

Britain should prepare for military action in Iraq

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More than a decade after the invasion of Iraq, and as Sunni jihadists wreak death and destruction in much of the country, there is once more a debate in the UK regarding whether to intervene militarily. [James Strong](#) argues that there is a strong case for intervention and that Britain should start planning for military action. However, unless there is a viable political settlement in Baghdad, Britain should continue to hold fire.



Britain should prepare to intervene militarily in Iraq, but should not yet translate preparation into action. It is directly if partially responsible for the Islamic State's rise. It is capable of acting, with allies, in a strategically significant fashion. It is indirectly responsible for international peace and security, and for civilian protection. Yet the government currently lacks a parliamentary mandate for the use of force. It needs a political strategy to translate military intervention into lasting stability. It is unable to predict what blowback might ensue. Without at least the former two any military effort seems likely in the long run to prove counter-productive.

Britain is directly responsible, at least in part, for the fact that Iraq is falling apart. Britain played a major role in the US-led 2003 invasion that overthrew Saddam Hussein. [Tony Blair](#) disclaims responsibility for the present morass even as [his former allies acknowledge](#) its origins in the post-Saddam political settlement. As my colleague [Toby Dodge](#) has argued repeatedly, Saddam's Shi'a successors systematically excluded Iraq's Sunni minority both politically and economically from the state. Both the insurgency that followed and the conflict we see today can be explained as consequences of that unequal outcome.

Few Sunnis support the goals of the Islamic State. It is so extreme, as *The Economist* [recently noted](#), even al-Qaeda has disavowed it. But faced with a choice between exclusion by the Shi'a-dominated government in Baghdad and the prospect of resistance led by well-armed co-religionists, many have chosen at least temporarily to side with the extremists. Historic tensions do exist between Sunni and Shi'a communities. But the roots of the present conflict lie in the Iraqi political order Britain helped to create. Britain seems to recognise this. [Yougov](#) found 49 per cent of poll respondents accepted the country was partially responsible for the present conflict. [ComRes](#) found two thirds blamed George W Bush and Tony Blair.

Britain is capable of acting in a meaningful fashion, at least as long as we act in conjunction with allies. The [2010 Strategic Defence and Security Review](#) reduced the army's deployable strength, but Britain remains a powerful military player provided it works alongside other NATO member states. The RAF showed its ability to act over Libya in 2011 and would be well able to do so again. Britain definitely cannot stabilise the security situation in Iraq on its own. But it definitely could form an important part of an international coalition.

Moreover, Britain is indirectly responsible for helping the Iraqi government to clear up its present mess. It has a duty to promote international peace and security as a permanent member of the UN Security Council. It has a further part to play as a member of the international community in the protection of civilians presently under threat.

There is little doubt that the Islamic State represents a threat to global order. It is aggressive, violent and expansionist. It is committed to the forcible conversion or massacre of civilians who do not share its world view, including Shi'a Muslims it considers apostates. Its self-proclaimed 'Caliph', [Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi](#), sports a Rolex watch while preaching his medieval message of death to all those who reject his perverse interpretation of Islam. Not for nothing does he have a [US\\$10 million bounty](#) on his head. [Some observers have questioned](#) President Obama's willingness to play the role of global policeman in Iraq. But Obama [has deployed around one thousand military personnel](#) to the country, and launched crucial airstrikes that helped arrested the Islamic State advance. Britain, as both a US ally and fellow member of the Security Council, is morally obligated to assist.

David Cameron has meanwhile been [criticised by the Church of England](#) for failing to defend Iraqi civilians, particularly the minority Christian and Yazidi populations most prominently under threat. While the Iraqi government has a primary [responsibility to protect](#) civilians within its territory, the international community has a secondary responsibility in the event Iraq proves unwilling or, as in this case, unable to do so. The fact the Iraqi government has explicitly asked for outside support further supports the argument that Britain is here, too, obligated to prepare to act.



Serious caveats nevertheless remain around whether and when Britain should shift from preparation into actual military attacks. Parliament must approve any new use of force. Britain should ideally seek a UN Security Council mandate, or at the very least a formal invitation from the Iraqi government, before using force against the Islamic State. At the very least [it needs the approval of MPs](#).

There have been [some suggestions in the media](#) that MPs are warming to the idea of military intervention. Pressure is beginning to build in both [opinion polls](#) and the [press](#) for an early parliamentary recall. On 12 August [Yougov](#) found 54 per cent of British respondents approved of the US decision to launch airstrikes. Four days later, an [Opinium poll for the Observer](#) found 51 per cent support for RAF involvement. A [second Yougov poll](#) concluded 68 per cent of respondents thought the Islamic State directly threatened Britain, while a plurality approved of RAF strikes.

While [ITV's ComRes poll](#) of 19 August showed 63 per cent of respondents opposed the use of British ground troops, it echoed earlier findings suggesting many British voters would accept the use of air power. David Cameron insisted the Syria debate was “not about Iraq”. His public seems ready to accept an Iraqi intervention might not entirely be about Syria. But greater clarity is required over what Britain would be fighting for. [Lord Ashdown](#) oversteps the mark by portraying Iraq as just one battleground in a broader post-colonial war. But the combined [risk and fear of mission creep](#) remains very real, if [avoidable](#).

David Cameron's strategy appears under-developed at best, and incoherent in the eyes of [crueller satirists](#). His [Sunday Telegraph editorial](#) echoes palpably the reasoning of Tony Blair, but combines Blair's universal moral aspirations with a (small-'c') conservative account of Britain's natural role in the world. The result is a sense that ‘something must be done’, and no clarity over what exactly constitutes ‘something’. In part this reflects the complexity of the situation. In part it echoes a cautious instinct best captured by the Guardian's admonition to “[speak very carefully and carry a proportionate stick](#)”.

Yet the most crucial factor remains the politics of Iraq itself. [Haider al-Abadi](#) looks set to replace Nouri al-Maliki as Iraqi prime minister. If al-Abadi can reverse the consolidation of power in Shi'a hands pursued aggressively by his predecessor, [he may yet succeed](#) in co-opting moderate Sunni groups. Without a political settlement, any military action will only prolong the violent upheavals presently disturbing domestic order in Iraq. Few conflicts grow less intense through outside military intervention. They fizzle out and end when political conditions are right. One

unfortunate observation arises from this point. It is unlikely Iraq can be truly stable [while civil war still rages in Syria](#).

Unknowable risks will inevitably remain whatever the course of action chosen. Decisive intervention in Syria might have prevented that conflict spreading across the [Sykes-Picot line](#). This might have meant, as in Libya, intervention to support the rebels in overthrowing Bashar al-Assad. It might equally have meant, as in Russia's preferred approach, steps to support Assad in putting down the rebels. Similar inaction in Iraq now could allow the Islamic State to consolidate its gains.

Kurdish troops have performed quite well thus far, and Kurdish leaders have refused (diplomatically) to use the crisis to press their case for independence. But if they are supported too heavily with western armaments, they may yet prefer to go it alone rather than struggling along as part of a critically weakened federal state.

Any operation involving military force raises the possibility of civilian casualties, and so [the possibility that excessive force might help rather than hinder](#) the Islamic State's spread. Given Britain's [multicultural polity](#) both intervention and non-intervention raise the threat of terrorist [blowback on British streets](#).

So, to sum up, Britain should prepare to take military action in Iraq. It is directly responsible, at least in part, for the present chaos. It is indirectly responsible for the maintenance of international peace and security and for the protection of Iraqi civilians. It has a clear enemy in the Islamic State and a clear idea of who are the innocents it seeks to protect. Despite its military decline after thirteen years of war and six of recession and austerity, it remains powerful enough to 'do something' provided it works with allies. Its interests lie in an international order governed by rules, and the resistance to the violent jihadist ideology the Islamic State represents.

Yet Britain should not yet translate preparation into action. Without a political settlement the conflict between Iraq's Sunni and Shi'a populations will continue in one form or another. Britain has learnt in Afghanistan the impossibility of pacifying a population solely by force. It will only create new enemies if it offers the Islamic State's broader support base a choice between Shi'a subjection or death.

With the [relief of the siege of Mount Sinjar](#) following US airstrikes, the immediate need to act has passed. Britain should work with allies, and [even erstwhile rivals such as Iran](#), to promote political stability in Baghdad as a necessary condition of any future peace. Only then can military force against the Islamic State possibly prove effective. Britain must make ready. But the time has not yet arrived for Britain to fight.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting. Image credit: [Expert infantry](#) CC BY 2.0

About the Author

Dr James Strong is Fellow in Foreign Policy Analysis in the Department of International Relations at LSE. His research looks at British foreign and security policy, the politics of the 2003 invasion of Iraq, and foreign policy communication. Twitter: [@dr_james_strong](#).

