



Defence Committee

Oral evidence: UK military operations in Syria and Iraq, HC 657

Tuesday 1 December 2015

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 1 December 2015.

Watch the meeting – [UK military operations in Syria and Iraq](#)

Members present: Dr Julian Lewis (Chair); Richard Benyon; Douglas Chapman; Mr James Gray; Johnny Mercer; Mrs Madeleine Moon; Jim Shannon; Ruth Smeeth; Bob Stewart

Questions 1–58

Witness[es]: **Rt Hon Michael Fallon MP**, Secretary of State for Defence, **Lieutenant General Gordon Messenger**, Deputy Chief of Defence Staff (Military Strategy and Operations), **Air Marshal Stephen Hillier KCB CBE DFC RAF**, Deputy Chief of Defence Staff (Capability), and **Peter Watkins**, Director General for Security Policy, gave evidence.

Q1 Chair: Welcome to this session of the Defence Select Committee, originally scheduled to concentrate on our inquiry into defence expenditure and the 2% commitment. We will indeed get on to that topic and will also discuss some aspects of most interest from the recently published SDSR. However, in the present circumstances, given the vote that is going to take place tomorrow on military action regarding Syria, we feel that it would be bizarre if we did not take this opportunity, having the Secretary of State for Defence before us, to have a conversation and a question-and-answer session on that very important topic.

As well as the Secretary of State for Defence, we have other witnesses present today. For the purposes of the record, I will invite them to identify themselves, and then perhaps, Secretary of State, you would care to make a few opening remarks about what is proposed to be done in Syria, how we propose to do it and what resources we will have available to carry out such a policy if Parliament approves it. Could I just ask our other witnesses to identify themselves?

Air Marshal Sir Stephen Hillier: I am Air Marshal Sir Stephen Hillier, the Deputy Chief of the Defence Staff for Military Capability.

Peter Watkins: I am Peter Watkins, the director general for security policy in the Ministry of Defence.

Lieutenant General Gordon Messenger: I am Lieutenant General Gordon Messenger, the Deputy Chief of the Defence Staff for Military Strategy and Operations.

Michael Fallon: Good morning, Chairman, and thank you for the invitation to set out briefly the case for extending the military action that we are already taking against ISIL in Iraq to north-east Syria and to set out the practical difference that United Kingdom involvement would make in Syria.

We are proposing this action to Parliament tomorrow, because ISIL is a very real threat to us here in Britain. The attacks in Paris brought home this evil organisation's terror to our doorstep. To those who argue that striking ISIL in Syria might make us a target, I reply very simply that we are already a target and we are already in this fight, since Parliament approved action last September 2014. We now need to act against ISIL in Syria. Syria is where ISIL is headquartered. It is where it hatches its plots against us. It is where it is plotting to create terror elsewhere in western Europe. Our allies have made it clear that extending UK operations to Syria would make a difference. They have asked for our support because the United Kingdom provides up to one third of the coalition's high-end strike capability at the moment—the planes and missiles that can deal with the highest-value and most difficult targets—but of course that capability is restricted to operations in Iraq.

There is an urgent need now for the United Kingdom to join the fight against ISIL in Syria, for our own security and to provide vital support to our allies. That does not mean that we will compromise our rigorous rules of engagement or our careful selection of targets, which have been in place since Parliament gave us the authority to strike in Iraq in September a year ago.

In summary, air strikes alone cannot defeat ISIL, but they can degrade it. They can prevent ISIL from expanding further in Syria. They can relieve the pressure on opposition forces that are being attacked by ISIL, and they can therefore enhance the prospect that the political negotiations now under way will lead to a new and more secure Syrian state. Most importantly, by putting greater pressure on ISIL in its heartland of Raqqa and north-eastern Syria, we can reduce ISIL's ability to launch international attacks against the United Kingdom and others, thus making us safer.

Chair: Thank you very much. To open the questioning, Colonel Bob Stewart.

Q2 Bob Stewart: Secretary of State, it has been quite difficult for us to ascertain exactly what Daesh/ISIL is, in military capability terms. For example, the CIA published something in August 2014 saying they were about 30,000 to 50,000 strong. The Brookings Institution has said that they are 60,000. Some people are saying they are 100,000. People in Iraq are saying there are 200,000 of them, in numbers terms. I am trying to ask about their capability. I know you probably will not be able to answer this yourself, but you have got experts here.

They have also taken over tanks such as T-55s, T-62s and M1 Abrams. They have got lots of Humvees; they have got ZSU-23-2s and Stinger missiles. What I am getting at is this: what are we actually facing? How are they deployed, and therefore, what targets are they presenting? We cannot just keep knocking out houses presumed to be operations centres. Presumably, as soon as they move a tank, it will be spotted by our surveillance equipment in some form. What we are presumably aiming to do is hole them up or destroy them where they are, but what we do not know—I have tried to find this in the press and classified press; I cannot see classified stuff anyway—is exactly who these people are, what strength they have and what capability and equipment they really have, in numbers terms. I know that you

probably will not be able to answer that question, but General Messenger or Air Marshal Stephen Hillier might, or even Peter.

Michael Fallon: We will do our best to answer all these questions, because they are important. General Messenger will be able to give you our current estimate of ISIL's strength and its configuration.

It is important to start by saying that we have been helping the Iraqi and Kurdish forces push ISIL backwards. Since you gave us the authority to act over a year ago, ISIL has not been advancing in Iraq. On the contrary, they have been pushed out of Tikrit, they are almost out of Baiji now, they have been pushed up the Tigris, and there are battles raging west along the Euphrates. The Iraqi and Kurdish forces are having some success, not least due to the air power the coalition has been able to deploy in their support, and the training that our Army and those of many other NATO members have been assisting with.

In Iraq is an organisation that is no longer advancing; we are slowly pushing it back, although it is of course being reinforced and resupplied through the supply routes that lead from its headquarters in north-east Syria. I will ask Lieutenant General Messenger to say something about the estimate of the numbers that are laid out.

Lieutenant General Gordon Messenger: It is very difficult to estimate accurately what constitutes an ISIL fighter who will operate in civilian clothes, with weaponry one day, without weaponry another. This is not a uniform force that is good at book-keeping, so it is difficult to be specific. We do assess with a low level of confidence that there are about 20,000 to 30,000 core fighters spread throughout the area.

Q3 Bob Stewart: Is that Syria and Iraq?

Lieutenant General Gordon Messenger: That is Syria and Iraq. We agree that they have access to and use high-end capabilities. We have been quite successful at degrading the more obvious ones: the tanks and the personnel carriers that they captured from the Iraqi security forces when they swept through Iraq in the summer of 2014. As I said, that has been degraded. When it becomes obvious and they become clearly legitimate targets then they are struck. That process of degradation continues.

We know more and more about their command and control and their leadership. That command and control is centred on Raqqa, as the Secretary of State has said. With that command and control comes a semblance of civic governance. They portray themselves as the civic governance of the cities and towns that they control.

It is easier to target them when they are on a frontline and fighting against the many opposition fighters who are applying pressure to them: the Peshmerga, the Iraqi security forces, the Kurdish forces in the north of Syria, the moderate opposition forces in the north-west of Syria, the southern front forces in the south-west of Syria. When they show themselves as a fighting force, when we can identify them as ISIL, when we are clear that they are legitimate combatants, we will and do strike them in that regard. A great deal of that activity, it needs to be said, is taking place in Syria.

We do know they are under pressure as a result of the pressing that is occurring around their periphery by the many fronts that they are sustaining with opposition forces. Increasingly the coalition is focusing on what we call strategic targeting, which is getting

to the heart of where they feel most comfortable. It is about targeting their vulnerabilities, their command and control, their leadership, their sources of revenue, their training camps, the places where they feel most secure. The majority of that is inside Syria and is centred on Raqqa.

Q4 Bob Stewart: They seem to be decentralising their command, General, so that they do not have to use communication between Raqqa and their local areas. From what I gather, the local commanders are given a considerable degree of independence until al-Baghdadi wants something done, in which case they have to communicate to them.

The other thing is that it seems to me from what I have heard that they are extremely well trained. They are doing three months' training on all arms and equipment up to tanks, in a way, and they are being trained by outsiders, mainly from Russia such as Chechens, with interpreters. In other words, these guys, these 20,000 to 30,000, they have a will to battle. How good is their morale?

Lieutenant General Gordon Messenger: I think they have a will to battle. We assess their morale is declining. I have no knowledge over the length of training or its nature. I agree with you that there has been a degree of decentralisation of control, but what we are seeing is an organisation under pressure that needs to move its capabilities around the battlefield to plug the latest gap or to move to the latest place where it feels under pressure. That requires a degree of centralised control. A symptom of the pressure that they are under is that that decentralised control may reduce.

Q5 Johnny Mercer: Secretary of State, if we are to have a foreign policy that is resilient enough to withstand shock and not be accused by our allies or our opponents of being reactionary, can I ask what has changed recently, either with the threat, their capabilities, or their intent? For many of us, the attack in Paris is not a shift in what they can achieve; it is a modus operandi that we have seen before and a capability that we know they have. What has changed now to bring this before Parliament?

Michael Fallon: The nature of the campaign against ISIL, as I said, has begun to change as we have begun to have some success in Iraq, but the threat from ISIL has intensified. Let me put it this way, there were some 15 ISIL-inspired or ISIL-directed attacks around the world last year. This year there have already been 150, with another month to go, so the threat has certainly intensified. We have seen in the past few weeks attacks in Ankara, Beirut, Paris and elsewhere in western Europe.

What else has changed? Clearly, two other things have changed internationally. We have had the unanimously agreed United Nations resolution that called on all members of the United Nations to use their capabilities to suppress this terrorist organisation and—in the words of the resolution—to eradicate its safe havens. That was not the case a year ago, so that has changed. Finally, there are much more promising signs now of a widespread agreement on a different future for Syria. We have seen the engagement in the Vienna process of Russia and also of Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey and other European countries, in helping to persuade everybody of a Syrian Government that is much more representative, involves some of these moderate opposition forces that have been fighting Assad and starts to design a future for Syria without Assad. That has really changed in the past couple of months.

Q6 Johnny Mercer: Do you think that we are entering this conflict at the right time, or are we too late or too early? Can you honestly, hand on heart, say that we have not been affected in our international standing by coming to this conflict at this late time? Judging by what you have just said, do you think it is the right time?

Michael Fallon: Our international standing was certainly affected by the vote back in 2013, but we have been operating since the vote in 2014, which gave us permission to strike in Iraq. We have obviously been operating at that limit of parliamentary authority but, since then, as I said, the threat has very much intensified. We have had direct requests in the light of the Paris slaughter—very direct requests—from France to come to its aid, which we are responding to. We are allocating a Type 45 destroyer to guard the Charles de Gaulle. We have been making other assistance available to the French in terms of border security and greater shared intelligence but they would also like the RAF to join in the strikes that they are now designing against very specific targets in the Raqqa heartland. The answer to your question, in the end, is that we are one of the leading countries in the world; we have some of the most skilled, well-equipped and powerful armed forces in the world. The United Nations and our allies now expect us to join this fight.

Q7 Mr Gray: I would appreciate a detail or two; we will know more when we know the terms of the motion in front of the House tomorrow. First, in your opening remarks, you said something about north-east Syria. Was that intentional? In other words, is the motion going to authorise air strikes in north-east Syria or Syria as a whole? Secondly, are the strikes only going to be allowed against something that is badged as ISIS/Daesh/ISIL or whatever you might call it, or are we talking about any of the very many organisations in Syria that are all jihadist? If the answer is the former, what is to stop them just changing their badging and carrying on with what went before? I am using slightly flippant language, but you understand my general point.

Michael Fallon: I certainly do. You will see the text of the motion shortly when the House sits at the beginning of business today. To answer your question directly, it will ask the House's permission to enable us to strike against ISIL. I do not think you should read anything into my phrasing of north-east Syria—ISIL has also been operating slightly further south—but it will ask for your authority to enable us to strike against ISIL in Syria. In other words, not to intervene in the civil war and take sides. There are various groups, as you know, battling Assad, but some of those groups who we want to play a part in the future of Syria are coming under pressure from ISIL as well. ISIL is what has to be dealt with first.

Q8 Mr Gray: What about the other jihadist groups that are operating alongside ISIL? Many of these people are intermingling.

Michael Fallon: The Prime Minister has made it clear that the strategy is ISIL first. It is ISIL that is undermining the Government of Iraq through its intervention there. ISIL is causing much of the mayhem in Syria and is a threat to us here in western Europe, so we have to deal with ISIL first. But there is also now a well-developed political track leading to the inclusion of the more moderate groups in the process that we hope will lead fairly swiftly to the—

Q9 Mr Gray: What about al-Qaeda, for example? If we come across an al-Qaeda unit, are we allowed to strike it in Syria or are we not?

Michael Fallon: The authority that we are asking for is the authority to strike ISIL in Syria, just as we have been striking them in Iraq.

Q10 Mrs Moon: May I start with a question about the numbers? General Messenger, I think you have said that there are roughly 20,000 to 30,000 Daesh fighters. Can you give us an idea of how many Taliban we were fighting in Afghanistan? What were the numbers there?

Lieutenant General Gordon Messenger: Again, my point about how difficult it is to assess the numbers of what are essentially insurgent groups stands true of the Taliban and others that are out there. This idea that they are carrying a badge that tells us exactly what organisation they are, and the idea that they do not move in and out of affiliations and allegiances, makes it extremely difficult, so I would not want to be drawn on the numbers of Taliban, other than to say that the challenge of quantifying them is very similar to that which we are experiencing with ISIL.

Q11 Mr Gray: But ISIL is stronger than the Taliban.

Lieutenant General Gordon Messenger: The question was about the Taliban.

Q12 Mrs Moon: It was. We have a guesstimate of 20,000 to 30,000 of Daesh, but you are saying we never had a guesstimate for the Taliban.

Lieutenant General Gordon Messenger: There are any number of estimates about the Taliban, but we had the same levels of confidence and I would not want to be drawn on the numbers.

Q13 Mrs Moon: You wouldn't want to be confident about the numbers of Taliban, but you are confident about the 20,000 to 30,000?

Lieutenant General Gordon Messenger: No, I think that comes with considerable conditionality.

Q14 Mrs Moon: It could be considerably larger or considerably smaller?

Lieutenant General Gordon Messenger: It comes with considerable conditionality, yes.

Q15 Mrs Moon: I will leave it to the panel to decide who is best able to answer, but what is the full range of military capability that we currently are utilising in Iraq? Which of that will be also utilised in Syria and what additional capability do you see us drawing upon?

Michael Fallon: Perhaps I could start in general terms and then ask either of the two military here to add to it. First, as I think you know, the military assets that are being deployed in Iraq include strike aircraft—manned and unmanned—and surveillance aircraft of various types, plus the training effort that is being put in through the British Army. If Parliament passes the motion tomorrow night, we will add to the strike aircraft we currently have deployed forward in RAF Akrotiri. We will add numbers to those aircraft, and we are working on those details at the moment.

Lieutenant General Gordon Messenger: We would wish to see everything that we are currently employing over Iraq operating over Syria. We would want our specific capabilities to be available for the entire fight against ISIL, rather than a proportion of it. If your question is about the difference that the UK can bring to Syria, I think you need to

take a quantitative and a qualitative view of that. In terms of the quantitative view, the difference that the UK's joining airstrikes over Syria would make would be considerable. It would be incremental. I do not claim that it would be decisive, but it would make a considerable impact.

It is not easy to sustain an air campaign of the nature of that we have seen over Iraq and Syria. All nations involved in that campaign have found it difficult to sustain the effort over time, so being able to use the UK aircraft over Syria would make a difference. There are examples of when priority targets have appeared in Syria when a UK aircraft is a relatively small number of minutes away but cannot be used to strike it, and the only other available aircraft in the theatre is involved in supporting Syrian opposition forces some 30 or 40 minutes away. It would make a difference, in terms of the number of aircraft that we bring to the campaign over Syria.

On the qualitative piece, the Secretary of State has already covered the fact that we bring precision weaponry, weaponry that is designed to have low collateral, and a highly skilled set of pilots and operators to that mix. Although we are not alone there—there is a weapons system that we alone can bring, but I do not pretend that we are the only ones who play in the precision and low-collateral game—we bring a considerable and meaningful proportion of that sort of high-end capability. The Secretary of State has already said—this is not an exact science—that up to a third of the capability in the coalition is provided by the UK.

We are looking at the direction the campaign is taking. We talked earlier about how strikes against ISIL's heartland and its vulnerabilities, which are predominantly in Syria, will take us into target sets where precision and low-collateral strikes will be ever more important. We take our responsibilities, in terms of collateral damage, very seriously. The thresholds for approving the strikes are high, and the skill sets are high. As yet, the UK has not had a civilian casualty incident after months of bombing over Iraq as a result of the capabilities I described.

Q16 Chair: Before Madeleine carries on, may I ask a point of clarification? A great deal has been made of the accuracy of the Brimstone missile, in particular. What does the Brimstone bring, in terms of accuracy and power, that, for example, a Reaper drone strike cannot achieve?

Lieutenant General Gordon Messenger: The actual weapon effects of a Reaper drone strike, which is a Hellfire missile system, and a Brimstone are largely similar, in terms of the level of collateral damage. The difference that a Brimstone makes is that it can strike moving targets.

Chair: Thank you.

Q17 Mrs Moon: Thank you for your answer. I would like to be a bit tighter on the actual facts, rather than the aspirations. I take it from the answer that we are possibly looking to add strike aircraft, but otherwise the capability that we have there now is going to be spread over Syria and Iraq. Is that right?

Lieutenant General Gordon Messenger: Yes.

Michael Fallon: When you say possibly, we are definitely. If Parliament passes this motion tomorrow night, we will definitely be adding to the strike aircraft that we have at the moment. I am not going to give precise numbers now, because we have not taken a final decision on that and I do not want to presume on Parliament's decision tomorrow night.

Q18 Mrs Moon: We currently have eight planes so that we can fly two. Will we be using the same ratio? If we take another two planes, will we be taking another eight, to ensure that we can fly two?

Michael Fallon: It does not work quite like that.

Lieutenant General Gordon Messenger: We have eight aircraft to deliver two sorties of pairs a day. Additional aircraft will allow us to increase that sortie rate, yes.

Q19 Chair: By how much?

Michael Fallon: I am sorry, Mr Chairman. We have not taken final decisions on this and I do not want to discuss the exact number of aircraft that we are likely to send, but we will be stepping up the sorties. We will be able to do that with additional numbers. We do not just have the eight Tornado aircraft at Akrotiri, we also have our unmanned aircraft.

Q20 Mrs Moon: But none of them can use the Brimstone?

Michael Fallon: No.

Q21 Mrs Moon: Can I have some clarification about Brimstone? How often have we actually utilised it? How often has it been discharged?

Michael Fallon: We can get back to you on that.

Q22 Mrs Moon: Have you assessed the impact on Daesh's capacity to regenerate in Iraq, if we are moving our attention from Iraq to Syria, given that it is not a case of glass half full or half empty in Iraq—70% of the land that Daesh was controlling is still under its control? What would be the impact? Will they be able to regain that 30%? Will they be able to expand? What assessment have you made of that?

Michael Fallon: Absolutely not. We see this as enabling us to conduct this campaign as a much more coherent whole. They are being resupplied in Iraq from Syria. There are supply routes running that enable them to move personnel and matériel from Syria into Iraq. Everybody else who is involved militarily—more than a dozen countries are contributing to the military campaign—would like to see our planes directed on both sides of the land border. Perhaps General Messenger would like to add to that. It will not diminish our effort in Iraq.

Lieutenant General Gordon Messenger: It will not diminish our effort in Iraq. Arguably, the ISIL effort in Iraq draws a great deal of sustenance and support from the ISIL heartland in Syria. We assess that, if we get after ISIL in Syria, those who are fighting for ISIL on the periphery in Iraq will feel much more vulnerable and under threat and their backyard will be struck.

Q23 Mrs Moon: We have not been able to retake Mosul, what makes you think we can retake Raqqa?

Michael Fallon: First, the Iraqi forces have had some success. They have retaken Tikrit and I think they are on the verge of finalising the retaking of Baiji and the refinery to the north of Baiji. Moving north-westwards up the Tigris, Mosul is there at the end of the line. That will require a sustained effort by the Iraqi forces and probably some assistance on the other side of the river from the Kurdish forces who have been making their own progress in pushing ISIL back over areas that they occupied before.

The Iraqi Government—I discussed this with their Prime Minister and Defence Minister back in the summer—are absolutely determined that they have to get to the point where they are able to start operations against Mosul. That is one of their major objectives.

Q24 Chair: There you have a situation where you have the army of the Iraqi state making this slow progress, but in Syria you do not have the army of the state. In fact, we have nothing to do with the army of the state. How do you feel that you are going to match—I think this is the point of Madeleine's question—in Syria the effort on the ground that has so far been carried out in Iraq when we have no contact with the armed forces of Syria's army?

Michael Fallon: There is fighting going on against ISIL in Syria. A lot of it is being done by Kurdish groups who have been supported in the air by others—the Americans and so on. But we do not have to wait for any ground army to emerge. Of course, we hope that, in the future, under a new Syrian state, we will be able to see a Syrian army stand up to ISIL with the other opposition forces that have been fighting Assad.

But there is plenty to be done to degrade ISIL from the air in striking these very specific targets: the command and control, the logistics, and the supply routes, and, indeed, some of the bases of ISIL's revenue: oil refining, oil distribution depots, and other oil logistics from which they derive their revenue. That does not depend on a ground army. That can and needs to be done from the air with precision air strikes. That particularly is the bit that the RAF can add.

Chair: We will come on to ground forces presently, but Johnny Mercer has a short question.

Q25 Johnny Mercer: Briefly, so that I can simplify in my mind what we are talking about here, you appear to be saying that we have a unique tactical capability when it comes to intercepting high value and difficult targets. We are conducting a third of that in Iraq and we have been asked to extend that to Syria. If I understand what General Messenger said, while the Americans very much favour the Hellfire weapon system, what we bring specifically is the Brimstone, which has a more technical capability: it has a dual-mode radar that enables us to hit harder-to-hit targets with more important people. That is the simple capability that we are being asked to add to the coalition—is that correct?

Michael Fallon: General Messenger will add to this, but in essence, yes. We have one of the best air forces in the world with some of the most advanced equipment that is being deployed in Iraq but not in Syria. As I have said, over a dozen countries have been engaged in the air campaign. Some of the smaller air forces have had to withdraw or downscale to regenerate. We have these high-end precision capabilities and it has always

been rather odd that we are not able to deploy them against ISIL's headquarters on the other side of a very artificial line in the sand that ISIL itself does not respect.

Lieutenant General Gordon Messenger: I think we will absolutely do that, but I do not want to suggest that our efforts will be limited to that. We will be part of a coalition air campaign, bringing our weaponry, our skills, our aircraft. And, if approval is given, that will occur over ISIL—

Q26 Johnny Mercer: It is a specific UK capability. If we are talking about the pod on the Tornado, if we are going to talk technical details—

Chair: We must bring this to a close—you said it would be a brief question.

Johnny Mercer: Sorry. But it is a specific UK technical capability.

Lieutenant General Gordon Messenger: As I said, the Brimstone is the specific UK piece. Other nations have the other piece, but they are not infinite and the amount that we bring will make a meaningful difference to it. It is not just about high-end targeting; it would also be about support to moderate opposition and other fighters on the ground that are attacking ISIL.

Chair: Earlier, Madeleine Moon asked questions about the reliability of estimated numbers of ISIL/Daesh. I know that Jim Shannon has been waiting patiently to ask about the reliability of another interesting number: the number 70,000.

Q27 Jim Shannon: First, it is nice of you to come along and let us know what your thoughts are about questions. Last week the Prime Minister said, “we believe there are around 70,000 Syrian opposition fighters—principally the free Syrian army...with whom we can co-ordinate attacks on ISIL” or Daesh. The question on my mind since last Thursday has been: what is the make-up of the different coalition groups? You have got different cultures, different religious factions, different levels of training, different levels of equipment quality and different goals. For instance, the free Syrian army are clear that they want to get rid of Assad, but there are other, different strategies, with small groups who do not want to leave the territories that they currently protect.

Have we got our Lawrence of Arabia: someone who can bring these groups together as one, fight under one flag, if there is such a thing, and focus on the enemy, Daesh/ISIL? Secretary of State, can you give us an idea of your thoughts about how a coalition of all those groups can come together under one banner to fight them?

Michael Fallon: I will try. This is a complicated situation. Perhaps I could say a couple of things about the overall number. I am slightly surprised that people should be surprised that it was 70,000. In a country of more than 20 million that has been fighting a civil war for several years, it would be a bit surprising if it was any lower than that. It is a large country, and they have been fighting Assad for over three years.

You said that it was the Prime Minister's belief that the number was 70,000. It is not his belief, and it is not our belief. It is not even our estimate. It is the estimate of the independent Joint Intelligence Committee, which was reset precisely because, after the Iraq invasion and war, there was concern that estimates and intelligence that Ministers were using were not properly verifiable.

Q28 Chair: Is there any reason why there has not been a breakdown of how that figure of 70,000 supposedly moderate forces is made up? I put down a question to ask the Prime Minister. It is due for answer today. Will I be getting an answer?

Michael Fallon: I think it is possible to give a rough breakdown and, if I may, I will come to that.

Q29 Chair: Please do.

Michael Fallon: This is the independent Joint Intelligence Committee's estimate of around 70,000. That has been supported by academics who have been studying the conflict over the last two or three years, and it deliberately excludes those who are on the extreme side of this fight, such as al-Nusra Front and so on, who are right on the outer edge of this. The Joint Intelligence Committee estimates the number, but those 70,000 are people who we would define as being able to do two things. First, they could play a part in supporting a different type of government in Syria, and indeed be part of it. Secondly, they could, in the fullness of time, take the fight to ISIL. That is what we mean by moderate opposition forces in Syria, and we estimate that there are around 70,000.

You are perfectly correct that those 70,000 are not all in one place. They are not a new model army, drilled outside the walls of Raqqa. They are spread through Syria, with more than 20,000 in the Free Syrian Army, mainly in the north, and around 20,000 on the southern front, commanded by al-Zoubi. There are groups throughout Syria that add to give the overall figure of 70,000, so they are not all in one place. They are fighting on a whole range of different fronts, but they are fighting Assad. One of the reasons for us to get more involved in tackling ISIL in Syria is to relieve the pressure on the Free Syrian Army, so that they are not being squeezed by both sides, by both ISIL and Assad. Is there a single commander who can weld all this together, as Lawrence of Arabia tried to do 100 years ago? I am not sure of that. Let me now ask General Gordon Messenger to give a little more on the breakdown of the 70,000 and their future deployment.

Lieutenant General Gordon Messenger: First, I totally support the Secretary of State's point that this is not a coherent force. Their principal motivation is defending their communities and self-preservation against anyone who is fighting them, and that is mostly the regime but in certain parts of Syria it is ISIL. We would be wrong to characterise them as a rag-tag army. If we look at what they have managed to defend over years, and what they have managed to achieve in terms of territory preservation in both the north and the south, it is considerable. They have been up against enormous pressure and techniques such as barrel bombing and other indiscriminate forms of violence, which have brought violence to their population as well as their combatants.

I don't think that we should dismiss them, but nor should we try to invent some coherence where it does not exist. Nor are we saying—and again, the Secretary of State has been clear on this—that they are ready to advance to Raqqa. We are saying that they are a very important group to preserve because we see them as a vital part of the political process that we described earlier. We see it as critical to preserve them to prevent Syria from becoming essentially a choice between Assad or ISIL, neither of which we assess to be acceptable for what I hope are obvious reasons. So they are a very important part of the dynamic.

As was said, what we do not want to do is directly link air strikes at the heart of ISIL with the idea that there is an imminent ground force about to exploit the effect of that, but I think we can say that, by applying pressure to ISIL, we are relieving the pressure on those moderate oppositions where they are up against ISIL, and doing a bit to preserve them as part of a future political process.

Q30 Jim Shannon: To follow on from what you and the general have said, it is very clear that the Assad regime will not provide any troops for this coalition. Is that an assumption that we can gather—that Assad’s troops will not be part of the coalition at any time?

Michael Fallon: Absolutely.

Q31 Chair: On a point of clarification about these 70,000 forces or groups named as moderate by the Prime Minister, do they include the organisations in the Islamic Front in general, and Ahrar al-Sham in particular, a leading group? I do not think anyone is arguing against the idea that 70,000 people might be willing to take up arms on a local or even regional basis; the question is, how moderate are they? Are they really moderate, or are they in fact Islamist?

Lieutenant General Gordon Messenger: I cannot go into the detail because of the level of classification of this briefing, but what I can say is that there is a spectrum of extremism, and that—

Q32 Chair: I’m sorry, General; I do not accept that at all. These groups are known to exist, and the Prime Minister has come forward with a figure of 70,000. He has obviously got a basis for that figure, and there is nothing of a sensitive or classified nature about which of these known groups he is including in his total and which he is not. As the Prime Minister is asking us to make a decision based in part on the idea that there is some democratic third force between the devil and the deep blue sea, as the Government see it, of Assad and ISIL/Daesh, the public are entitled—as are parliamentarians before we vote—to know how these 70,000 are made up. There cannot possibly be anything sensitive about which of the forces out there that are known to exist, such as the ones that make up the Islamic Front, are included in the total or not.

Lieutenant General Gordon Messenger: As the Secretary of State has described, there is a spectrum of extremism. Those that are seen to be inside the 70,000 are those that are moderate and in the next band: in other words, those that we are prepared to accept might be part of a political process that is representative of the people whom they represent.

Q33 Chair: It has been suggested publicly by people who are experts in the field that not many people in that group are what most people from a western viewpoint would regard as moderate rather than Islamist. Do you accept that a lot of people in that 70,000 would and should be categorised as Islamist?

Lieutenant General Gordon Messenger: You would have to ask the Joint Intelligence Committee for the detail.

Q34 Chair: I really don’t see why that has to be a secret. These groups are known. All we are asking is which of the known groups are included in the 70,000. I really think that breakdown ought to be made public. Nobody is going to do that now, I take it?

Michael Fallon: We will certainly reflect on that. Almost all these groups subscribe to Islam.

Q35 Chair: That is not what I am asking.

Michael Fallon: You say “Islamist”, but there is a separate debate as to how exactly you would define that. All we can go on is the best assessment that the Joint Intelligence Committee can make as to which of these groups would be prepared to play their part in a new, peaceful Syria. That is really the most important thing of all. These people are there and they deserve our support, if we are to free Syria of both Assad and ISIL.

Q36 Chair: Can you think of any good reason why that list, making up the 70,000 of those groups that are openly known to exist, cannot be published?

Michael Fallon: I have said that I will certainly reflect on that.

Q37 Richard Benyon: Like many MPs, since the Prime Minister mentioned this figure of 70,000, I have applied what I hope is a healthy scepticism to that number. Broadly speaking, it seems to have stacked up since then in terms of most commentators and most of what I have read. Would you say that it is an accurate view that around 70,000 people have managed to continue to support neither Assad nor ISIL? That is, that they have not been drawn into some pro-Assad grouping or some pro-jihadist grouping?

These are people who have for four years protected, sometimes just their village and sometimes larger territories. So that we can really understand what we are saying: these are people who one day may be looking after farmland or their local business and the next day may be defending their community. It is that lack of clarity that we are all going to face in trying to make this decision. Broadly speaking, that number seems to have held up.

Michael Fallon: I absolutely agree with that, and we ought to do more. We need to help them because, in the end, if we do not, they are going to get squeezed between the caliphate over in the east and Assad and his Russian support in the west. There are going to be fewer and fewer of them. It is very important that now we grip this and bring some relief to those opposition forces who have been fighting, as you say, for more than four years now. We can point their way to a different kind of Government altogether in Syria. There is now growing international agreement that we can do that, that there can be a political track, which there needs to be.

Q38 Richard Benyon: You used that word “caliphate”. Could I ask you to precede that with “so-called”? I think a lot of people find it deeply worrying when, not just in this country but other parts of the west, use of that phrase gives some credence to such a concept. Many people in the Islamic world find the use of the word “caliphate” a deep affront. “So-called caliphate” I can understand, but not using it on its own.

Michael Fallon: We stand reprimanded. “Self-styled caliphate” I think would perhaps be best of all.

Q39 Ruth Smeeth: Thank you, Secretary of State. I have a few questions, as we all have. Can you clarify, if we can only guestimate that there are 30,000 members of Daesh, why we are so confident about 70,000 fighters? Assuming that they are there—and I do—are they in

the right areas where we need them to be? Given how much we are investing in those 70,000 people, what additional support are we going to give them on the ground?

Michael Fallon: Again, I will try to answer the final question. We have been trying to support these opposition forces for a while now, within the limits of what Parliament has previously approved and agreed. We have supplied some training outside Syria itself, in camps in Jordan and Turkey. We have supplied some non-lethal equipment to enable them better to look after themselves, for example, in terms of battlefield medicine and some basic equipment that is not lethal, is not interfering with the civil war, just as we provided similar equipment to the Ukrainian army, for example, again not intervening directly in that conflict but helping them better look after themselves. But on the numbers, let me turn again to General Messenger.

Lieutenant General Gordon Messenger: Flowing from that point is the fact that we have a support relationship with them, which means that we understand them more, and therefore we are able to have more confidence in the numbers.

Q40 Ruth Smeeth: So we are directly dealing with these groups on a day-to-day basis both through support and on a military basis?

Lieutenant General Gordon Messenger: I would not say that we are dealing with all groups on a day-to-day basis, but we have a support relationship with a number of groups that we can do business with.

Michael Fallon: Some of them have been to the west. They have been to London and had meetings with my staff. They are, I hope, preparing to go to Riyadh, where the Saudi Arabians are convening the first conference of a spectrum of people in Syria who are now going to get working on a future Government. These people need our support.

Q41 Mrs Moon: When the Committee was in Iraq this time last year, we were told there were 1 million Shi'a fighters willing to take on Daesh. There were also Kurds and some Sunni tribes, although few were armed. I have two questions. First, given that there are huge numbers of fighters in Iraq who, we are told, are willing to fight and in an organised state, why have we not been able to take back the additional 70% of the territory held by Daesh? Why do we feel that that has failed when we can succeed with a far smaller number in Syria?

Secondly, what will we do to convince Sunni tribes in Iraq and in Syria that coming over to work with the opposition to Daesh is better than supporting Daesh, and that they will not risk being attacked by Shi'a forces?

Michael Fallon: Obviously, you were there a year ago. I was in Baghdad in the summer speaking with the Prime Minister and their Defence Minister. The progress is frustratingly slow, particularly in liberating some of the Sunni areas. Some of the framework to make that easier is still not in place. The national guard legislation is one example where, I think, I was told when visiting the same time as you a year ago, that they were hoping to get that legislation through Parliament to establish more of a local security force that would have the confidence of the Sunni tribes that their area would be secure after it had been liberated. That is one of the keys. It has taken far too long to get that legislation through

It has also taken too long to complete the delegation of responsibility to the governors in their own particular governance that will enable them to rally the Sunni tribes in their own particular area and to make more coherent the strategy of liberating these towns and villages, particularly west along the Euphrates. Perhaps General Messenger will deal with the first question.

Lieutenant General Gordon Messenger: We are seeing a number of areas where the Iraqi security forces, through incremental pressure, are starting to have tactical success. We have talked about Baiji, Ramadi, Tikrit and elsewhere. That has been slower than both we and the Americans would like. We are part of quite a significant programme, which is designed to build the capability of the Iraqi security forces so that they are more competent and capable in taking the fight to ISIL on their own ground.

You are right to highlight the importance of Sunni inclusivity. The Secretary of State said that Prime Minister al-Abadi has had that as a very high priority for some time. You are right—it is going to be key to the stabilisation of the Sunni areas in Iraq, once ISIL has been ousted.

Q42 Mrs Moon: We had three trainers—three military personnel—on the ground in Baghdad when we were there in December last year. I appreciate there were more trainers in the Kurdish area. How many do we have now?

Lieutenant General Gordon Messenger: We have about 130 at the moment.

Q43 Mr Gray: Considering the nature of the ground force coalition, I hope you are right that 70,000 is sufficient and it works. However, we are enjoining Assad and the Russians in particular to divert their attention away from friendly forces against ISIS. If we have Russian troops on the ground, which there are, and one hears possibly about Chinese troops, Hezbollah troops, all sorts of troops on the ground, surely they will by definition be fighting against ISIL on the ground, presumably in Raqqa and elsewhere. Does that not mean that de facto they are part of the same coalition, even if we do not like them? A moment ago, Secretary of State, you ruled out and treated with contempt the notion that we might welcome Assad's troops to join us in our fight against ISIL. If those people on the ground are fighting against ISIL in precisely the same country as we are, surely by definition, de facto, they are part of the same coalition.

Michael Fallon: I certainly look forward to the day when there is a new Syrian army combining with the opposition forces, all joining together in the fight against ISIL and I hope you do.

Mr Gray: Indeed.

Michael Fallon: I hope that will be possible and they will combine to do that. What we are not in the business of is entering some kind of coalition with countries like Russia, or even China, who I do not think are involved on the ground in the fight against ISIL. This is a fight that we are conducting with our allies in the coalition and we have to keep it to the existing coalition, as far as we can.

Q44 Mr Gray: So we are fighting the same enemy but not on the same side. Isn't our enemy's enemy our friend?

Michael Fallon: No, I think that we have learned from this conflict, which is a complicated one, that our enemy's enemy is not always our friend.

Peter Watkins: I can add to that. The information that we have is that the bulk of Russian activity is aimed at those that have been directly attacking the Assad regime, not ISIL.

Chair: I am hoping to come back to this at the very end. Just for guidance, I am hoping to get everybody in who has not spoken recently with one last question, including myself, then to move on to the other topic. I thank our other witnesses for their patience, because I know they came here to discuss that.

Q45 Douglas Chapman: Secretary of State, after Iraq, many people across the country will be hugely concerned about the planned extension to operations that you have in mind. You will remember that, a few months ago, members of this Committee and of the Foreign Affairs Committee received a briefing at the MOD where you said that any extended operations would be fully planned, all the way through. Beyond bombing, what are the key strategic objectives and where do you think, or where are you anticipating, that we might be after three months? Will we still be bombing at that stage? After six months, what will be the progress that you hope to make? This time next year, where do you see the extension in bombing taking us in the longer term? I believe that Peter Hitchens said the other day that we are “rushing towards yet another swamp”. What would be your view on that?

Michael Fallon: First, I would draw a distinction with the invasion of Iraq in 2003, which was not the same kind of international coalition that exists today. France, for example, was not involved in it. Here we have France asking for our assistance, the United Nations passing a very clear resolution, calling on all of us to help, and we have—which now appears not to have been the case in Iraq—a very direct threat to our own country. Of course, we await the Chilcot report to see how real that threat may or may not have been in 2003, but it was certainly not of the order that ISIL now presents to Paris, London, those of us in western Europe, so I would draw a distinction between the campaign now and the campaign then. As far as the progress of the campaign is concerned, perhaps Lieutenant General Messenger will speak.

Lieutenant General Gordon Messenger: The time lines in Syria will be dependent on the political track. Clearly some form of political progress needs to be made before the enormous complexity that exists throughout Syria can be resolved. In terms of the post-conflict planning, I can reassure you that we and others are thinking about that. There is consensus that we should not repeat the errors of the past by stripping out the state structures. While everyone agrees that Assad cannot be part of any future Syria, some of the state infrastructure should be retained and the future of Syria should be built around that to the extent possible, avoiding the mistakes of de-Ba'athification of the past.

Q46 Chair: If Assad, the individual, were to be removed, but all the other state structures, including his party control, as it were, of Syria and society—or the part that it still controlled—were to remain in place, would that be the basis for bringing the Syrian army into play?

Michael Fallon: The good news is that these are questions that the international community is now focused on. For the first time this autumn we are seeing a process where these things are being discussed: how Assad would leave the scene and, equally,

how we could continue to give the Alawite community—10% of the population—a stake in a future Syria. These are exactly the questions that are now being addressed as part of the Vienna process, and that is encouraging.

Q47 Chair: So the only aspect to the “Assad must go” line that the Government are taking is about him as an individual, and everything else is negotiable, is it?

Michael Fallon: No, I don’t think everything else is negotiable. Clearly there is a war machine there, and we have seen what looks like the use of chemical weapons all over again. There is a war machine there that will obviously not be able to translate straight into a model Syrian army. One of the keys to it is the departure of Assad, and that we are clear about. He cannot be part of the new Syria. I think we interrupted the General.

Q48 Chair: Sorry, but I think it was a useful interruption, if you will forgive my saying so. That is because, on the one hand, we are being told it is about keeping the structures of the state, including the army, in place, and on the other we are being told that it is a war machine that cannot continue. Which is it?

Michael Fallon: I do not draw that sharp distinction. I thought you were asking me about the Alawite community and machine. The Alawites are part of Syria and they need to be part of the future of Syria, and we need to reassure the Alawite community that they will still have a stake in Syria even if they lose their patron Assad.

Q49 Chair: Okay. General, if you would like to carry on, then I will come back to Douglas.

Lieutenant General Gordon Messenger: I think the exact terms of that are a really important part of the political process. If you read the communiqué from Vienna II, there is some very strong language on transition and the protection of ethnic communities in a future Syria.

My last point was going to be on the role of the United Nations, which we anticipate being prominent. It is already prominent in the peace process through Staffan de Mistura, and the United Nations is performing a key role inside Syria by co-ordinating the activity of NGOs and others with the protection and the wellbeing of civilians at its heart.

Q50 Douglas Chapman: I want to come back to the time line, because that is really important for where we are going to make progress in future. I take your point on the UN and trying to get a political solution, but it still remains a fact that it looks very open-ended at the moment. Peter Osborne in *The Telegraph* yesterday was talking about bomb and hope for the best. For a lot of people outside this room, Committee and Parliament, that seems to be the Government’s strategy at the moment. There is no real sense that we have a planned strategy to take us through a campaign that will help us get to that political and diplomatic solution.

Michael Fallon: I do not agree with Peter Osborne. I certainly accept there is scepticism about these interventions and these wars. The American Secretary of State last year, when you gave us authority to strike in Iraq, estimated that it might take at least three years and we are not halfway through that process in Iraq. It is frustratingly slow, as Mrs Moon and I agree. It is taking a long, long time to start pushing ISIL back. They are being pushed back but it is wrong to draw the conclusion from that that this is simply a military operation.

There is a very strong political track now that gives us the prospect of a new settlement in Syria. Plans are already being laid—you heard this from the Prime Minister on Thursday—to get on with the bit that was not addressed too quickly in Iraq, which is the reconstruction of Syria. We are hosting the pledging conference in February. Plans are being drawn up for our financial contribution to that. We have certainly got to learn from past conflicts and ensure that we can recreate a civil society in Syria that can prevent this kind of thing happening again.

Chair: Bob Stewart, you had a point you wanted to come in on earlier. Is that still relevant?

Bob Stewart: It has been overtaken by events.

Chair: Very good. Johnny, you had a point.

Q51 Johnny Mercer: Are we not in danger of looking at a very unconventional and complex situation with very conventional eyes? We are looking to take a path to peace out of the box, stick it in, and there it is. We were given the figure of 70,000 and—whether it is actually 30,000 or 100,000—if we facilitate these people, then that is great. But what we are trying to do is take on a direct threat to this country with so-called Islamic State. If that helps this 30,000 or 70,000 or 100,000 or whatever it is, then that is great, but we have a duty to protect this nation. Going after that specific threat is what we are asking for. If we try to come up with a 100% solution, we are actually going to miss that and miss in essence our duty, which is to keep our people safe.

Q52 Chair: That is the sort of question which amounts to a statement, but do you endorse the statement?

Michael Fallon: I do endorse the statement. First of all, let me say that this is complex. There are no two ways about it: in Syria there is the most complex military and political situation, and all these questions are absolutely legitimate questions and concerns. If you are asking me whether we are trying to do two or three things at once, the answer is yes, we are. We are trying to help the legitimate Government of Iraq to complete its campaign in Iraq, and there is a military reason for acting in Syria for the Iraq campaign alone.

We are also trying to help the moderate opposition forces, much as we disagree on the definition of “moderate”. Are we trying to help stop them being squeezed between Assad and ISIL? Yes, we are. Are we trying to lay the path to a political settlement in Syria? Yes, we want that to happen as well. We also want to come to the help of allies, and to respect the request of the United Nations. But over and beyond all that, we have to keep this country safe. These attacks from ISIL, inspired or directed by ISIL, are coming closer and closer to our shores. We have been foiling plots, and our security services have been working round the clock on that, but what happened in Paris could happen here. We need to do something about that.

Q53 Chair: We are coming towards the end of this large part of our session. Let me just put one or two more points to you, which arise out of what you have just said. There is no doubt that if it were a choice between moderate democrats, authoritarian dictators such as Assad, or revolutionary internationalist terrorists such as ISIL/Daesh, every sane person in a western democracy would say that we want the moderate democrats to win. Of course, the question—which is why so much attention is being paid to this figure of 70,000 moderate fighters—is

whether there is a moderate alternative, or whether it is a question of choosing the lesser of two evils. At Defence questions last Monday, the Secretary of State said that the aim is

“to ensure that Syria is rid of both Assad and Daesh”.

If you could get rid of only one of them, which would it be? Assad, or Daesh?

Michael Fallon: If I may say so, that goes right to the heart of those who want to reduce this to very simple choices. We want Syria to be free of both, and we are clear that Syria first has to be free of ISIL, because the overall threat to us and to the rest of the region would be if ISIL were to win in either Iraq or Syria and to take control of Baghdad and Damascus. That would be the greatest threat of all. But we want Syria to be free of both, and what has changed since I think you posed this question a long time ago—

Chair: Several times.

Michael Fallon: Several times. We now have the prospect of a new Syria and how it might shape up, but in the meantime we have to get on with this campaign of dealing with ISIL seriously, not just hoping it will go away or just attacking it around the periphery in Iraq, but getting after its command and control right in the centre, in the area around Raqqa.

Q54 Chair: If it transpired that there was no moderate alternative, which choice would you make? Would you decide to stay out, or would you decide to choose the lesser of two evils?

Michael Fallon: There are moderate alternatives in Syria. Syria has had elections before, and there is no reason why Syria cannot have elections. Elections have taken place in Iraq, and they have taken place in Afghanistan. There is no reason why Syria cannot have a democratic future. The people we have been discussing—the 70,000—have been fighting Assad for over four years now. They believe in a better future for Syria. We can disagree about exactly where on the spectrum of Islam each of these different groups sit, but they are sure that they want to get out from this dictatorship and equally sure they do not want to live under the Daesh. These are the people we should be supporting.

Q55 Chair: I will protect the last half hour for our other concerns. I will ask one more question and then ask Richard to ask the final question of this part of the session. I will then come to Jim Shannon to ask the first question in the next part of the session. Once again, I thank our other witnesses for their patience and indulgence. My final question, Secretary of State, is what assessment have you made of the risks of a confrontation between western and Russian air forces if both are bombing in the same battle space in Syria without mutual military co-ordination?

Michael Fallon: Since the Russian intervention, there is already a memorandum of understanding between the coalition and the Russian forces in terms of air safety. If we were given permission tomorrow to fly in Syria, we would come under the protection of that particular memorandum that ensures the maximum possible air safety when these operations are being conducted.

In addition, I should say that our own aircraft are well able to defend themselves. They are equipped with defensive aids and there is already co-ordination—there has been over the

last year—in the command centres as to how the different aircraft form part of the attacking and strike patterns in the air.

Q56 Richard Benyon: That is my question. It would be a great help if we could see the MOU. I cannot imagine it is particularly classified—perhaps it is. It is really important that we feel that what happened over Turkish airspace or disputed airspace does not recur.

Michael Fallon: Let me respond to that. First, the memorandum is not ours. It would certainly not be for us to give it to you.

Q57 Richard Benyon: But we have signed it?

Michael Fallon: No. I have said that it is about operations in Syria. It is an understanding between the coalition and the Russians and we would come under that if we strike in Syria. But I will see if there is some summary of it that can be provided.

What happened with the shooting down of the Russian plane is still not wholly clear. We must not prejudge what the precise facts were. As I understand it, there was a Turkish fighter involved in air defence inside Turkish airspace that engaged the Russian aircraft and, after warnings, the Russian aircraft was shot down because it did not respond to those warnings and was in Turkish airspace. In other words, the Turkish plane was not engaged in operations against ISIL or anything like that. But, as I say, the facts are not yet entirely clear.

Q58 Chair: Just a bit of a nightmare scenario—supposing the Russians go on bombing various aspects of the opposition that we are actually bombing other targets in support of, can you not see the potential for a very dangerous confrontation?

Michael Fallon: That was seen from day one, which is why this memorandum of understanding was negotiated between the coalition and the Russians; precisely to ensure safety in the air.

Chair: Thank you.