

# Five questions that need to be answered before the UK intervenes in Iraq

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*Before supporting strikes against the Islamic State, David Cameron needs to answer some important questions, writes [James Strong](#). He argues that Islamic State is indisputable our enemy and that if we can identify our friends, build a political settlement worth supporting and identify the limits of what we are willing to do, we should be prepared once again to send our troops abroad.*



Britain seems likely soon to be asked to join US-led military action against the Islamic State in Northern Iraq. In reality British forces are already involved in the fight, flying surveillance and supply missions, training Kurdish Peshmerga fighters, and conducting special forces reconnaissance missions on the ground. But the next request will be for RAF bombing missions, and that will change the complexion of this conflict completely.

After parliament vetoed military action in Syria last year, many observers concluded Britain had lost its stomach for a fight. This is to misread the Syria vote. For one thing, both Labour and the government behaved deeply politically. Whatever the two sides might say, they actually proposed near-identical policies. 75 per cent of MPs voted for one or the other. Parliament actually supported escalating the pressure on President Assad. It wanted to work through the UN, but it was prepared to countenance the use of force if the UN process did not work. That neither the government motion nor the Labour amendment was accepted says more about partisan posturing than our willingness as a country to fight.

Early indications suggest we could at least be persuaded to support strikes against the Islamic State. We have seen sufficient evidence of its extremism and brutality to recognize an enemy at work. We understand that friendly groups are not normally ejected from al-Qaeda for being too hardline. But we, and our parliamentary representatives, still need more information before we will feel happy about proceeding. Looking at David Cameron's failings during the Syria debate, I believe he needs to answer these five questions before parliament should approve another intervention.

## 1. Who are we targeting?

On one level this is straightforward. Our enemy is the so-called 'Islamic State', an extremist group based on the remnants of Al-Qaeda in Iraq. It controls large swathes of territory and seeks to establish a medieval Islamic 'Caliphate' centred on the strategically significant city of Mosul. It is funded by regional backers and by revenues from oil production under its control. It professes an extreme form of Sunni Islam and calls all those who refuse to accept its religious and political authority apostates. It punishes apostasy with death. While it cannot yet threaten us directly, it clearly aspires to. Its mere existence in a strategically significant region puts our interests at risk.

On another level it is far less straightforward. The Islamic State has some support from Iraq's minority Sunni population. Exactly how much is difficult to say. While Sunni-Shi'a tensions owe much to ancient rivalries, their present height in Iraq is more prosaic. After the 2003 invasion the US and UK helped exclude Sunnis from the political and economic life of the state. Cut off not just from power but from Iraq's only real source of income, they turned to insurgency as a last resort. President Bush's 'surge' helped restore security, but only the re-integration of Sunnis in the 2008 'awakening' brought the conflict under control. After US forces left Iraq, Nouri al-Maliki worked to regain for his Shi'a allies that early exclusive dominance. That is one reason why the Islamic State wins some sympathy in otherwise moderate parts of Iraq. Many Sunnis are willing to back any force that offers to improve their domestic position. They see no reason to be loyal to a government in Baghdad apparently determined to cut them off.

If Britain and its allies are to intervene against the Islamic State, we need first of all to distinguish between its extremist core and the broader Sunni population. If we try to fight an entire people we will either fail or wind up bogged down, just as we have been for years in Afghanistan. There we made a similar mistake by failing to drive a wedge between the Taliban and the Pashtun ethnic group. We have to be clear that we are fighting extremists, and we have to ensure that actually is the case on the ground.

## **2. What are we fighting for?**

This question is related to the first. If the Islamic State is our enemy in Iraq, who are our friends? Western states pushed for the removal of al-Maliki as Iraq's prime minister precisely because of his role in exacerbating ethnic tensions. If Haider al-Abadi can create a genuinely inclusive political settlement, half the battle will already be won. If he cannot, it will already be lost. Military force can only support a political solution. It cannot create one. President Obama knows this well. It is why he has been so apparently slow to act, to keep the pressure on politicians in Baghdad to make a deal. Britain should not offer them any further assistance until it is clear they are serious about creating an inclusive and workable settlement. On the flip side, Britain should be willing to support a fair solution for the simple reason that it might actually work.

## **3. How far should we take the fight into Syria?**

This is a really important question. It is not possible to defeat the Islamic State in Iraq alone. Its heartlands remain across the border in Syria. While that country remains unstable, its instability will always be liable to spread. If we are serious about putting Iraq back together, we have to get serious about Syria as well. If we are unwilling to intervene at all in Syria (and that intervention need not necessarily be military) then we should stay out of Iraq.

## **4. Are we willing to pay the price of success?**

The US is reported to be spending \$7.5 million a day on its operations in Iraq. While Britain's contribution would inevitably be smaller, it would still come with a price tag. Are we prepared to pay that price after years of war and recession? Parliament balked at the question when it last vetoed military action in 2013. But here it seems clearer that doing nothing also comes with a price. Iraq, for better or for worse, is at least in theory an allied state. Not that long ago it was a *de facto* US-UK protectorate. If we allow it to collapse we will lose credibility, and credibility still matters in international affairs. We will also face a financial hit as oil prices rise. And that is assuming the Islamic State never threatens Britain directly, an assumption I do not think we can reasonably afford to make.

But there is a broader potential price we must be willing to pay before we intervene. Are we willing to lose more British lives to create a stable and inclusive Iraq? We have lost 179 already. If we take military action we should be prepared and we must be willing to lose more. If Iraq is worth fighting for then it must be worth dying for. Ruling out 'boots on the ground' is a mistake, even if tactically they are unlikely to be our first resort. Even if ground troops are not required to press a military victory home, bombing operations are not without their risks and special forces are already active on the ground. If we get into this fight seriously then British servicemen and women are likely to die. We should not take action if we are unwilling to pay that price.

## **5. What role is there for the UN?**

Parliament wanted UN involvement in Syria in 2013. In fact, it wanted it in Iraq in 2003 as well, but when it came to the punch most MPs preferred to drop that requirement rather than ditching Tony Blair. Will it expect a Security Council resolution before any use of force can proceed? The answer, actually, is 'probably not'. If Britain takes action in Iraq it will not be violating Iraqi sovereignty, since the Iraqi government has requested outside help. The legal case for action will be far better than that put forward by the Attorney-General last year. Given the tensions between the US, Europe and Russia over Ukraine it seems unlikely a Security Council consensus can be reached.

Yet there are still good reasons to try to get the UN on board, at least in part. For one thing, if it does prove necessary to act in Syria as well as Iraq, that might yet mean violating sovereignty, though President Assad is hardly

a friend of the Islamic State. More importantly, it would be a bad idea to take such a step without involving Russia. There can be no military solution in Syria without a political one, and without Russian involvement a political settlement will prove a pipe dream. Working through the UN seems the only realistic way to get all of the great powers on board. This will mean compromises, some of which (such as leaving President Assad in power) we inevitably will not like. Finally, involving the UN would help reduce the visual impact of Western troops returning to Iraq. This would be good for public opinion, which in both the US and UK prefers to support UN initiatives than to act alone. It would also be good for the situation on the ground. Even if other states, especially Arab League states, can offer only token military contributions, the internationalisation of any outside action would reduce the risk of the outsiders themselves being identified by Iraqis as invaders. Nobody likes to be invaded. That is another lesson of 2003.

### **What then?**

If all of these questions can adequately be answered, parliament should support the use of British force. There are risks in military intervention. But, as Cameron said over Syria, while 'doing nothing is a choice, it is a choice with consequences'. Some of those consequences are things we would not like. Military action should always be a last resort. But the Islamic State is cutting off heads and burying hundreds in mass graves. It actively seeks to throw the entire Middle East into turmoil, and our economy depends on Middle Eastern oil. It is murdering Muslims, the brothers and sisters of our large British Muslim population. It is indisputably our enemy. If we can identify our friends, build a political settlement worth supporting and identify the limits of what we are willing to do, Britain must be prepared once again to send its troops abroad.

*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. Featured image credit: [Expert infantry](#) CC BY 2.0*

### **About the Author**

**Dr James Strong** is a Fellow in Foreign Policy Analysis at the London School of Economics. 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](#).

