

British government to escalate its Middle East intervention

By Paul Mitchell
5 August 2016

On Monday, a Ministry of Defence (MoD) press release on the UK's intervention in the war in Iraq and Syria was taken up in several British media outlets including the BBC, *Guardian* and *Daily Mail*.

The headline-grabbing story told of an air-strike on a palace of former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein in Mosul, the Iraqi "capital" of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (IS/ISIS/ISIL/Daesh), by Reaper drones and Tornado fighters using the Royal Air Force's 2,000-pound bunker busting Paveway bombs. ISIS has been in control of Mosul, Iraq's second-largest city, since June 2014, when the Iraqi army collapsed in the face of an offensive by the Islamist force.

The press release also revealed that there have been RAF strikes over several days around Manbij in northern Syria, which lies on the main supply route from Turkey to Raqqa, Islamic State's headquarters in Syria.

The British air force has conducted close to 950 airstrikes from RAF Akrotiri in Cyprus since the UK restarted military action in Iraq in September 2014, as part of the US's Operation Inherent Resolve to recapture territory held by ISIS. Some 1,150 military personnel are stationed in the region and more have been promised by Conservative Defence Minister Michael Fallon.

Speaking at the Royal United Service Institute's annual airpower conference last month, Fallon declared, "The RAF has not operated at this sustained operational tempo in a single theatre of conflict for a quarter of a century.

"Our tempo and commitment to the operation—our precision targeting, our Intelligence, Surveillance, Reconnaissance, and our overall support to the coalition—shows no sign of abating."

An indication of the severity of the conflict can be gleaned from the monthly reports published on the MoD website, which catalogue the almost daily bombing raids by the RAF.

Typical is the entry for July 28 which reads, "RAF

aircraft continued to provide close air support to the Syrian democratic forces on Thursday 28 July, when a Reaper patrolled the Manbij area. The Reaper's crew conducted 4 attacks with Hellfire missiles against several groups of Daesh fighters, and assisted in 4 further attacks by coalition fast jets. In Iraq, Brimstone armed Tornados destroyed a mortar near Qayyarah, while a pair of Typhoons used a Paveway IV to strike a Daesh bunker on the shores of Lake Qadisiyah."

A demonstration of the terrible power of the missiles can be seen here.

The ramping up of UK military intervention is part of US plans to recapture Mosul from ISIS. According to some press reports, pressure is increasing to begin the offensive in October--before the US presidential election--and that it may be combined with one on Raqqa.

Speaking at a meeting of 30 defence and foreign ministers in Washington last month, Brett McGurk--Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition To Counter ISIL, Office of the Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL--declared, "The liberation of Mosul is now in sight and an achievable goal" and means the end of the "IS phony caliphate."

In March, ISIS was ousted from the Syrian city of Palmyra and in June from the Iraqi city of Fallujah. The Pentagon claims ISIS has lost some 45 percent of the territory it held in Iraq and up to 20 percent in Syria.

In recent weeks, the Obama administration has given permission for US advisers to be deployed with Iraqi battalions i.e., in the firing line, and hundreds of advisers are pouring into the Qayyarah air base, about 40 miles south of Mosul, which was recaptured from ISIS last month.

Additionally, support for the Peshmerga militia of the Kurdistan Regional Government has rapidly escalated with an agreement signed last month to provide \$415

million to buy ammunition and medical supplies.

The battle for Mosul will be waged by three main military forces: Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces, the Kurdish Peshmerga and Iraqi Security Forces. So far, the fight against ISIS has provided the glue for an uneasy truce among these political factions—but US officials concede the informal alliance on the battlefield could be shattered by political disagreements. A powder-keg has been created, which will lead to another bloody sectarian conflict in the vacuum left should ISIS be defeated.

The Popular Mobilization Forces is an Iraqi state-sponsored umbrella organization composed of some 40, almost entirely Shia Muslim militia groups. It was created in 2014 as the Iraqi Army collapsed. Nominally headed by Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, under the control of the Iraqi security services and paid by the Iraqi state, most militias operate with their own chain of command, and receive direct support from Iran. According to Amnesty International, Shiite militias have abducted, tortured and killed numerous Sunni civilians.

The US alliance with the Peshmerga, which it sees as the mainstay of the Mosul operation, has antagonised both the Iraqi central government and Turkey, which fears growing Kurdish influence with the US—especially since the failed coup attempt against Turkish President Recep Erdogan earlier in July. The Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) and its local offshoots now control a swathe of territory from northern Iraq into northern Syria.

A recently negotiated US-Kurdish understanding includes Peshmerga militia standing aside when the Iraqi Security Forces pass through their units during the initial assault on Mosul. The move is part of a US effort to make sure that the units involved in the Mosul operation do not end up killing each other.

The US has also dropped its opposition to arming Sunni militias in Iraq's Anbar province and helped create a new Tribal Mobilization Force.

The announcement Wednesday by President Barack Obama that he has authorised a month-long bombing campaign against Islamic State in Libya, prompted *Middle East Eye* (MEE) to raise questions regarding UK military involvement on that front.

Noting evidence of ongoing covert UK operations in Libya, including the use of the elite Special Air Service regiment, MEE writes: “On Wednesday, sources at the Ministry of Defence in London refused to be drawn on ‘potential UK flights and Libya’ when asked to clarify the UK's position by MEE. This comes after Prime Minister Theresa May promised to work toward

preventing Libya ‘becoming a base for Daesh.’ She made the comments alongside her Italian counterpart, Matteo Renzi in Rome last week.”

MEE also states that the British government has “refused to comment on whether RAF drones are currently operating over Libya.”

The UK's role in the bloodbath being carried out across the Middle East and North Africa lies firmly with the Labour Party which allied itself with the Conservative government, voting for war in Iraq in 2003, Libya in 2011, in Iraq again in 2014 and in Syria in December 2015.

Current Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn cleared the path for the bombing of Syria when he capitulated to his right wing and agreed to a “free vote” on military action, enabling 66 Labour MPs to vote with the Tories without fear of censure.

In a survey of the party membership, 75 percent registered their opposition to the bombing of Syria. Only the day before, the Foreign Affairs Select Committee voted four to three in favour of a motion that Cameron “had not adequately addressed concerns” about military action.

Corbyn continues to state his personal opposition to military action in Syria and Libya, but his new Shadow Secretary of State for Defence, Clive Lewis, pointedly refused to rule out support for military operations in Libya. “We will look at the detail of any request from the Libyan authorities, if and when such a request for military assistance is made,” Lewis reported.

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