

Written evidence from Foreign and Commonwealth Office (ISI0005)

1. This submission is intended to inform the Foreign Affairs Committee's Inquiry into the UK's role in The Fight against ISIL and follows the structure of the Committee's call for evidence.

SECTION ONE – THE ISIL THREAT

1: The extent to which ISIL is a threat to the region, to the international community (as a network or franchise), and to the UK and its interests.

2. ISIL poses a significant threat to the UK and regional and international peace and security. It has been designated a terrorist organisation by the UN Security Council. Its primary aim is the establishment of what it claims to be a pan-Islamic 'caliphate', based on an extremist doctrine that justifies widespread brutality and executions. It continues to promote and support terrorist attacks by its supporters and affiliates and has been linked to over 150 attacks worldwide in 2015. At least 25,000 foreign fighters are believed to be fighting with extremist groups in Syria, the majority now with ISIL.

Threat to the region

3. ISIL has taken over large parts of Iraq and Syria, and smaller areas in Libya, displacing local authorities, inciting sectarian violence, terrorising civilians, including minorities, and exploiting areas of weak governance.
4. ISIL also poses a threat in other countries. The group has been associated with attacks in Turkey, Lebanon, Bahrain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, and Afghanistan. A number of pre-existing terrorist groups have declared allegiance to ISIL in countries including Egypt, Yemen, Nigeria and Libya. ISIL holds ground in the city of Sirte in central Libya and has demonstrated an ability to launch attacks across the country and the region. Widespread insurgent activity poses a threat to regional stability and government control. The Syria-Lebanon border remains insecure and at risk from spill-over violence.

Threat to the international community

5. ISIL has explicitly sanctioned attacks outside the Middle East and North Africa since September 2014. The pattern of these attacks indicates increasing scale and complexity with a range of likely levels of direction from ISIL's leadership – some inspired by ISIL and some ISIL-directed.
6. Foreign fighters pose a particular threat ranging from trained combatants returning to their countries of origin to encouraging migration to the caliphate by non-combatants. The first terrorist attack in Europe conducted by a returnee from Syria took place in Brussels in May 2014, killing four people. Recently ISIL-linked terrorist attacks have

indicated the further threat posed by aspiring fighters who have been prevented from travelling to Syria and Iraq.

Threat to the UK

7. In August 2014 the independent Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre (JTAC) increased the UK threat to SEVERE, meaning that an attack is highly likely. This reflected, among other factors, the threat ISIL poses to the UK and its interests. Counter-ISIL activity is now the driver for the majority of the UK's international counter-terrorist effort, which spans the four pillars of the CONTEST strategy. ISIL has also been recognised as one of the two most important threats to be addressed in the forthcoming SDSR and is likely to result in substantial investment in counter-terrorism capabilities.
8. The threat facing Britain from Islamist extremist violence is more acute than ever before. Over 700 British Nationals have travelled to the region as foreign terrorist fighters. Others have become radicalised but have remained in the UK. ISIL has exploited social media as a tool for manipulation, radicalisation, recruitment and the sharing of information for terrorist purposes. In the UK, the police and security services have stopped at least six ISIL-linked attempts to conduct attacks in the last 12 months. As a result of ISIL-linked terrorist violence, 33 British nationals have been killed since 2014 (30 in the June 2015 attack in Sousse, Tunisia, two hostages killed in Syria and Iraq and one killed in the attack on the Bardo Museum in Tunis).

SECTION TWO – UK INTERESTS AND COALITION RESPONSE

2: The position of the UK's partners on how to deal with the threat from ISIL, and current coalition policy to address that threat.

9. The UK is a leading member of a Global Coalition of over 60 countries, from the Middle East and around the world, working to tackle ISIL. This Global Coalition has united to agree a common, multifaceted and long-term approach to degrade and defeat ISIL which was reiterated most recently in a joint statement released on 28 September 2015, available [here](#).
10. The Coalition works across five lines of effort: military action; countering ISIL financing; stopping foreign fighters; strategic communications; and the stabilisation of liberated areas. These efforts build on and complement substantial bilateral and pre-existing multilateral action to tackle foreign fighters, counter-extremism, terrorist financing and disrupt ISIL-linked terrorist plots and recruitment networks.
11. The Coalition formed quickly. It includes regional states, has presented a united front to fight ISIL and provides a coordinating mechanism to ensure that assets are used to best strategic effect. Coalition action has:

- a. denied ISIL the freedom to operate in 30% of the populated Iraqi territory it once held, including the liberation and stabilisation of Tikrit;
 - b. helped retake large swathes of northern Syria (up to 17,000 square kilometers of territory), preventing the fall of Kobane and the Mar'a line, and supporting the liberation of Tal Abyad and other towns;
 - c. helped damage or destroy 13,781 targets (as of 8 October 2015);
 - d. degraded ISIL's ability to refine oil;
 - e. denied ISIL the ability to access the international financial system.
12. There is also an enormous humanitarian effort to support victims of the Syria crisis, overseen by the United Nations. The UK has been at the forefront of this response, and is the second largest bilateral donor after the US. As well as providing life-saving aid, the UK is supporting refugees to remain in host countries in the region, and supporting host countries to accommodate them. The Prime Minister recently pledged an additional £100 million which will help address urgent needs in 2015 including life-saving essentials such as food, clean water and shelter as well as encouraging other donors to do likewise. Our total humanitarian commitment to Syria and the region now stands at over £1.1 billion, our largest ever response to a single humanitarian crisis.
13. In Iraq, the humanitarian situation is also grave. International appeals are currently only 39 per cent funded, with a £194m (USD300m) gap. These shortfalls have led to a halving of food rations for one million people and the shutdown of 180 frontline health facilities. The UK has recently pledged another £20m, bringing our total humanitarian effort in Iraq to £79.5m.
14. ISIL thrives in ungoverned spaces. As a core part of its fight against ISIL, the UK is supporting the Government of Iraq in its ongoing reforms and working to achieve a political transition in Syria.

2a: The participation by the UK in US-led air strikes against ISIL in Iraq and the possible extension of air strikes into Syria; and the geographical reach and limitations of the UK's action against ISIL.

The participation by the UK in US-led air strikes against ISIL in Iraq

15. The UK is one of the largest contributors to air strikes against ISIL in Iraq, and we are involved in intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) missions over Syria. The RAF contribution is focussed on areas where the UK can add most value. Our advanced ISR and targeting capabilities allow us to conduct and/or facilitate successful engagements where many other Coalition partners could not. The RAF delivers a wide range of capability which also includes air-to-air refuelling, and transportation of aid and equipment.
16. Current UK military air assets on task in the region include:

- a. Tornado GR4 (strike and ISR) aircraft in Akrotiri.
- b. Reaper MQ-9 unmanned (strike and ISR) aircraft.
- c. C-130 Hercules (transport) aircraft in Akrotiri.
- d. Voyager (air refuelling) aircraft in Akrotiri.
- e. Sentinel (ISR) aircraft.
- f. Rivet Joint (ISR) aircraft.

17. Since the start of the campaign RAF Tornado and Reaper have flown more than 1,500 combat missions and carried out more than 320 successful strikes in Iraq.

The geographical reach and limitations of the UK's action against ISIL

18. The UK has deployed more than 800 people to the region to contribute directly to countering ISIL. The UK has a Major General as Deputy Commander in the US-led Coalition HQ and has also deployed supporting staff in this and other headquarters across the Coalition.

19. On the ground we are providing training and equipment to the Iraqi Security Forces, including the Peshmerga, and we have been training Syrian moderate opposition forces to take the fight to ISIL in Syria.

20. ISIL draws no distinction between Iraq and Syria. There is no operational logic to tackling ISIL only in Iraq when it does not respect national borders. It is from ISIL's core in Raqqa, Syria that its global influence spreads and where the direct threat to the UK originates.

The possible extension of air strikes into Syria

21. Extending UK air strikes against ISIL into Syria would be a significant step in aligning us with the US, Australia, and other Coalition partners. The Coalition would welcome the additional capability provided by sophisticated RAF aircraft armed with precision guidance weapons.

22. We will keep Parliament informed and engaged on the broader options of UK action to defeat ISIL in Syria. As the Prime Minister has made clear, the Government will return to Parliament for a separate vote if it proposes to join Coalition air strikes in Syria. As the Prime Minister has also said, if there were a critical British national interest at stake or there were a need to act to prevent a humanitarian catastrophe, the Government would act immediately and explain the action to Parliament afterwards. This was the case with the precision air strike which was taken in self defence against British nationals based in Syria on 21 August.

2b: The UK contribution to a coherent international policy toward ISIL, including at the United Nations.

23. The UK has had a strong influence on Coalition strategy and broader international efforts over the past year, including at the December 2014 Brussels meeting of the full Coalition and through hosting the inaugural meeting in London of the Coalition's 'Small Group' in January 2015. The London Small Group meeting, under the Chairmanship of the Foreign Secretary and John Kerry, agreed to split the Coalition's work into different lines of effort, with a working group created for each strand. The UK plays an active role in each line of effort:

Military

- a. Around 800 UK personnel are directly contributing to the Counter ISIL coalition through the deployment of an air package and the training and development of Iraqi and Syrian forces.

Impeding the flow of foreign fighters

- b. We work closely with international partners to understand and counter the threat of foreign fighters, including through UK- and US-sponsored UNSCRs (see below); close cooperation with EU partners; sharing information through bilateral channels to disrupt British travellers seeking to reach Syria; capacity-building work in the region to address other sources of foreign fighters and instability; and multilateral action, including the Global Counter Terrorism Forum and the Global Coalition's working groups on foreign terrorist fighters.
- c. At home, we have rolled out legislation in line with 2178 and 1624 commitments, such as the Counter Terrorism and Security Act 2015 and the Serious Crime Act 2015. In September 2015, we proposed that a number of ISIL-linked British citizens should be added to the UN Al Qaeda Sanctions regime, which would lead to a global asset freeze and travel ban.

Finance

- d. We have contributed to a Coalition counter-financing Action Plan and shaped a joint statement on kidnap for ransom, which was issued on 14 May. Most recently, we have taken a leading role in implementing the recommendations of UNSCR 2199, which aims to disrupt ISIL's financing. Our domestic counter terrorist finance legislation is amongst the most stringent in the world, and we have successfully imposed sanctions on individuals engaged in raising funds for ISIL. We have taken the first steps towards establishing a substantive dialogue with the financial sector.

Stabilisation

- e. We have deployed a Stabilisation Adviser to Baghdad to work with the Iraqis and international partners on planning for stabilisation efforts. We have also made a £2m contribution to the UN Development Programme's Funding Facility for Immediate

Stabilisation. This will help stabilise areas liberated from ISIL's control, helping to provide a safe and secure environment for displaced people to return home.

Exposing ISIL's true nature

- f. As Co-chair of the Coalition's Strategic Communications Working Group (with the US and UAE), the UK has shaped the Coalition's approach to communications in line with our own strategy, focusing on aligning Coalition messages (both civilian and military), amplifying credible voices, strengthening digital communications and measuring impact. The UK drafted the Coalition's strategic communications action plan, is deploying a strategic communications expert to Baghdad to work closely with the government of Iraq and established a network of Coalition Government Spokespersons to counter ISIL's propaganda.
 - g. On 29 September 2015 the Prime Minister announced a commitment to host a Coalition Strategic Communications Cell in London and committed £10m of seed funding (some of which will come from next year's C-ISIL programme spend which is expected to be in excess of £150m).
 - h. The Coalition's Strategic Communications Cell is staffed currently by five UK and Canadian staff, including civilian and military communications experts. Its final size and structure may depend on Coalition partners, who we have invited to contribute resources to the work of this Cell.
 - i. In this initial phase, it is focused on co-ordinating communications cross the Coalition, driving joint messaging to tell the positive story of the Global Coalition and the significant work underway to combat ISIL. The Cell will also be responsible for deploying the full range of strategic communications to attack and undermine the ISIL brand. It will co-ordinate and expand the number of countries undertaking communications interventions tackling ISIL and countering violent extremism and widen the Coalition effort to include countries who have previously lacked the means or the knowledge necessary to deliver effective communications against ISIL.
24. The UN is a critical component of the international response to ISIL. Under our Presidency in August 2014, the UNSC adopted Resolution 2170 to restrict ISIL's financial, trade and recruitment networks. UNSC Resolution 2178, which the UK co-sponsored, built on this, strengthening the international response to threats posed by foreign terrorist fighters.
25. Official-level liaison between the UK and Coalition countries is largely undertaken by the HMG ISIL Task Force – based in the FCO. It has hosted secondees from Australia, New Zealand and Canada, and has deployed a UK secondee to the US Coalition Support Working Group.

26. Beyond the Global Coalition the UK is actively engaged diplomatically in bilateral and multilateral fora, including with countries such as Russia, China and Iran. Within the Global Counter Terrorism Forum, a multilateral body designed to coordinate best-practice sharing on CT, the UK co-chairs the Working Group on De-Radicalisation. We also supported the UN Human Rights Council Resolution mandating the UN to investigate urgently and report on ISIL abuses.

2c: The extent to which there is understanding and agreement about what a 'defeat' of ISIL would constitute.

27. The Global Coalition has agreed that its aim is to degrade ISIL's capabilities via a comprehensive approach over a sustained, multi-year timeframe, leading to its eventual defeat. Degrading ISIL entails disrupting and suppressing its ability to conduct large-scale operations. Its defeat will come when it no longer has safe-havens from which to operate; when it no longer poses an existential threat to Iraq or other states; and when ISIL's ideology no longer achieves traction and is therefore no longer a threat to UK security and interests.

2d: The implications of the ISIL threat for the UK's approach to the war in Syria and its approach to the governments in Damascus and Baghdad.

28. Defeating ISIL requires a comprehensive solution to reduce the organisation's space to operate, including through the development of effective and inclusive political institutions in those countries where it has taken root.

29. ISIL's growth in Iraq was, in part, a consequence of the inability of successive former Iraqi governments to build credible and inclusive political institutions. The grievances of the Sunni community have been exploited by ISIL to build support and foment radicalisation. To rebuild public trust and unite Iraq's communities, the Government of Iraq needs to deliver reform and meaningful reconciliation – particularly with the Sunni community. Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi has taken some important steps, including forming the most inclusive government for six years, agreeing an ambitious and consensual programme for government and passing a sensitive austerity budget. Implementing such comprehensive reforms is inevitably challenging. The UK has increased the number of diplomats in Baghdad to provide greater political support to the Abadi Government.

30. In Syria, we are clear that Assad is part of the cause of, not the solution to, ISIL. The Assad regime is responsible for the crisis in Syria and the violence and instability of the last four years grimly illustrate that there is no prospect of peace while it remains in power. The regime's brutality against its own people, including the use of chemical

weapons and barrel bombs against civilians, and its targeting of moderate opposition groups has led some to turn to extremist groups and ideologies, including ISIL.

31. For this reason, the UK's priority for Syria remains an end to the conflict through an inclusive political settlement. This means bolstering those who have a moderate and unified vision for the country, putting pressure on the regime and its backers, and on extremists, while alleviating human suffering through the provision of humanitarian aid.

2e: The extent to which the UK's partners in the region (particularly Turkey and Saudi Arabia) share the UK's goals and strategy for defeating ISIL.

32. Our partners in the region share our view that ISIL presents a threat to stability. They recognise that coordinated international action is the best way to defeat ISIL, and that there is no long term answer without a political solution to the Syria conflict and a more inclusive political settlement in Iraq. Regional countries have suffered from ISIL attacks and many host large numbers of refugees driven from their homes by Assad and ISIL's brutality. To date, regional partners have been involved in the bombing campaign against ISIL in Syria and Iraq including: Bahrain, the UAE, Jordan and Saudi Arabia.

33. Turkey is a valued partner and shares our view that stability in Syria and the region is only achievable by the removal of Assad and his replacement with an inclusive government that will genuinely seek to defeat ISIL. They are participating in Coalition airstrikes against ISIL in Syria.

34. The Saudis are fully engaged in the Global Coalition to counter ISIL, and we work closely on counter-terrorism issues. Saudi Arabia also sees Syria and Iraq through the prism of its relations with Iran. They are also one of the largest donors to the Syria crisis response £379m (USD586m). We are encouraging Saudi Arabia, along with other regional partners, publicly to support Iraqi PM Abadi.

2f: The potential for involving Iran in the fight against ISIL.

35. ISIL remains a serious challenge to Iranian interests in Iraq and the region. Tehran also sees potential challenges to its own domestic security linked to border incursions, and increased sectarian, separatist and extremist tensions.

36. The UK has always tried to engage Iran in a constructive manner. The reopening of our Embassy in Tehran in August allows us to discuss a broad range of issues and shared challenges – including the threat from ISIL.

37. The Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF), elements of which are supported by Iran, represent one of the most capable fighting forces against ISIL. However, Iran's influence

in Iraq has helped feed sectarian tensions from which ISIL has benefited. We have made it clear that we have no difficulty with contributions from around the region to rid Iraq of ISIL, provided that this is done in a way that supports the Iraqi Government, including in its objective to reach out to Sunni communities. To this end the UK is working as part of the Coalition in Iraq and Syria: Iran is not part of that Coalition.

38. In Syria, Iran provides significant military and financial support to the Assad regime, whose actions have contributed to ISIL's rise and continue to fuel extremism. Iranian support for countering ISIL in Syria would require it to use its leverage with the regime to press for a political process and full compliance with UN Security Council Resolutions.
39. We do not ignore our, and regional partners', concerns about Iran's role in fostering instability in the Middle East. Part of our strategy for engaging Iran is delivering the message that if Iran is a responsible member of the international community it will be much better at achieving its objectives. We will continue to raise our objections to Iran's destabilising activities.

SECTION THREE – CHALLENGES ARISING FROM THE GROWTH OF ISIL

3: The challenges arising from the growth of ISIL, including displaced peoples; inflaming sectarianism in the region; and the implications for non-violent Islamist movements.

40. The rise of ISIL poses complex challenges for the region. Firstly, ISIL's advance has resulted in the large scale displacement of civilians. In Iraq, 3.2 million are internally displaced. In Syria, the principal driver of the conflict has been, and remains, the Assad regime. As a result of the regime and ISIL more than 7.6 million people are internally displaced and over 4 million have fled to neighbouring countries. There are 12.2 million people inside Syria in need of humanitarian aid. Large numbers of displaced persons in the region places enormous pressure on local economies and services and risks exacerbating existing grievances and tensions.
41. Secondly, ISIL has spread a violent sectarian doctrine, which promotes the killing of anyone considered an 'apostate'. It is indoctrinating a whole generation of Syrian and Iraqi children in schools under its control. The ISIL threat also appears to have inflamed ethnic tensions between Kurds and Arabs in contested areas.
42. Thirdly, in the rise of ISIL we have seen the catastrophic consequences of extremists filling the void produced by a lack of genuine popular participation and political inclusion. It is crucial to support the widening of political space and inclusive political systems in the region.
43. All these challenges arising from the growth of ISIL in the region have direct consequences on the UK and its interests; the radicalisation of vulnerable individuals in the UK; the impact on children in families choosing to travel to the region; the challenges

of dealing with returned fighters or families disillusioned by their experience of ISIL and lucky enough to escape alive; and the growing consequences of the most serious migration crisis in recent years in Europe, which is due in part to ISIL.

SECTION FOUR – OPTIONS FOR RESPONSE

4: Options for confronting the ISIL ideology, and the need for political and governance solutions.

44. ISIL's rapid expansion across Iraq and Syria in 2013/14 was aided in part by the group's ability to gain local support. It capitalised on disaffection and frustration of oppressed populations fuelled by decades of poor governance and exclusion.
45. The UK's strategy to confront ISIL's ideology takes in strategic communications, political and governance solutions and is made up of five areas of work:
 - a. Impede ISIL's narrative from achieving traction with Muslim communities in the UK and overseas until ISIL is defeated;
 - b. Increase recognition that there is a global coalition and that its actions, with emphasis on the UK's role, are supporting stability for all peoples of all religions;
 - c. Build confidence in both the Government of Iraq's ability to deliver a solution to the current crisis and to build an inclusive and stable future for Iraq;
 - d. Strengthen international understanding that the majority of Syrians are moderate, and within Syria build support for an inclusive political solution led by Syrian moderates, without Assad, ISIL or other violent extremist actors; and
 - e. Increase UK public support for current and future activities designed to protect our national security interests through defeating ISIL.
46. Complementing these areas are efforts to support political inclusion in Iraq and a political transition in Syria. We are working to support sub-national political and governance structures that will deny ISIL the space to thrive at a local level. These structures are targeted specifically by stabilisation and reconciliation efforts. The FCO hosts over 30 cross-Whitehall staff working full-time in a task force on the counter-ISIL effort (in addition to other staff across Whitehall departments), including 11 in Iraq, to encourage genuine political reform and meaningful reconciliation. This includes a strategic communications expert to help the Government of Iraq communicate and expose ISIL's hypocrisy.
47. For long term peace and stability in the region - as well as to address the threat from ISIL to the UK and its interests overseas - we need to have viable political alternatives to ISIL's extremist ideology. This will only occur with a genuinely representative government in Iraq, and an inclusive and legitimate government in Syria.

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