁸⁴ The report explains:

Government and pro-Government forces continue to attack civilian objects including hospitals, schools and water stations. A Syrian Air Force attack on a complex of schools in Haas (Idlib), amounting to war crimes, is a painful reminder that instead of serving as sanctuaries for children, schools are ruthlessly bombed and children's lives senselessly robbed from them.⁸⁵

The report also said that the government and its supporters used cluster munitions, incendiary weapons and chlorine weapons in civilian areas, disregarding international law obligations.

The Commission of Inquiry found that other actors in the conflict had violated international law, particularly Jabhat Fatah Al-Sham and ISIS, while other armed groups, including the Kurdish YPG, came in for criticism, too.

In April, shortly after the US cruise missile attacks in response to the alleged use of chemical weapons, the Syrian government upped the tempo of strikes against rebel-held areas, supported by Russian

⁸³ Human Rights Watch, [Death by Chemicals: The Syrian Government's Widespread and Systematic Use of Chemical Weapons](#), 1 May 2017

⁸⁴ For more information, see the Commons Briefing Paper [International Humanitarian Law: a primer](#), January 2016

⁸⁵ Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, [March 2017 report](#)

warplanes. Warplanes used the base that was targeted by US cruise missiles, undermining the claims that it had been disabled.⁸⁶

In May, the US government claimed that the Syrian government is using a crematorium at the Sednaya military prison, An Administration briefing said: “We believe that the building of a crematorium is an effort to cover up the extent of mass murders taking place in Sednaya prison.”⁸⁷ The Syrian government denied the report. Commentators suggest that trying to hide evidence of atrocities suggested a bigger concern for international justice than the Syrian government has admitted.⁸⁸

In July 2017, Amnesty International released a report on violations of International Humanitarian Law in the battle for Mosul.⁸⁹ It said that the violations committed by ISIS had been “abhorrent”, while pro-government forces had subjected the city to “ruthless and unlawful” attacks, failing to take effective precautions to protect civilians and using inherently indiscriminate weapons.

There is also the question of accountability. In December 2016 the UK co-sponsored a UN General Assembly resolution establishing a new ‘International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism’ to collect and analyse evidence of serious international crimes committed in Syria – adding to other commissions and organisations doing so. But without Syrian agreement or Security Council authorisation there is very limited scope for using that evidence in an international court or tribunal.

⁸⁶ ‘Assad steps up air strikes on rebels’, *Financial Times*, 12 April 2017

⁸⁷ ‘Syria using crematorium at prison, U.S. charges’, *Washington Post*, 16 May 2017

⁸⁸ ‘The Guardian view on Assad’s crematorium: he cannot hide his tracks - editorial’, *Guardian*, 16 May 2017

⁸⁹ [At any cost – the civilian catastrophe in West Mosul, Iraq](#), Amnesty International, July 2017 AT ANY COST THE CIVILIAN CATASTROPHE IN WEST MOSUL, IRAQ

5. Human cost

The casualty toll continues to rise: the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights says that 96,000 civilians have died, of a total of 470,000, between the beginning of the conflict and March 2017. Other groups give different figures.

Many sources say that the Syrian government and its supporters have caused by far the most casualties. Aerial bombardment is reported to have caused fewer casualties, although the number caused by the US-led coalition is increasing.

Over half of Syrians have been forced out of their homes. But refugees are finding it increasingly difficult to find refuge in neighbouring countries as Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon seal their borders.

\$3.4 billion are needed for the Syria response plan 2017. The UK was the third largest bilateral donor for the Syria crisis in 2016. At present the UK Government is committed to spending 2.3 billion by 2020.

Casualties of the conflict

In March 2017, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights estimated that 470,000 people had died, of whom 96,000 were civilians. Another 145,000 people were reported missing.

The Syrian government continues to be responsible for more deaths in Syria than any other force, according to most sources, although the number of civilian casualties caused by International Coalition attacks aimed at ISIS is increasing, again according to the SOHR.

The SOHR sets out documented civilian deaths by actor responsible since the beginning of the conflict to March 2017 as follows:

Actor	Syrian Government	Opposition factions	Russian airforce and rockets	Islamic State	International coalition	Turkish ground and air forces	Turkish border guards
Total	78602	7134	4925	3123	920	527	242
Of which:							
Syrian airforce	22596						
Syrian government ground forces and their Syrian and foreign allies	41345						
Deaths in government detention	14661*						

* "...this statistic does not include the 45000 citizens who were killed under torture in the detention centers and prisons of Bashar al-Assad's regime, and the observatory got the information about their death during the period of their detention."

SOHR estimates that about 12,000 people have been kidnapped or imprisoned by various factions. They are not included here.

SOHR also estimates that the true figure of civilian deaths is likely to be about 85,000 higher, since evidence of many deaths is hidden.

These figures should be treated with caution:

- The SOHR admits that the evidence on which it bases its figures is patchy – information from war zones is always difficult to obtain. But, as the organisation says, that means that the true number of civilian casualties is likely to be much higher.
- The SOHR comes from an anti-government position and is based in the UK. These two factors may mean that its figures have an anti-government or pro-Western slant.
- The categorisation of actors is not fully explained.

Nevertheless, the organisation is widely quoted in respected media sources.

The Syrian Government does not record casualty statistics, according to newspaper reports.⁹⁰

According to the Syrian Network for Human Rights, another monitoring group based in the UK, the US-led coalition overtook Russia for the month of March 2017, being the second biggest killer of civilians after the Syrian Government during that month. According to the group, the Syrian Government killed 417 civilians, the US-led coalition, 260, Russia 224, ISIS 119 and Kurdish forces 11. It is worth noting that, like the Observatory, the SNHR released figures for the sixth anniversary of the

⁹⁰ ['US-led coalition killed more Syrian civilians than Isis or Russia in March, figures show'](#), *Independent*, 3 April 2017

beginning of the conflict. The SNHR's figure of 207,000 was very different from the Observatory's number (96,000).⁹¹

Humanitarian

As the Assad government battles to survive and the international participants fight for their perceived strategic interests, the suffering in Syria continues to rise. The ceasefire agreed in Astana has been violated. UNICEF says "the general non-compliance with the Cessation of Hostilities continues to limit access to meet humanitarian needs in hard-to-reach and besieged areas."⁹²

The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) says that 13.5 million people need humanitarian help, 5.8 million of those are children.

4.7 million people are trapped in areas where aid agencies find it difficult to help them.⁹³ 644,000 are living in areas officially declared siege sites by the UN. Aid services are often denied entry into these areas and urgent medical evacuations are blocked, resulting in civilian deaths and suffering.

Over half of Syrians have been forced to leave their homes: a total of 6.3 million internally displaced persons. More than 6,000 people are forced to leave their homes every day.

69% of the population are living in extreme poverty.⁹⁴ One in three Syrians are food insecure.

Neighbouring countries continue to host millions of refugees, supporting them with very limited resources. Most Syrian refugees live in poverty but are relatively safe. Over the last year, however, Jordan and Lebanon have been increasingly reluctant to admit more refugees.⁹⁵ That has led to 170,000 people being stranded in difficult and dangerous conditions on the Syrian side of the border.⁹⁶ Lebanon would like to see 'safe zones' created in Syria, where refugees could be sent. Turkey started a wall along its Syrian border in 2014.

The inter-agency response plan sets out a need for \$3.4 billion for 2017. The largest portion of this would go to food security work, followed by shelter and health.⁹⁷

5.1 UK aid in the region

An increase in aid spending for the Syrian crisis and the related region was set out in the November 2015 aid strategy – [UK aid: tackling global challenges in the national interest](#). The strategy also provided for a £500

⁹¹ Syrian Network for Human Rights, [The sixth anniversary of the popular uprising towards freedom, and the killing of the first civilians](#), 18 March 2017

⁹² [UNICEF Syria Crisis Situation Report April 2017](#)

⁹³ UN OCHA Syria, [About the crisis](#)

⁹⁴ For a definition, see ODI, [The definition of extreme poverty has just changed – here's what you need to know](#), 5 October 2015

⁹⁵ Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyah, '[Syrian refugees in Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon face an uncertain 2017](#)', *The Conversation*, 3 January 2017

⁹⁶ UN [Syrian Humanitarian Needs Overview](#)

⁹⁷ [Syrian Arab Republic Humanitarian Response Plan January – December 2017](#), March 2017

million ODA crisis reserve to allow greater flexibility to respond to emerging crises such as the displacement of Syrian refugees. The whole region of Syria, the Middle East and North Africa is a target for “stepping up” UK aid.

According to the Department for International Development (DFID), the UK was the third largest bilateral contributor to the humanitarian response in Syria in 2016, and the second largest overall since the start of the response in 2012.⁹⁸

Since 2012 the Government has committed over £2.46 billion in response to the crisis in Syria. This includes allocations to over 30 implementing partners, including UN agencies, international NGOs and the Red Cross. It also includes £46 million allocated under the UK Conflict, Stability and Security Fund (CSSF) to support local capacity and build stability in the region.⁹⁹

Regular [updates on the UK's response to the Syrian refugee crisis](#) are posted on the GOV.UK website.

On 4 February 2016, the UK, Germany, Kuwait, Norway and the United Nations co-hosted a conference in London on responding to the crisis in Syria. The ‘Supporting Syria and the Region’ conference involved world leaders, non-governmental organisations, the private sector and civil society, with the aim of raising significant new funding to meet the immediate and longer-term needs of those affected. The conference raised over US\$11 billion in pledges - \$5.8 billion for 2016 and a further \$5.4 billion for 2017-20 to enable forward planning. The conference also set goals on education and economic opportunities to transform the lives of refugees caught up in the Syrian crisis, and to support the countries hosting them.¹⁰⁰

DFID Allocations to Date

By 18 April 2017 DFID had allocated £1.98 billion in response to the Syria crisis. The largest single country destination for the funds is Syria itself (£698 million spent prior to 2017). The other two big destinations are Jordan, where £327 million has been spent, and Lebanon, where £337 million has been spent.¹⁰¹

The UK's aid so far has supported the provision of:¹⁰²

- 24,996,383 individual monthly food rations
- 9,504,220 relief packages
- 7,140,448 vaccines
- 7,919,676 medical consultations

⁹⁸ Department for International Development, '[Britain sends lifesaving aid to the people of Aleppo](#)', 16 December 2016

⁹⁹ Department for International Development, [Syria Crisis Response Summary](#), 18 April 2017

¹⁰⁰ [Co-hosts declaration from the Supporting Syria & the Region Conference](#), London, 4 February 2016

¹⁰¹ Department for International Development, [Syria Crisis Response Summary](#), 18 April 2017

¹⁰² Ibid

Future Commitments

Following the 'Supporting Syria and the Region' conference in February 2016, then Prime Minister David Cameron announced an extra £1.2bn to be spent between 2016 and 2020, taking the UK's total investment to more than £2.3bn. He gave further details of how UK aid would be spent in the region:

With hundreds of thousands of people risking their lives crossing the Aegean or the Balkans, now is the time to take a new approach to the humanitarian disaster in Syria.

Today's pledge of more than £2.3bn in UK aid sets the standard for the international community – more money is needed to tackle this crisis and it is needed now.

But the conference I am hosting today is about more than just money. Our new approach of using fundraising to build stability, create jobs and provide education can have a transformational effect in the region – and create a future model for humanitarian relief.

And we can provide the sense of hope needed to stop people thinking they have no option but to risk their lives on a dangerous journey to Europe.¹⁰³

The International Development Committee has commended the Government for setting an exemplary standard in its commitment to funding humanitarian assistance to address the Syrian crisis.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³ Prime Minister's Office and Department for International Development, [UK to invest an extra £1.2 billion supporting Syria and the region](#), 4 February 2016

¹⁰⁴ International Development Committee, [Syrian refugee crisis](#), 5 January 2016, HC 463 2015-16, page 29

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