

British Politics and Policy

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7/8/2015

On balance Britain should join anti-ISIS strikes in Syria, argues [James Strong](#). But it should do so cautiously and take care to establish clear legal grounds for such action.

Last week Michael Fallon, the Defence Secretary, asked MPs today to consider extending the RAF's mission against ISIS, [to permit airstrikes on ISIS positions in Syria as well as in Iraq](#). He promised a formal vote would follow if the House appeared willing to support the move.



When David Cameron proposed Britain join the anti-ISIS coalition in September 2014, the US was just preparing to extend its own operations (already six weeks old) into Syria. After failing to secure Labour opposition support over action against the Assad regime, Cameron felt he had to offer whatever concessions were necessary to get Ed Miliband on board. Miliband's price was that British involvement should be limited to the Iraqi side of the border.

On one level this was a purely political move. Miliband wanted to show his ability to influence the government, both to send a single about his own leadership during the long build-up to the 2015 general election, and to appeal to Labour MPs skeptical about the use of force after years of war in Iraq and Afghanistan.

On another level, however, it had some strategic merit. It [doesn't really make sense](#) to fight ISIS in one half of the territory it commands, and not the other. But the US and several Gulf allies were already engaged on the Syrian side of the border. So the coalition overall was hitting ISIS from both sides. More crucially, as Miliband pointed out during the parliamentary debate, the situation in Syria was quite different to that in Iraq. The Iraqi government was a UK ally directly requesting UK assistance as it sought to defend itself against ISIS. British forces would act in support of Iraqi ground troops, safe in the knowledge that their actions were clearly legal under international law.

In Syria, however, Britain did not have ground forces to rely on. One reason why action against the Assad regime in August 2013 was such a bad idea was that Britain had no clear sense of who the good guys were. Airstrikes do not win wars. ISIS is unlikely to disappear simply because a coalition of states bombs it from above. Instead it is more likely to blend in to civilian populations, forcing the intervening states either to risk civilian casualties or to back off. If the US and its allies can shore up the Iraqi military, outside air power could help it re-secure its borders. But no-one is suggesting helping the Assad regime to do the same.

Britain also did not have such simple legal grounds for action in Syria. Bashar al-Assad has no love for ISIS. But he was hardly likely to give permission for outside forces to attack Syrian territory. Action in Syria would have meant violating Syrian sovereignty, and without UN Security Council approval that in turn would likely have meant breaking international law.

Nothing has changed in Syria in strategic terms since September 2014. The US and its Gulf allies continue to strike ISIS targets when they appear. But there is no coherent anti-ISIS force on the ground that the US and its allies will want to support. Most of the various opposition groups still fighting the regime, ISIS and each other are Islamists of one variety or another. Most are almost as bad as ISIS itself.

Fallon is proposing action in Syria, in other words, not because the strategic picture has changed, but because the politics have changed. For one thing, David Cameron now commands a Conservative majority in the House of Commons. He is no longer reliant on Liberal Democrat coalition partners to win parliamentary votes. This advantage is not absolute. Thirty-nine Conservative MPs voted against strikes on the Assad regime. Indeed, there is probably no government less well-placed to get a vote on military action through the House of Commons than a weak Conservative one.

Cameron knows it will not be easy to win over Labour, and he can count on SNP opposition to any military action on principle. He also knows that it takes just a handful of Conservative rebels to erode his ten-seat majority. Yet with no election looming and Labour's leadership in a state of flux, the party may be willing to consider widening the anti-ISIS campaign. [YouGov polls](#) conducted around the time of the original parliamentary vote on fighting ISIS showed most respondents favoured strikes in Syria alongside those in Iraq. Miliband's opposition obviously did not win him many votes.

So politically it is probably easier now for Britain to extend its anti-ISIS campaign into Syria than it was in September 2014, though there is no guarantee Cameron will be able to win Labour support, and he will probably not risk a further parliamentary vote without it. That still leaves open the strategic issues raised by Miliband and never quite resolved. There are at the very least unresolved legal questions surrounding the prospect.

The government will probably argue that Iraq has the right to defend itself from a threat based in Syrian territory, and that the UK therefore has the right to do the same following Iraq's request for UK assistance. That is the US position, and it is a reasonable one. The only ground forces that UK airstrikes can reasonably support, however, are Kurdish irregulars. That in turn raises the prospect of an independent Kurdish state emerging on the Syrian/Turkish border, a prospect Turkey vehemently opposes, but one [made more likely](#) the longer the de facto independence of Iraqi Kurdistan goes on.

The best reason for Britain to join strikes on ISIS in Syria is probably the diplomatic one. Britain's contribution to the anti-ISIS coalition thus far has been 'strikingly modest', in the words of the [House of Commons Defence Committee](#). [US policymakers are pressuring](#) the Cameron government over its apparent willingness to [let defence spending fall below the NATO target of 2 per cent of GDP](#). Extending Britain's participation in the fight against ISIS would send a signal that the government does not intend to withdraw from its recent role as 'first ally' to the United States.

Whether that is reason enough to take a step with mixed strategic merits, however, remains unclear. The US did strike ISIS initially without waiting for Britain, a potentially troubling consequence of the 2013 parliamentary veto of action in Syria. But it seems somewhat doubtful that US leaders are truly worried about Britain's long-term commitment to upholding international order, by force if necessary. It was Cameron (and Sarkozy), after all, who dragged a reluctant Obama into Libya in 2011. On balance, the military situation on the ground in Iraq probably necessitates attacks on ISIS in Syria, so as to deny it a safe haven across the border. Britain's contribution to such attacks will be at best symbolic. But symbolism matters, as ISIS well knows.

On balance, then, Britain probably should join anti-ISIS strikes in Syria. But it should do so cautiously, as is perhaps inevitable given the [new requirement](#) for parliament to approve major military deployments. It should take care to establish clear legal grounds for such action. It should be aware of the risks of indirectly supporting Kurdish statehood, or helping groups that oppose ISIS on the ground but offer no more of a western-friendly approach than ISIS does. It should go into any further action knowing its prime motivation is to signal commitment to its allies, especially the US but also in the region (especially the Gulf). And it should know that ISIS is a long way from defeat.

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