

# UK actions against Islamic State in Iraq and Syria | Intelligence briefing #5

13 April 2016



open briefing  
the civil society intelligence agency

## Summary of main points

1. From 8 March to 7 April, the US-led coalition carried out 478 airstrikes against IS forces in Iraq and 141 against those in Syria.
2. As in previous months, UK military forces have continued to primarily operate around Ramadi in central Iraq, on the Mosul-Sinjar corridor in northern Iraq, and around Kirkuk in Kurdish Iraq.
3. UK Ministry of Defence data reveals that only 16% of British airstrikes carried out against Islamic State in Iraq and Syria have been in the latter country. Furthermore, half of the RAF's airstrikes in Syria have been intelligence-led against fixed targets, as Islamic State adapts and presents less opportunistic targets.
4. Local government forces have retaken control of the Syrian cities of Palmyra and Al-Qaryatayn and the Iraqi city of Hit.
5. Russia has switched its air capabilities in Syria from fixed-wing aircraft to attack helicopters as it shifts attention from supporting Bashar al-Assad's government against the moderate opposition forces to the fight against Islamic State.
6. On 22 March, an IS-backed cell in Brussels, Belgium, carried out an attack on the city's transport network killing 32 people and injuring more than 300.
7. On 4 April, Islamic State used mustard gas in an attack on Syrian Army forces based at the Deir ez-Zor airbase.
8. On 4 April, Islamic State also released a new English-language video containing threats against the 'nations of the cross' and promising further attacks in Europe.

**Note:** These briefings began in December 2015 with seed funding from the Network for Social Change. Our analysts lift the lid on the UK military's involvement in the conflict against Islamic State in Iraq and Syria in order to ensure there is informed public and parliamentary debate on the extent and nature of the British contribution to the US-led coalition. However, next month's briefing will be the last one we have funding for. We will endeavour to continue the briefings using volunteers and core funding, but we urgently need to secure dedicated funding to continue this important and respected project. If you are able to help in this matter, please contact our executive director, Chris Abbott, at [chris.abbott@openbriefing.org](mailto:chris.abbott@openbriefing.org) or +44 (0)20 7193 9805. Many thanks.

**Open Briefing**  
27 Old Gloucester Street  
Bloomsbury  
London WC1N 3AX

t 020 7193 9805  
[info@openbriefing.org](mailto:info@openbriefing.org)  
[www.openbriefing.org](http://www.openbriefing.org)

## Recent developments

From 8 March to 7 April, the US-led coalition carried out 478 airstrikes against Islamic State (IS) forces in Iraq and 141 against those in Syria.<sup>1</sup> These actions were carried out by the United States, United Kingdom and France primarily, though the Netherlands undertook occasional missions as well. The focus of airstrikes continues to be Iraq, where the coalition is supporting the Iraqi armed forces' assaults on Hit and Mosul and helping to maintain control of previously liberated cities.

On 4 April, Iraqi forces entered Hit in a push to retake it from Islamic State, which had captured the city in October 2014. The Iraqi advance was slow due to poor weather conditions and a lack of engineer teams to deal with IEDs. Hit is a strategically important city, forming part of the supply lines between the IS-controlled parts of Syria and Iraq. IS fighters reportedly fired on civilians fleeing during the offensive in order to discourage them from leaving the city.<sup>2</sup> Between the beginning of the offensive and 10 April, over 1,000 hostages held by Islamic State were released and 39 IS fighters have been confirmed killed by airstrikes according to Kurdish media.<sup>3</sup> There are reports that IS forces have been retreating to Mosul, though large parts of Hit remain under the control of Islamic State.<sup>4</sup> The offensive comes after the retaking of Ramadi, a major Iraqi city approximately 30 miles away from Hit. In Syria, government forces retook the destroyed historic city of Palmyra on 27 March and Al-Qaryatayn, near Homs, on 3 April.

On 15 March, Russia announced that it would withdraw its airstrike groups from its base in Syria back to Russia in light of the ceasefire agreement in Syria. Initially, this was seen as a standing down of forces; however, it has become apparent that this is, in fact, a reshuffle of capabilities, as the fighter jets and their support crews have been replaced by attack helicopters. While some Russian fixed-wing aircraft are still in Syria, the change of air capabilities allows the Russian military to more effectively support the Syrian Army against Islamic State forces. Previously, Russian airstrikes had involved cluster munitions and indiscriminate bombing against entrenched static targets and cities held by moderate opposition forces. Now, with the ceasefire holding, the Russian military needs to be able to attack mobile IS units and other extremist forces traversing open ground – something the heavily-equipped Russian gunships excel at.<sup>5</sup>

On 22 March, an IS-backed cell in Brussels, Belgium, carried out an attack on the city's transport network killing 32 people and injuring more than 300. At 07:58 local time, a suicide bomber detonated a nail bomb at the international check-in desks at Brussels Airport. In a classic double-tap attack, a second bomb exploded near the exit, killing those fleeing the first explosion. A third bomb was later found in the airport by security services and detonated in a controlled explosion. At 09:11 local time, a suicide bomber detonated a device on the metro system at Maalbeek Station, near the EU commission building. The attacks came days after Salah Abdeslam was arrested by Belgian police for his part in the attacks in Paris in November 2015.

<sup>1</sup> <http://airwars.org/military-reports-march-2016/> and <http://airwars.org/daily-reports-apr16/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/iraqi-forces-face-heavy-resistance-in-isis-held-town-of-hit/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iraq/100420161>

<sup>4</sup> <http://rudaw.net/mobile/english/middleeast/iraq/100420161>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/04/gunships-replace-jets-russias-air-campaign-syria-160407111014579.html>

On 4 April, Islamic State used mustard gas in an attack on Syrian Army forces based at the Deir ez-Zor airbase in eastern Syria. The airbase is just south of Deir ez-Zor city, which links Raqqa – Islamic State’s capital in Syria – to Mosul, its stronghold in Iraq. Islamic State is likely to consolidate its Syrian forces around Deir ez-Zor as it is pushed out of other areas.<sup>6</sup> The use of chemical weapons here demonstrates an IS capability that suggests there is a nascent threat of the group using weapons of mass destruction in a terrorist attack outside the Middle East – something the European Parliament raised the alarm over in December 2015.<sup>7</sup> It is suspected that Islamic State has created a team of foreign and Iraqi engineers based at Mosul University in Iraq and tasked it with creating chemical weapons.<sup>8</sup> Russia Today has alleged that the team also has access to the 40 kilograms of uranium previously reported as having been stolen from the university,<sup>9</sup> though the International Atomic Energy Agency has suggested that it is low grade and poses little security risk.<sup>10</sup>

On the same day as the mustard gas attack, Islamic State released a new English-language video containing threats against the ‘nations of the cross’. The video – titled ‘Fight Them: Allah Will Punish Them by Your Hands’ – features propaganda, executions and threats, and images of the Eiffel Tower being destroyed and the Colosseum in Rome. The narrator says: ‘So if it was Paris yesterday and today Brussels, Allah knows where it will be tomorrow. Maybe it will be in London, or Berlin, or Rome.’ The video offers a choice to *kuffār* (infidels): join Islam, pay tribute, or face a war.<sup>11</sup>

### **Review of UK military operations**

As in previous months, UK military forces have continued to primarily operate around Ramadi in central Iraq, on the Mosul-Sinjar corridor in northern Iraq, and around Kirkuk in Kurdish Iraq, with limited operations across the border in Syria. During this reporting period (8 March to 7 April 2016), UK forces attacked 47 IS-controlled bases/buildings, 21 assault groups, 12 IED targets, nine weapons stores, 13 heavy machine-gun positions, seven tunnel sites, six construction targets, five rocket-launching sites, five mortar units, three supply/transport vehicles, three RPG units, two sniper positions, one anti-aircraft gun, one road checkpoint and one network of trenches.

At present, the United Kingdom has the following air assets deployed to Operation Shader (the British contribution to the military intervention against Islamic State):<sup>12</sup>

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/ISIS%20Sanctuary%2031%20MAR%202016-01\\_2.png](http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/ISIS%20Sanctuary%2031%20MAR%202016-01_2.png)

<sup>7</sup> [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2015/572806/EPRS\\_BRI\(2015\)572806\\_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2015/572806/EPRS_BRI(2015)572806_EN.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> <http://europe.newsweek.com/isis-carries-out-chemical-weapon-attack-syrian-army-state-news-agency-444213?rm=eu>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.rt.com/news/338086-isis-chemical-lab-mosul/>

<sup>10</sup> <http://uk.reuters.com/article/iraq-security-iaea-idUKL6N0PL1RM20140710>

<sup>11</sup> <http://heavy.com/news/2016/04/new-isis-islamic-state-news-pictures-videos-english-language-video-fight-them-allah-will-punish-them-by-your-hands-full-uncensored-youtube-video/>

<sup>12</sup> <http://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/SN06995>

- 10 Tornado GR4 attack and reconnaissance aircraft
- Six Typhoon FGR4 multi-role combat aircraft
- 10 (unconfirmed<sup>13</sup>) MQ-9 Reaper Remotely Piloted Air Systems (RPAS)
- Airseeker surveillance aircraft
- Voyager air-to-air refuelling aircraft
- Two C130 transport aircraft
- E3-D Sentry surveillance, command and control, and weapons control aircraft
- Sentinel R1 long-range battlefield surveillance aircraft

As of 4 March, the RAF's Reaper drones had been operating in Iraq and Syria for 500 days. In that time, data from the Ministry of Defence shows that there had been 250 strikes from Reapers in Iraq and 17 in Syria, out of an overall total of 796 airstrikes.<sup>14</sup> This indicates that the drone fleet is carrying out one third of the RAF's airstrikes against IS targets.

As of 1 March, there have been only 54 airstrikes in Syria out of an overall 338 across all of Operation Shader.<sup>15</sup> This probably has less to do with any lack of UK political will or military capability and more to do with lack of opportunity. After more than a year of intensive operations by US and other coalition forces, it appears that Islamic State's forces in Syria have become more successful at evading the coalition's tactical surveillance and therefore provide fewer opportunistic targets. Subsequently, half of the RAF's targets in Syria have been intelligence-led, primarily against fixed oil assets and construction sites.<sup>16</sup>

Speaking at the FIDAE air show in Santiago, Chile, on 30 March, Air Marshall Greg Bagwell, the RAF's Deputy Commander of Operations responsible for all overseas RAF operations, said that while the RAF's involvement in Operation Shader represents the RAF's 'maximum sustained effort' (reflecting recent defence budget and equipment cuts), it can still be maintained for many years.<sup>17</sup> Revealing the thinking of UK military planners, he said that 'Some countries do six months hard, and then leave and go back in once they've recovered – we are doing things differently. We could have put more [aircraft and personnel] in for a shorter period of time, but we are in this for the long-haul, as it looks like it is going to go on for some time, perhaps even years.'<sup>18</sup>

In addition to the air assets, a Royal Navy Type 45 destroyer is deployed as part of Operation Shader. HMS Defender is providing air-defence cover to the French Charles de Gaulle carrier group, which is currently stationed in the Mediterranean.

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.janes.com/article/59276/uk-raf-set-for-the-long-haul-against-the-islamic-state>

<sup>14</sup> <http://truepublica.org.uk/global/500-days-british-drone-operations-iraq-syria/>

<sup>15</sup> <http://truepublica.org.uk/global/500-days-british-drone-operations-iraq-syria/>

<sup>16</sup> <http://truepublica.org.uk/global/500-days-british-drone-operations-iraq-syria/>

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.janes.com/article/59276/uk-raf-set-for-the-long-haul-against-the-islamic-state>

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.janes.com/article/59276/uk-raf-set-for-the-long-haul-against-the-islamic-state>

In relation to ground forces, the UK government states that there are approximately 1,000 UK personnel based in Iraq and airbases in Kuwait and Cyprus.<sup>19</sup> Approximately 300 of these are providing training and advice, and the remainder are supporting the air campaign. UK military teams continue to participate in the coalition-run programme training Iraqi and Kurdish security forces in tactical infantry drills, IED identification and disposal (the UK is the lead provider of this type of training) and field medical skills.<sup>20</sup> As of 16 March, the United Kingdom has trained over 6,500 personnel in Iraq.<sup>21</sup> The government states that there are no UK combat troops deployed to the region; however, UK special forces units continue to operate in Iraq and probably Syria. The deliberate opacity surrounding UK special forces deployments allows the British government to authorise ground operations while at the same time claiming that there are no UK combat troops involved in the conflict, thereby sidestepping public and parliamentary debate.

<sup>19</sup> <http://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/SN06995>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/update-air-strikes-against-Islamic-State> and <http://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/SN06995>

<sup>21</sup> <http://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/SN06995>

## Appendix 1: Available chronology of UK military actions in Iraq and Syria

The RAF flies daily armed reconnaissance flights over Iraq and Syria, monitoring the activities and movements of Islamic State and engaging IS targets. The following is a list of the confirmed airstrikes as reported by the UK Ministry of Defence:<sup>22</sup>

Date	Syria	Iraq
8 March		Kisik – One assault group and one heavy machine-gun position destroyed. Sinjar – Seven defensive strongpoints destroyed.
9 March		Sinjar – One vehicle destroyed. Ranbusi – Six buildings destroyed. Ramadi – One assault group and two machine-gun positions destroyed.
10 March		Ramadi – One weapons cache, one heavy machine-gun position and one assault group destroyed. Tal Afar – One rocket-launching site destroyed. Kisik – Six positions destroyed.
11 March		Sinjar – Reaper drones assisted three coalition strikes plus attacked two combat positions.
12 March		Sinjar – Reaper drones destroyed one rocket-launching unit. One assault group and one vehicle also destroyed. Reaper assisted in strike on multiple rocket launchers.
13 March		Ramadi – Tunnel complex destroyed.
14 March		Qayyarah – Two mortar positions and one assault group destroyed. Kisik – Two combat positions destroyed.
15 March		Sinjar – One heavy machine-gun position destroyed.

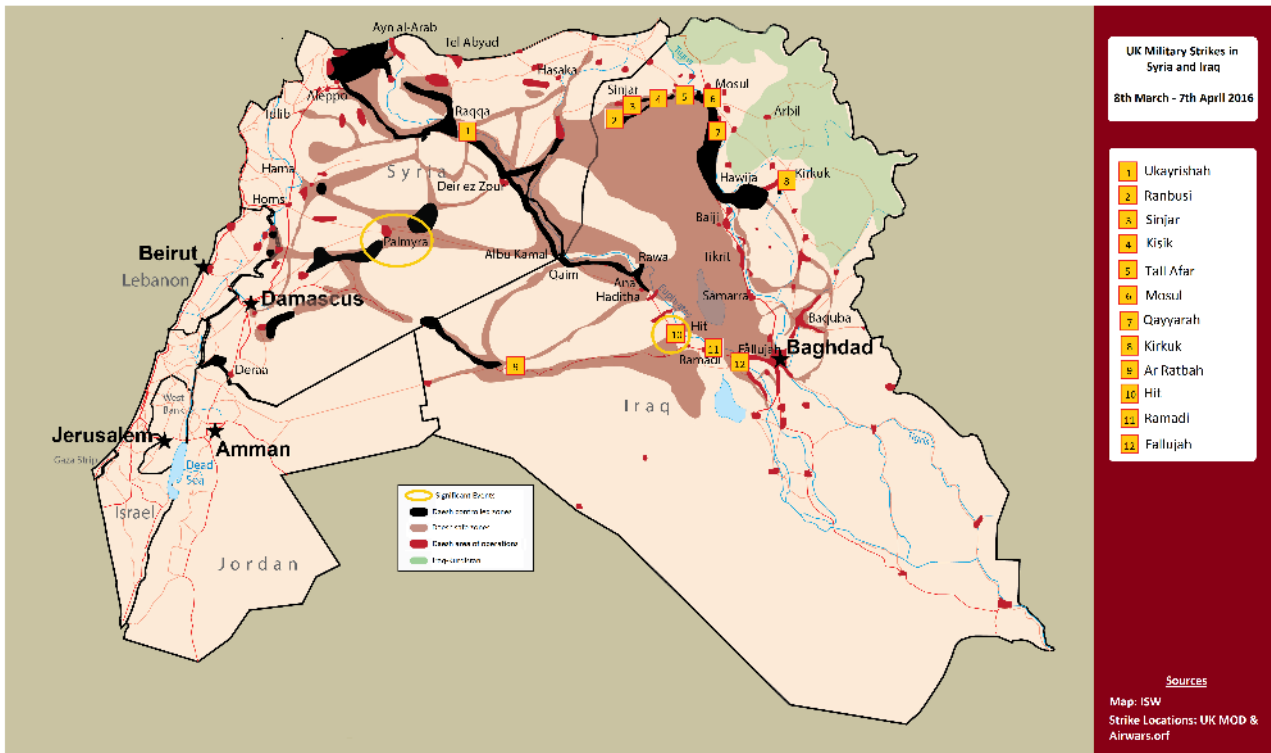
<sup>22</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/update-air-strikes-against-daesh>

Date	Syria	Iraq
16 March		Kirkuk – One heavy machine-gun position destroyed. Ar Rutbah – One road checkpoint destroyed.
17 March		Tall Afar – One sniper position destroyed. Ramadi – One assault group destroyed. Kisik – One command post destroyed. Qayyarah – Three engineering vehicles and two construction sites at a damaged strategic bridge crossing destroyed.
18 March		Mosul – One assault group destroyed. Kisik – Two assault groups destroyed.
20 March		Sinjar – Three weapons caches/supply depots destroyed.
21 March	Ukayrishah – Major weapons storage depot destroyed.	Kisik - One rocket-launching unit and three groups planting IEDs destroyed.
22 March	Ukayrishah – One storage depot destroyed.	Anbar – One base destroyed. Qayyarah – Bridge crossing attacked again, one construction site destroyed.
23 March		Sinjar – One combat position destroyed. Kisik – One tunnel site, two buildings and one mortar unit destroyed.
25 March		Mosul – Five combat positions destroyed.
27 March		Qayyarah – One sniper position and one heavy machine-gun position destroyed. Sinjar – One heavy machine-gun team destroyed.
28 March		Sinjar – Two buildings destroyed. Tall Afar – One combat position destroyed.

Date	Syria	Iraq
29 March		<p>Mosul – One storage depot destroyed.</p> <p>Quyyarah – Four tunnel entrances and three truck IED manufacturing bases destroyed.</p> <p>Anbar – Two IED manufacturing bases destroyed.</p> <p>Hit – Two IED manufacturing bases destroyed.</p>
30 March		<p>Fallujah – One building and a stockpile of concealed rockets destroyed.</p> <p>Mosul – Two bases destroyed.</p>
31 March		<p>Hit – One observation post destroyed.</p>
1 April		<p>Ramadi – One mobile anti-aircraft gun destroyed.</p> <p>Hit – One fuel tanker/VBIED destroyed.</p> <p>Fallujah – One bunker destroyed.</p> <p>Mosul/Sinjar – Three buildings destroyed.</p>
2 April		<p>Qayyarah – One major weapons store/IED factory and one mortar team destroyed.</p>
4 April		<p>Fallujah – Two buildings destroyed.</p> <p>Hit – One assault group destroyed.</p> <p>Mosul – One assault group destroyed.</p> <p>Qayyarah – One assault group destroyed.</p>
5 April		<p>Mosul – Three buildings destroyed, including one weapons store.</p> <p>Kirkuk – Three buildings destroyed, including one headquarters and one mortar unit base camp.</p>
6 April		<p>Hit – Three RPG units and four heavy machine-gun teams destroyed.</p> <p>Qayyarah – Network of trenches destroyed.</p>
7 April		<p>Kirkuk – One truck-mounted VBIED and one machine-gun position destroyed.</p> <p>Qayyarah – Two buildings and one assault group destroyed.</p>



Figure 1. Locations of known UK airstrikes against Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (8 March to 7 April 2016).



Open Briefing is the world's first civil society intelligence agency. We are a unique international collaboration of intelligence, military, law enforcement and government professionals working tirelessly behind the scenes to make a difference.

We provide **intelligence, security and training** to organisations striving to make the world a better place. We **scrutinise the actions of governments and militaries** and generate alternative policies. We deliver a **public intelligence service** so that *you* know what is really going on in the world.

Founded in 2011, Open Briefing is a groundbreaking non-profit social enterprise supported by volunteers. We take no government or corporate funding and rely on charitable grants and public donations. We are *your* intelligence agency.

[www.openbriefing.org](http://www.openbriefing.org)