

STRATEGY



A S P I

Strike from the air

The first 100 days of the campaign against ISIL

Patricia Dias, Tobias Feakin,
Ken Gleiman, Peter Jennings,
Daniel Nichola, Simone Roworth,
Benjamin Schreer, Mark Thomson

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Cover image: An explosion after an apparent US-led coalition airstrike on Kobane, Syria, as seen from the Turkish side of the border, near the Suruc district city of Sanliurfa, Turkey, 20 October 2014. © SEDAT SUNA/epa/Corbis

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The first 100 days of airstrikes in Iraq and Syria based on data sourced from US Central Command news releases, 8 August to 24 November 2014, [online](#).

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

This ASPI report is the first publication from a continuing, open-source study of the coalition campaign against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). The report is an important part of ASPI's mission to provide policy relevant research and analysis to better inform Government decisions and public understanding of strategic and defence issues. With Australian blood and treasure committed to the efforts of the coalition, it is important for ASPI to provide research and constructive commentary on the campaign efforts and dedicate the time and expertise of our analysts to the understanding of events, decisions, costs, risks and potential outcomes.

Australia's role in the international coalition is currently limited to airstrikes on targets in Iraq and an evolving commitment to training elements of the Iraqi security forces. Both roles are indefinitely sustainable, given the ADF's capacity to rotate forces and projections of defence spending. The broader challenge for Canberra will be to explain how this fits into a credible international strategy with a realisable political objective.

The campaign to 'degrade, and ultimately destroy, ISIL through a comprehensive and sustained counterterrorism strategy' is essentially a work in progress. ISIL's rapid advances of mid-2014 have been checked, but the group has shown itself to be tough and able to adapt its tactics. In 2015, it will become apparent how much more can be done to degrade ISIL via airstrikes. The first half of the year will be decisive for the Iraqi Army in showing whether it can retake and then effectively administer territory. Including the Sunni minority, especially in the west and north of Iraq, and limiting Iranian influence will both be critical to subsequent phases of the campaign. More broadly, a credible political solution in Syria and Iraq remains elusive. The absence of an international interest in or commitment to tackling the region's deep-seated political problems will constrain the effectiveness of the campaign against ISIL into the future.

This report is designed to be read in conjunction with ASPI's interactive map of coalition airstrikes, which details the date, location, target and effect of all strikes reported by US Central Command at the time of writing. It also shows coalition humanitarian and military airdrops, and the authors thank Rosalyn Turner for her assistance collating that information. The map, developed by ASPI's Luke Wilson, can be viewed at first100days.aspi.org.au. On that website, readers will also find this report's airstrikes database, which collates all the strike information reported by US Central Command at the time of writing. So far as we can tell, this database is the most accurate open-source collation of information on coalition airstrikes in Iraq and Syria to date. The maps featured in this report have also been specially commissioned from this research effort.

ASPI's research team will continue to study and assess the campaign against ISIL as long as the campaign affects the future of Australian strategic policy. We expect to publish future reports and analysis that will be timely and relevant to the strategic discourse in Australia.

ASPI welcomes critical feedback about its work from the Defence community and the general public.

CHAPTER 2

A holding strategy: the campaign against ISIL

Peter Jennings

Two speeches defined US President Barack Obama's view of the crisis in Iraq and Syria. In the first, a downcast address to graduating West Point cadets on 28 May 2014, Obama set much higher thresholds for America to deploy military force overseas:

The United States will use military force, unilaterally if necessary, when our core interests demand it—when our people are threatened, when our livelihoods are at stake, when the security of our allies is in danger ... On the other hand, when issues of global concern do not pose a direct threat to the United States ... then the threshold for military action must be higher.¹

By May 2014, ISIL had consolidated its grip on much of Syria and mounted terror attacks and military operations in Iraq for over 12 months. It had captured and stubbornly held the city of Fallujah and parts of Ramadi, the capital of Anbar Province, in January 2014. On 10 June, ISIL captured Mosul—Iraq's second largest city, with a population of around 700,000. A quarter of the Iraqi Army had collapsed, thrown down their weapons and deserted—some 60 of 243 combat battalions couldn't be accounted for. By 17 June, ISIL forces using captured American vehicles and military equipment had reached Diyala, 60 kilometres north of Baghdad. In August, they captured the Mosul Dam, moved to threaten the Kurdish-speaking Yazidis (40,000 of whom had sought refuge on the Sinjar Mountain) and threatened the Kurdish provincial capital of Erbil.²

In less than 10 weeks and to the apparent surprise of governments and intelligence organisations, substantial parts of north, west and central Iraq had fallen to a terror organisation. In September, the CIA estimated that the number of ISIL's fighters had grown from around 10,000 to between 20,000 and 31,000—15,000 of whom were in Syria.³ Using appalling violence and sophisticated propaganda, a few thousand fighters had panicked the Iraqi Army and put millions of Iraqi citizens under ISIL's control.

On 10 September, President Obama announced a campaign to 'degrade, and ultimately destroy, ISIL through a comprehensive and sustained counterterrorism strategy'. By then the US had launched about 150 airstrikes in northern Iraq. Obama identified four main aims for the international coalition then being assembled:

First, we will conduct a systematic campaign of airstrikes against these terrorists. Working with the Iraqi government, we will expand our efforts beyond protecting our own people and humanitarian missions, so that we're hitting ISIL targets as Iraqi forces go on offense ... Second, we will increase our support to forces fighting these terrorists on the ground ... As I have said before, these American forces will not have a combat mission—we will not get dragged into another ground war in Iraq. But they are needed to support Iraqi and Kurdish forces with training, intelligence and equipment ... Across the border, in Syria, we have ramped up our military assistance to the Syrian opposition ... we must strengthen the opposition as the best counterweight to extremists like ISIL ... Third, we will continue to draw on our substantial counterterrorism capabilities to

prevent ISIL attacks. Working with our partners, we will redouble our efforts to cut off its funding; improve our intelligence; strengthen our defenses; counter its warped ideology; and stem the flow of foreign fighters into and out of the Middle East ... Fourth, we will continue to provide humanitarian assistance to innocent civilians who have been displaced by this terrorist organization. ...⁴

Australia was among the first countries to commit to the international coalition of forces. On 3 October 2014, Prime Minister Tony Abbott announced:

The Government will commit up to eight Australian F/A-18F Super Hornet aircraft to participate in airstrikes in Iraq as part of the international coalition formed to disrupt and degrade ISIL. Once the appropriate legal arrangements are in place with the Iraqi government, Australian Special Forces will also deploy to Iraq to advise and assist Iraqi security forces. These forces will join the RAAF E-7A Wedgetail airborne early warning and control aircraft and KC-30A multi-role tanker transport already supporting coalition air operations over Iraq.⁵

The Australian strike package commenced operations on 5–6 October. After an inexplicably long delay, Australian special forces deployed from the United Arab Emirates (UAE) into Iraq in November to take up a training role with Iraqi special forces.

Difficult questions abounded at the start of the coalition campaign. It wasn't clear how such a limited campaign of airstrikes, coupled with a very small contingent of trainers, could have a decisive impact. On paper, the Iraqi military comprises around 280,000 regular troops, and there are close to half a million police. In Iraq, a dysfunctional government and collapsed military faced an opponent that was psychologically ascendant. Syria presented an even bigger challenge, its civil war having effectively been ignored by the US for the previous two years. Who should the allies assist when faced with, as Tony Abbott called it, a war of baddies versus baddies?⁶ Although the US was able to quickly assemble a large group of countries willing to be involved in the fight against ISIL, the 'coalition' was a diverse group: a number of Arab states, such as Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Turkey and the UAE, all had different underlying strategic motivations for their participation. Many others showed variable willingness to use armed force.

However, airstrikes against ISIL took place in the days following Obama's 10 September statement. From the outset, the air campaign seemed to owe more to sloth and pause than to shock and awe. It was soon clear that airstrikes were going to be limited and highly selective. This was to be a campaign of slow strangulation. The Pentagon's spokesman, Rear Admiral John Kirby, said that degrading and destroying ISIL could not be done militarily. ISIL's ideology is the thing that needs to be destroyed, he said: 'that's not going to be defeated through military means alone. It's going to take time and it's going to take good governance, responsive politics, both in Iraq and in Syria.'⁷

Based on Obama's September speech, the international coalition has managed to degrade but not destroy ISIL through an air campaign in Syria and Iraq that's involved around 1,000 strikes in the first 100 days of the operation. Actions to degrade ISIL capability have included:

- destroying a significant number of vehicles, ranging from commercial cars and trucks to captured US Humvees, tanks, artillery pieces, rocket launchers and earthmoving equipment
- killing an unspecified number of ISIL fighters, particularly in and around the town of Kobane
- destroying elements of ISIL infrastructure, such as guard posts, some headquarters buildings in Syria and infrastructure designed to generate ISIL finances, including in the black market oil trade.

Iraq: assessment after 100 days

In Iraq, the strikes have partially but by no means completely contained ISIL. Much of the forward momentum of ISIL operations against the Kurds in the north, around Baghdad and in Anbar Province seemed to slow towards the end of September. ISIL has no longer been able to move in formations of military vehicles because they can be identified and hit from the air. This has limited its capacity for conventional military manoeuvres.

ISIL responded to the air campaign by changing tactics. Large convoys flying ISIL flags, which were seen in June and July, have ceased. ISIL has clearly worked hard to disguise leadership movements. A rare break in its operational security allowed coalition forces to attack a house in the western Iraqi border town of al-Qaim, where it was understood that a leadership meeting was taking place, on 7 November. Reports that ISIL leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was wounded in the strike appear to have been disproved by the subsequent release of an audio recording of the leader.⁸

It's clear that US rules of engagement place considerably more restrictions on the use of airstrikes than was the case during the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Over the first 100 days, the vast majority of strikes in Iraq were against clearly identified military targets, often single vehicles or guard posts. Mosul, where significant numbers of ISIL fighters are located, has been off limits. For the coalition, this has had the benefit of significantly reducing claims that it's been killing civilians. Narrow rules of engagement have also constrained the coalition in targeting ISIL leaders. Many strikes have had only very limited tactical effect.

With its options for quasi-conventional military tactics constrained, ISIL returned to more traditional insurgency tactics. A number of towns and villages in Anbar Province have been infiltrated by ISIL fighters undetected by coalition aircraft. ISIL is reported to have built up strength at Abu Ghraib, 40 kilometres west of Baghdad and within shelling distance of the city's international airport. ISIL has previous history in the area: it staged an attack on the Abu Ghraib prison in July 2013, freeing more than 500 people.⁹ There's considerable local Sunni sympathy for the group at Abu Ghraib and throughout Anbar Province. ISIL has also been able to stage regular bomb attacks in Baghdad over the past few months. On 16 October, for example, two car bombs, a suicide bomber and several attacks with mortar rounds were reported to have killed at least 50 in different Baghdad suburbs.¹⁰ On 17 November, ISIL claimed responsibility for a suicide car bomb attack on a UN convoy near Baghdad airport.¹¹ Twenty-four hours earlier, a bomb attack in a car park at the airport wounded a number of people. On the same day, a bomb in a Baghdad commercial area killed three.¹² Similar incidents have been occurring daily in Baghdad for months. The continuation of this violence shows that ISIL and its supporters have comparatively easy freedom of movement around central Iraq.

On 19 August, following some days of US airstrikes, Iraqi military and Kurdish Peshmerga fighters retook the strategically important Mosul Dam, which had been captured by ISIL several weeks earlier.¹³ Reinforced with US advisers and coalition airdrops of weapons, the Peshmerga seemed able to hold ISIL at bay in the north of Iraq. In the centre of the country, fighting between Iraqi forces, Sunni militias of unclear pedigree and ISIL produced more mixed results, but the coalition's sustained pressure on ISIL seemed to be turning a corner from late October. In mid-November, it looked as though Iraqi forces were gaining control of critical assets in the town of Bayji, close to Iraq's biggest oil refinery, where a hard-pressed Iraqi military unit had been under siege by ISIL for five months. In October, ISIL brought down an Iraqi Mi-17 helicopter and a Bell 407 helicopter using shoulder-fired, man-portable air defence systems apparently sourced from Syria.¹⁴ The refinery was nearly overrun by ISIL on 11 October, prompting airdrops of supplies to the besieged forces.

However, ISIL fighters were said to be retreating from Bayji on 18 November. On a visit to Baghdad, the Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Martin Dempsey, said 'And now, I think it's starting to turn. So well done.'¹⁵ November reports also indicated significant fighting around Abu Ghraib: an Iraqi Interior Ministry statement of 13 November claimed that 'A joint force managed to destroy four strongholds used as ISIL headquarters in the Awda Bridge area, west of Abu Ghraib, killing ISIL elements there.'¹⁶

It isn't clear how decisive the US ground force 'advise and assist' role has been in shaping these tentative Iraqi gains. In mid-October, for example, it was reported that 12 US special forces teams, each comprising 12 trainers, had been attached to 12 Iraqi Army headquarters units at brigade level and higher. Seven of the teams were in the Baghdad area, and five were around Erbil. No US advisers were with Iraqi units in Anbar, apparently because of force protection concerns. US assistance was limited and far removed from any combat on the basis that this was a mission that the Iraqis needed to 'own'.¹⁷

On 7 November, President Obama authorised the deployment of an additional 1,500 US troops:

... in a non-combat role to train, advise, and assist Iraqi Security Forces, including Kurdish forces. The President also authorized U.S. personnel to conduct these integral missions at Iraqi military facilities located outside Baghdad and Erbil. U.S. troops will not be in combat, but they will be better positioned to support Iraqi Security Forces as they take the fight to ISIL.¹⁸

Obama claimed that a new phase in the campaign had been reached, but it was difficult to escape the thought that the President's most critical turning point had been the conclusion of the mid-term US congressional elections. American military planners aimed to speed up the deployment of the additional forces, with a view to having them train 12 Iraqi brigades.

As was the case with the campaign in Iraq in 2007—the time of the Petraeus 'surge'—a critical factor for success in Iraq remains the willingness of Sunni tribal leaders in Anbar Province to work with the Iraqi Government against terrorist forces. There's little sign at this stage of an 'Anbar awakening' like the one in 2007, when the Sunni tribes decided that they'd had enough of the brutal behaviour of Al-Qaeda in Iraq. ISIL is a significantly more capable force and even more intimidating than its al-Qaeda predecessors. The Iraqi military's progress (or lack of it) in Anbar will be a defining factor in the progress of the war in 2015.

Syria: assessment after 100 days

Over the past three years, around 200,000 Syrians have been killed in the country's civil war. More than 3 million refugees have fled to Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan, and millions more have been displaced within Syria. Vicious fighting between forces loyal to President Assad and a variety of dissident groups (ranging from the allegedly 'moderate' elements of the Free Syrian Army to ISIL and the al-Qaeda affiliated Al-Nusra Front) have decimated large parts of the country. ISIL has secured control of the city of Raqqa and much of the northern third of the country. Its control of oilfields at Deir ez-Zor has helped it to fund its operations through the sale of oil on the black market.¹⁹ It appears that the group moved much of the US-sourced military equipment abandoned by the Iraqis into its Syrian strongholds and used it in a sustained, largely conventional force, attack on the town of Kobane on the Syrian–Turkish border.

Syria is reportedly the home of around half of ISIL's fighters.²⁰ The absence of Western intervention has made the northern part of the country an effective safe haven. It was the staging ground for the January and June attacks into Iraq and remains the key to ISIL's aspirations for long-term success.

The challenge for the US and coalition countries has been to design a strategy that weakens ISIL but doesn't lend comfort or direct assistance to Syrian President Assad. The US remains wedded to the policy that it won't put boots on the ground in Syria. The combination of these constraints makes developing coherent strategy almost impossible. President Obama described his goals on 10 September:

... in Syria, we have ramped up our military assistance to the Syrian opposition ... I call on Congress again to give us additional authorities and resources to train and equip these fighters. In the fight against ISIL, we cannot rely on an Assad regime that terrorizes its own people—a regime that will never regain the legitimacy it has lost. Instead, we must strengthen the opposition as the best counterweight to extremists like ISIL, while pursuing the political solution necessary to solve Syria's crisis once and for all.

As of late November, there's no greater clarity about the plan to train a force of around 5,000 'vetted' Syrian fighters. Saudi Arabia may be the training ground, but we don't know who'll be trained, what they'll be trained to do, what military capabilities the force will have, and what difference such a force might make against much larger Assad loyalist forces (numbered at around 100,000 fighters)²¹ or ISIL. The US has indicated that vetting Syrians to find acceptable fighters and training them will take months. Pentagon spokesman Rear Admiral Kirby referred to this process as 'a year-long pipeline of training opportunities'.²² At the earliest, US-backed ground operations involving the 5,000 'moderate' fighters might be able to start around the beginning of 2016. A US presidential election

year is an unpropitious time to start a major new military campaign. The recent defeat of the US-backed Syrian Revolutionary Front and Harakat Hazm in Idlib Province indicates that US support appears to be too little, too late.²³

Coalition airstrikes began in Syria on 22 September. Late that month, the US used the F-22 Raptor on its first combat operation since it entered service, possibly in anticipation of the need to attack remnant Syrian air defence capabilities but equally possibly, as one analyst speculated, to ‘take the bubble wrap off’ the aircraft.²⁴ A remarkable array of aircraft and precision weapons were used in the strikes, which were notable for the involvement of Bahrain, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE (Australia has limited its airstrikes to Iraq). Initial strikes, including with cruise missiles, were directed at Raqqah. Over October, the UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said that 521 Islamist fighters, including 464 from ISIL, were killed in Syria as a result of coalition airstrikes, most of them in Raqqah.²⁵ The US indicated that a particular object of the targeting had been to disrupt ISIL oil production and financial activities. ISIL forces at the Deir ez-Zor oil refinery were struck regularly during September and October.

By far the greatest concentration of airstrikes in the first 100 days of the campaign was directed at ISIL forces ‘besieging’ the Syrian town of Kobane, on the border with Turkey. Major strikes took place almost every day of October and into November as ISIL continued to throw a major portion of its fighters into its attempt to take the town. The US CENTCOM Commander, General Lloyd Austin, said on 17 October that ‘If he [ISIL] continues to present us with major targets, as he has done in the Kobane area, then clearly, we’ll service those targets, and we have done so very, very, effectively of late.’²⁶

The concentration of ISIL’s effort on Kobane is puzzling. Some have speculated that it wanted to control a border crossing into Turkey, but the Turks quickly closed the border, stationing armoured units in what’s an ethnically Kurdish area. ISIL’s massing of forces in a way that made them easier targets appeared to be a tactical error, but it’s clear that even under multiple daily airstrikes ISIL fighters were pressing the town’s Kurdish defenders hard. At best, the campaign to late November could be declared a stalemate. As with most of its activities, ISIL appeared to be most interested in the propaganda effect of the Kobane campaign. Aside from Western film crews reporting on the battle from the Turkish side of the border, by the end of October ISIL was making its own well-produced propaganda from Kobane using a captured British journalist as its ‘reporter’.²⁷ It wouldn’t have escaped ISIL planners that attacking a Kurdish town put the Turkish Government under sustained pressure from its own Kurdish population. The wider effect of Kobane was to promote a common Kurdish cause across Iraq, Syria and Turkey, which suits ISIL’s agenda of fragmenting existing national structures and thereby strengthening its ‘caliphate’ in Sunni territory.

The campaign in 2015 and beyond

It’s apparent that the campaign to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL is going to last for years. A White House ‘fact sheet’ released on 7 November described the broader strategic outlook:

ISIL poses an immediate threat to Iraq, Syria, and American allies and partners throughout the region as it seeks to overthrow governments, control territory, terrorize local populations, and implement an oppressive and intolerant interpretation of sharia law. If left unchecked, ISIL could pose a growing threat to the United States and others beyond the region. Thousands of foreign fighters—including Europeans and some Americans—have joined ISIL in Syria and Iraq. We are concerned that these trained and battle-hardened fighters will try to return to their home countries and carry out deadly attacks.²⁸

Apart from a steady squeezing of ISIL, which has slowed its advance and destroyed quantities of American military equipment, the coalition’s strategy has achieved very little. ISIL’s position at the end of 2014 remains strong. Among its strengths is its continuing capacity to develop effective propaganda that helps to recruit foreign fighters. ISIL continues to have a substantial funding base and is well armed. Core areas of territory remain solidly under its control in Syria and Iraq. ISIL’s broader weaknesses include the unattractiveness of its ideology to any but a small minority of potential recruits. The organisation’s shift to more conventional military capability has overextended it and caused it to suffer significant casualties, which might not be sustainable for long.

The US's position is strengthened by its unparalleled capacity to use air power, which will degrade ISIL over time and prevent it from making easy gains of territory. However, that strength has to be offset against a set of broader problems and challenges for the US. First, it's clear that President Obama will keep the US military role very limited. Washington won't deploy large-scale ground forces. Second, there's no credible longer term strategy to address the Syrian crisis. In effect, Obama has created a holding strategy that contains ISIL in Iraq and hits obvious targets in Syria, and is waiting for a new US President in 2016 to develop a more definitive strategy.

In Iraq, some early signs in October and November suggest that some units in the Iraqi military are regaining confidence and the capacity to take the fight to ISIL. On paper, the Iraqi military is large enough to make short work of ISIL, but that 'strength' must be offset by the reality that ISIL remains firmly in control of much of the Sunni areas in Iraq. There's yet to be a turning point in the campaign. Baghdad remains under regular terrorist attack and vulnerable to the same psychological pressure that caused much of the Iraqi military to throw down its weapons in mid-2014. It's not yet clear that the Iraqi Government has turned a corner in maintaining a firm grip on power or in persuading Sunnis that their interests are fundamentally helped by Iraqi unity.

Syria is a humanitarian disaster, in the midst of which ISIL remains the most effective anti-Assad force (with Jabhat al-Nusra and its Islamic Alliance a close second). The US strategy for 'expanding ongoing assistance to the moderate Syrian opposition to develop their capacity to provide local security for communities'²⁹ is the least developed and least credible part of the anti-ISIL campaign. In the absence of a more thoroughgoing and credible international response to the Syrian disaster, there's no supportable case that victory against ISIL is assured.

The international coalition against ISIL is holding together in the sense that a number of countries are prepared, at least for now, to support a constrained campaign of airstrikes in Syria and Iraq (see the 'Developing the international coalition' section of this report). Support for training the Iraqi military is very much more limited, and so far the plan to train a Syrian 'moderate' force could best be described as an idea looking for friends. There's no obvious international mechanism allowing the coalition to plan a longer term strategy to counter ISIL. The coalition was flung together in great haste in September, and the challenge will be for it to survive into 2015.

Australia's role in the international coalition is limited to airstrikes on targets in Iraq and an evolving commitment to training elements of the Iraqi Army. On 25 November, the ADF Chief of Joint Operations, Vice Admiral David Johnston, briefed the media about a series of RAAF strikes against 'a large, well-established and hidden network of caves and bunkers that were concealed in a hill side' near Kirkuk.³⁰ Around a hundred ISIL militants were reportedly killed in this operation, which involved a ground attack by Kurdish fighters. Admiral Johnston said that Defence was 'scoping options' to increase ADF training numbers, should the government want to make a further commitment to the operation. Overall, his realistic assessment was that progress against ISIL had been 'modest' and that the situation in Baghdad was 'fairly fragile'. Both Australian roles—airstrikes and training—are indefinitely sustainable, given the ADF's capacity to rotate forces. The broader challenge for Canberra will be to explain how this fits into a credible international strategy with a realisable political objective.

The campaign to 'degrade, and ultimately destroy, ISIL through a comprehensive and sustained counterterrorism strategy' is essentially a work in progress. ISIL's rapid advances of mid-2014 have been checked, but the group has shown itself to be tough and able to adapt its tactics even while under heavy air attack. In 2015, it will become apparent how much more can be done to degrade ISIL via airstrikes. The first half of the year will be decisive for the Iraqi Army in showing whether it can retake territory. The Iraqi Government must also begin to include elements of the Sunni minority while containing the influence of Iranian-backed Shia militia. More broadly, a credible political solution to Syria and Iraq remains elusive. The absence of an international interest in or commitment to tackling the region's deep-seated political problems will constrain the effectiveness of the campaign against ISIL into the future.

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CHAPTER 3

ISIL's evolution and its military actions in 2014

Simone Roworth

The evolution of ISIL

The roots of ISIL can be traced to the al-Tawhid wa al-Jihad (Monotheism and Jihad) group established by *salafi-jihadi* Jordanian Abu Musab al-Zarqawi following the US invasion of Iraq in 2003.¹ Zarqawi led a ruthless campaign of attacks across Iraq, directing suicide bombers to blow up mosques, schools, cafes and bustling markets, usually in predominantly Shia areas. Among its more high-profile attacks, al-Tawhid wa al-Jihad was responsible for attacks against the Jordanian Embassy and UN headquarters in Baghdad, as well as the bombing of the holiest place of Shia worship in Iraq, the Imam Ali Mosque in Najaf.²

In 2004, Zarqawi joined forces with al-Qaeda, renaming his group Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). He continued his bloody campaign, but his ambitions were cut short when he was killed in a US airstrike in 2006. Zarqawi was replaced by Egyptian Abu Hamza al-Muhajir. Under Muhajir, AQI joined forces with other Sunni radicals and changed names again to become the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), led by Abu Omar al-Baghdadi.

By 2010 ISI's prominence in Iraq had been degraded, thanks to a forceful US counterterrorism campaign, Sunni tribal disaffection with AQI's extremist ideology, and the deaths of both Abu Hamza al-Muhajir and Abu Omar al-Baghdadi in US airstrikes in 2010. It was at this point that US troops began withdrawing from Iraq and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi took over leadership of ISI.

Capitalising on the instability in Iraq following the US withdrawal and extreme dissatisfaction among Iraq's Sunni population with Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's Shia-dominated governing coalition, Baghdadi revived Zarqawi's brutal tactics and led a relentless campaign of suicide and car bombings. Baghdadi differed from his predecessor, however, in his targeting of not just Shia targets but also Iraqi police and military offices, checkpoints and recruiting stations.³

ISI's campaign proved attractive to many Iraqis who rushed to join its ranks. Many had either served as commanders and soldiers in Saddam Hussein's military or, more unusually, been members of the secularist Baathist Party. ISI's ranks swelled once again as a result of the group's 'Breaking the Walls' campaign, in which it attacked several Iraqi prisons. This included the notorious Abu Ghraib prison where between 500 and 1,000 prisoners, many of whom were extremists previously captured by the US, escaped in 2013. One of the escapees would later become one of ISIL's top military commanders.⁴

In 2011, ISI also commenced operations in Syria, where the uprising against President Bashar al-Assad had descended into civil war. ISI initially joined forces with local Islamist militants, most notably the al-Qaeda-affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra, but established itself as a force to be reckoned with in Syria in its own right after a split between

the groups, in which ISI commandeered much of Jabhat al-Nusra's capabilities and many of its fighters.⁵ ISI made significant territorial gains in Syria between 2011 and 2013, fighting both government and rebel forces and establishing a stronghold in the northeast of the country.

It was at this point, in April 2013, that Baghdadi renamed his group 'the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant' (ISIL). In January 2014, ISIL took control of Raqqah City in Raqqah Province. Its control of the city gave the group the ability to operate freely across the border into Iraq.

ISIL's military campaign in 2014

Analysts suggest that ISIL is no simple terrorist organisation. Instead, it is a functioning government with a hybrid terrorist-army, as convincing in insurgent techniques as it is in conventional warfare designed to conquer and govern large swathes of territory.⁶

In early 2014, ISIL launched operations into Iraq, quickly taking control of the cities of Fallujah and Ramadi. However, it was in June, when ISIL seized control of Iraq's second-largest city of Mosul—near the strategically important Mosul Dam—that the seriousness and scale of ISIL's military operations became clear.

Since June, ISIL has taken over large swathes of land, controlling or contesting territory from Aleppo in Syria's north to cities and towns close to Baghdad in central Iraq—territory roughly the size of the UK. The area is home to more than 6 million people—the population of Finland. By mid-October, ISIL had advanced to within 25 kilometres of Baghdad airport. At the time of writing, it's reported that about a third of Iraq is dotted by active ISIL battle fronts.⁷

The scale and speed of ISIL's military campaign in Syria and Iraq since January 2014 have been impressive. Key ISIL military and propaganda actions in 2014 include those shown in Table 1. Figure 1 shows the contest for territory in Iraq and Syria at the time of writing.

Table 1: ISIL military and propaganda actions, 2014

January 2014	
4 January	ISIL takes control of Fallujah in the first reported instance of extremists taking over a major Iraqi city since the height of the sectarian insurgency after the 2003 US-led invasion. ISIL also seizes control of the nearby city of Ramadi.
June 2014	
10 June	ISIL takes control of Mosul, Iraq's second-largest city, seizing government offices, the airport and police stations. In the process, ISIL acquires over \$400 million in cash from the Mosul bank, uniforms, small arms, tanks, armoured trucks, Humvees, helicopters and a handful of anti-aircraft batteries. It also releases upwards of 2,000 prisoners from Mosul's prisons.
11 June	ISIL takes control of Tikrit, the former home of Saddam Hussein and 150 kilometres from Baghdad.
19 June	ISIL captures the Al-Muthanna Chemical Weapons Facility near Lake Tharthar, roughly 72 kilometres northwest of Baghdad. This was once Saddam Hussein's premier chemical-weapons production facility.
21 June	ISIL takes control of al-Qaim, a strategic town on the border with Syria in northwest Iraq.
21 June	ISIL takes control of the city of Baiji, north of Tikrit and near Iraq's largest oil refinery, following the desertion of 400 Iraqi soldiers.
22 June	In Iraq's northwest, ISIL forces advance on Haditha and the Haditha Dam, the second-largest dam in Iraq after the Mosul Dam.
23 June	ISIL captures the al-Waleed border crossing between Syria and Iraq in the west of Iraq. This is the second border crossing now controlled by ISIL.
29 June	ISIL's leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, declares the establishment of the Islamic Caliphate, overlapping state borders between Iraq and Syria.

July 2014	
3 July	ISIL takes control of Syria's largest oilfield, al-Omar in Deir ez-Zor Province. It's capable of producing 75,000 barrels of oil a day. ISIL now controls all of Syria's main oil- and gasfields.
August 2014	
3 August	ISIL captures the Yazidi city of Sinjar in Iraq's north, prompting between 35,000–50,000 Yazidi civilians to flee to nearby mountains, without food, water or supplies. ISIL is reported to have massacred scores of Yazidis.
7 August	ISIL takes control of the strategic Mosul Dam, the largest hydroelectric plant in Iraq.
19 August	ISIL releases a video showing the execution of American journalist James Foley.
24 August	ISIL captures the Tabqa airbase in eastern Syria, the last remaining stronghold of the Syrian Government in Raqqah Province.
September 2014	
2 September	ISIL releases a video showing the execution of American journalist Steven Sotloff.
13 September	ISIL releases a video showing the execution of British aid worker David Haines.
18 September	ISIL begins advancing on Kobane, the Kurdish city in Syria's north on the border with Turkey.
October 2014	
3 October	ISIL releases a video showing the execution of British aid worker Alan Henning.
4 October	ISIL takes control of the city of Hit, 186 kilometres west of Baghdad.
6 October	ISIL begins to capture parts of Kobane.
November 2014	
16 November	ISIL releases a video showing the execution of American aid worker Peter Kassig.

Sources: Sam Koebrich, Mohsin Ali, 'Map: rebels' path through Iraq', *Al Jazeera*, 12 August 2014, [online](#); CNN Library, 'ISIS fast facts', *CNN*, 17 November 2014, [online](#); Stratfor Media Centre, 'Islamic State Timeline', *Stratfor Global Intelligence*, 1 August 2014, [online](#).

Figure 1: The contest for territory—November 2014



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CHAPTER 4

Developing the international coalition

Patricia Dias

The campaign against ISIL is one of the broadest international coalitions the US has ever led. Washington has enlisted a diverse range of coalition partners and mobilised the international community around the campaign to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL in Syria and Iraq. By engaging NATO partners and regional allies, appointing a Special Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL,¹ and using its role as the chair of a UN Security Council meeting to call on ‘the world to join in its effort’,² the US has built up a sizeable coalition base of more than 60 partners committed to eliminating ISIL.

While not all coalition partners have contributed to the airstrike campaign directly, noting Secretary of State John Kerry’s statement that ‘there is a role for almost every country to play’,³ other partner nations have supported the campaign through humanitarian, military and financial aid and assistance. For example, Germany isn’t taking part in the campaign militarily but has supplied aid and training to Kurdish and Iraqi security forces.⁴

At 3 November 2014, the US Department of State listed the coalition partners as those shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Coalition partners at 3 November 2014

Albania	France	Luxembourg	Serbia
Arab League	Georgia	Macedonia	Singapore
Australia	Germany	Moldova	Slovakia
Austria	Greece	Montenegro	Slovenia
Bahrain	Hungary	Morocco	Somalia
Belgium	Iceland	NATO	Spain
Bulgaria	Iraq	The Netherlands	Sweden
Canada	Ireland	New Zealand	Taiwan
Croatia	Italy	Norway	Turkey
Cyprus	Japan	Oman	Ukraine
Czech Republic	Jordan	Poland	United Arab Emirates
Denmark	Kosovo	Portugal	United Kingdom
Egypt	Kuwait	Qatar	United States
Estonia	Latvia	Republic of Korea	
European Union	Lebanon	Romania	
Finland	Lithuania	Saudi Arabia	

Source: US Department of State, *Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL*, [online](#).

Iran and Syria have also been active in the fight against ISIL, but aren't acknowledged as coalition partners and have been restricted from coalition planning, operations and intelligence sharing. Nevertheless, Iran has resupplied Kurdish and Iraqi forces fighting against ISIL, and Tehran continues to play an influential role on the ground (see 'The advise and assist mission: land forces on the ground' section of this report).⁵

On 5 September, key allies and partners met in Newport, Wales, on the sidelines of a NATO summit to discuss the coalition campaign against ISIL and to develop common goals and the means to achieve them. Partner nations agreed to 'Five Lines of Effort'⁶ to ensure effective coordination against ISIL:

- military support to Iraqi partners
- stopping the flow of foreign fighters
- countering ISIL's financing and funding
- addressing humanitarian crises
- delegitimising ISIL's ideology.

The five lines also describe how coalition partner nations can contribute by helping the Iraqi Government equip its security forces at the federal, regional and provincial levels to disrupt ISIL's activity. Other lines of effort call for all member nations to follow UN Security Council Resolution 2170, enacted on 15 August 2014,⁷ which condemns ISIL in the strongest terms and calls on all member states to take significant actions to stop the flow of foreign fighters into Iraq and Syria.

While the coalition has drawn attention for its size and breadth, it includes some differences in approach. Calls for troops on the ground continue to raise debate, and further tensions between Turkey and Kurdish fighters and between Turkey and Saudi Arabia have posed challenges. Qatar's open support for Syrian Islamist groups and equivocation on Jabhat al-Nusra have also caused tension within the coalition.⁸ Issues have also arisen over Turkey's refusal to allow access to its airfields for fellow NATO members' aircraft conducting military operations against ISIL.⁹ In addition, the US is the only actor carrying out airstrikes in both Syria and Iraq, as partner nations operating in Iraq have declined to attack ISIL in Syria.

It's also worth noting that some partner nations, such as Belgium and the Netherlands, entered into the airstrike campaign for predetermined periods, while others such as the UK and Australia have kept open the option of a longer term commitment.

Airstrike coalition nations

Despite these differences, the US has been joined by an impressive number of partner nations in coalition airstrikes. According to the most recent US Central Command reports, coalition partners conducting airstrikes in Iraq include Australia, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, the Netherlands, the UK and the US, while coalition nations conducting airstrikes in Syria include the US, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Jordan and Bahrain. The contributions of these nations are detailed below (see also Appendix 3 to this report).

Australia

Australia was one of the first countries to join coalition airstrikes against ISIL. On 3 October, Prime Minister Tony Abbott announced Australia's intention to participate. Australia commenced combat operations—Operation Okra—in Iraq on 5–6 October and conducted its first strike on 8 October.¹⁰

As of 5 November, Australia had planned and led attacks against ISIL targets in Iraq, flying 144 sorties and dropping twenty-five 500-pound laser- and GPS-guided bombs on ISIL targets, including logistics bases and storage facilities. Australia has contributed six F/A-18F Super Hornet fighter aircraft, one E-7A Wedgetail command and control aircraft and one KC-30A multi-role tanker transport refuelling aircraft.

Australia has also deployed around 600 ADF personnel: 400 assigned to the Air Task Group and 200 special forces members assigned to the Special Operations Task Group to advise and assist Iraqi security forces.¹¹

Bahrain

On the night of 22 September, Bahrain conducted coalition airstrikes with the US and other Arab partners in Tabqah, Tall al-Qitar, Deir ez-Zor, al-Hasakah and Abu Kamal in Syria.

More recently, Bahrain hosted an international conference to identify and adopt measures to counter the financing of terrorist organisations and to develop an implementation plan as part of the coalition campaign to defeat ISIL.¹²

Bahrain continues to be listed by US Central Command as a partner nation carrying out airstrikes in Syria.

Belgium

On 26 September, the Belgian Parliament voted to commit six F-16 fighter jets and 120 soldiers to support coalition operations in Iraq in Operation Desert Falcon. Even before the full parliament had voted in what was expected to be a large majority in support of the deployment, Belgium flew six F-16s to Azraq Air Base in Jordan to join the coalition campaign.¹³

Belgium conducted its first mission as part of the coalition on 1 October and launched its first airstrike against ISIL on 5 October using precision weapons. Since starting operations, the Belgian force has carried out about 60 flights (mainly for reconnaissance) and bombed a number of ISIL targets, including an armoured jeep and a factory manufacturing improvised explosive devices (IEDs).¹⁴

On 7 November, following a proposal put forward by Defence Minister Steven Vandeput, the Belgian cabinet decided to extend Belgium's participation in the campaign until 31 December.¹⁵

Canada

On 5 September, Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper announced that several dozen members of the Canadian Armed Forces would join the US in advising Iraqi security forces. The Canadian Parliament voted by an overwhelming majority to commit Canadian forces (six CF-188 Hornet fighter aircraft) to the coalition campaign. On 2 November, Canada conducted its first airstrikes in Iraq as part of Operation Impact.

At 19 November, the Canadian Air Task Force—Iraq had flown 103 sorties, conducting preplanned strikes on ISIL fighting positions and warehouse facilities. It has also conducted air-to-air refuelling with a CC-150 Polaris and delivered an estimated 28,000 pounds of fuel. Canada has deployed around 600 armed forces personnel, including the air task force, liaison officers and support elements, such as command and control personnel.¹⁶

Denmark

On September 26, Danish Prime Minister Helle Thorning-Schmidt confirmed that Denmark would contribute seven fighter jets to the coalition airstrike campaign. On 2 October, the Danish Parliament voted to send the aircraft to conduct operations in Iraq, but not Syria. Denmark conducted its first mission against ISIL in Iraq on 16 October, but no weapons were dropped. Denmark has also agreed to provide 120 military trainers to advise and assist Iraqi security forces.¹⁷

France

Following a request from the Iraqi Government, France was the first coalition nation to join the US in airstrikes against ISIL in Iraq on 19 September.¹⁸ As part of Opération Chammal,¹⁹ the French Air Force has been carrying out strikes in support of Iraqi and Kurdish forces, collecting intelligence and destroying ISIL targets.

The French appear to be planning for a long-term commitment to the campaign. Their contribution is built around nine Rafale fighter aircraft, one Atlantique 2 maritime patrol aircraft, one C-135FR tanker, and the anti-aircraft frigate Jean Bart integrated into the American carrier battle group in the Arabian Sea and Persian Gulf. In December, France will deploy six Mirage fighter jets to Jordan. This will enhance France's capacity to strengthen and adapt its mission for the long term.²⁰

Jordan

Jordan joined the airstrike campaign against ISIL with the participation of its warplanes in airstrikes in Syria on the night of 22 September. Jordanian Information Minister Mohamed al-Momani stated that Jordan would 'do whatever necessary to preserve the safety and security of [its] land'. Jordan joined the international coalition to stop the advance of ISIL and to prevent it from reaching Jordanian territory.²¹

Jordan is currently listed by US Central Command as a partner nation undertaking airstrikes in Syria.

The Netherlands

The Netherlands joined the international coalition campaign against ISIL on 24 September, announcing that it would contribute six F-16 fighter jets (and two spares) for missions in Iraq. It made its first strikes in Iraq on 7 October alongside the UK and the US, striking ISIL targets east of Fallujah, west and northwest of Ramadi, and northeast of Sinjar and Sinjar Mountain in Iraq.

The Dutch have deployed 250 military personnel to carry out airstrikes and an additional 130 to advise and assist Iraqi and Kurdish forces. At this stage, the Netherlands has indicated that it will maintain its strike mission in Iraq for up to 12 months.²²

Saudi Arabia

Following King Abdullah's commitment on 26 June to take 'all necessary measures' to protect Saudi Arabia against militants, Saudi Arabia joined the coalition campaign against ISIL on 22 September. It sent four F-16 fighter jets to carry out its first airstrikes on ISIL targets in eastern Syria on 22 and 23 September.²³

Saudi Arabia continues to be listed by US Central Command as a coalition partner nation contributing to airstrikes in Syria.

United Arab Emirates

The UAE Government confirmed its participation in airstrikes on the night of 22 September.²⁴ It has contributed F-16 Falcons to the campaign and hosts coalition aircraft from bases such as al-Dhafra, which has launched more strike aircraft than any other base or facility in the region, including the US Air Force's F-22 Raptors.²⁵

The UAE continues to be listed by US Central Command as a coalition partner nation contributing to the strikes in Syria.

United Kingdom

On 26 September, British Prime Minister David Cameron sought parliamentary approval for the UK to join the coalition campaign.²⁶ Four days after parliament backed military action, the RAF flew its first missions in Iraq on 30 September and 1 October as part of Operation Shader. Since then, Britain has conducted multiple airstrikes in Iraq using Tornado GR4 aircraft. It has also contributed other aircraft to the campaign, including Voyager refuelling tankers and Rivet Joint and Reaper remotely piloted aircraft.²⁷

United States

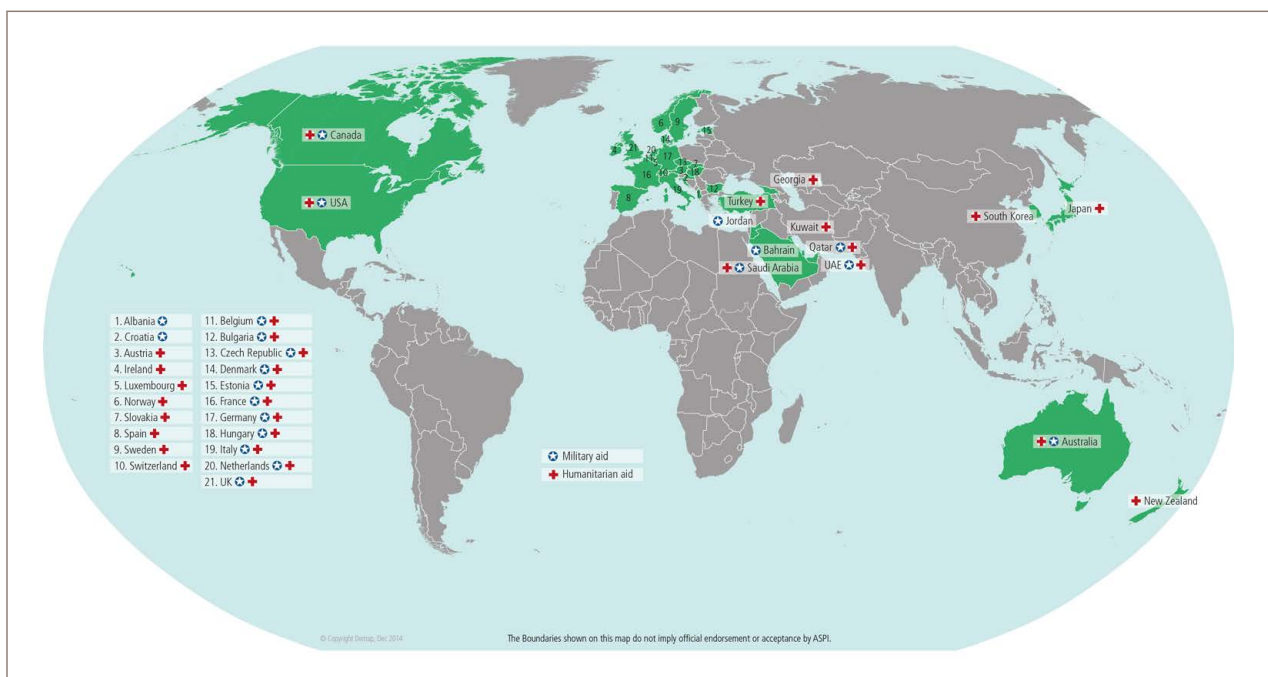
The first US strikes in Iraq on 8 August aimed to protect US personnel and achieve humanitarian ends, and the US refused to expand its airstrike operation against ISIL until the then Prime Minister of Iraq, Nouri al-Maliki, stepped down. Following al-Maliki's resignation on 14 August, US President Barack Obama announced the US-led coalition strategy to 'degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL', resulting in an expansion of US strikes targeting ISIL strongholds in Iraq. As foreshadowed in Obama's announcement, on 22 September the US began its air campaign against ISIL in Syria.²⁸ On 16 October, the US named its campaign Operation Inherent Resolve.²⁹

The US continues to lead the coalition campaign against ISIL. From 12 to 21 November, it hosted a counter-ISIL operational planning conference featuring military planners from 33 nations at MacDill Air Force Base in Florida to synchronise and refine coalition campaign plans against ISIL.³⁰ At the time of writing, the US and partner nations have conducted around 1,000 airstrikes in Iraq and Syria.

Others

Qatari aircraft contributed to the campaign from 22 to 23 September in a support, rather than strike, capacity, but Qatar has since been removed from US Central Command's airstrike coalition partner lists.³¹

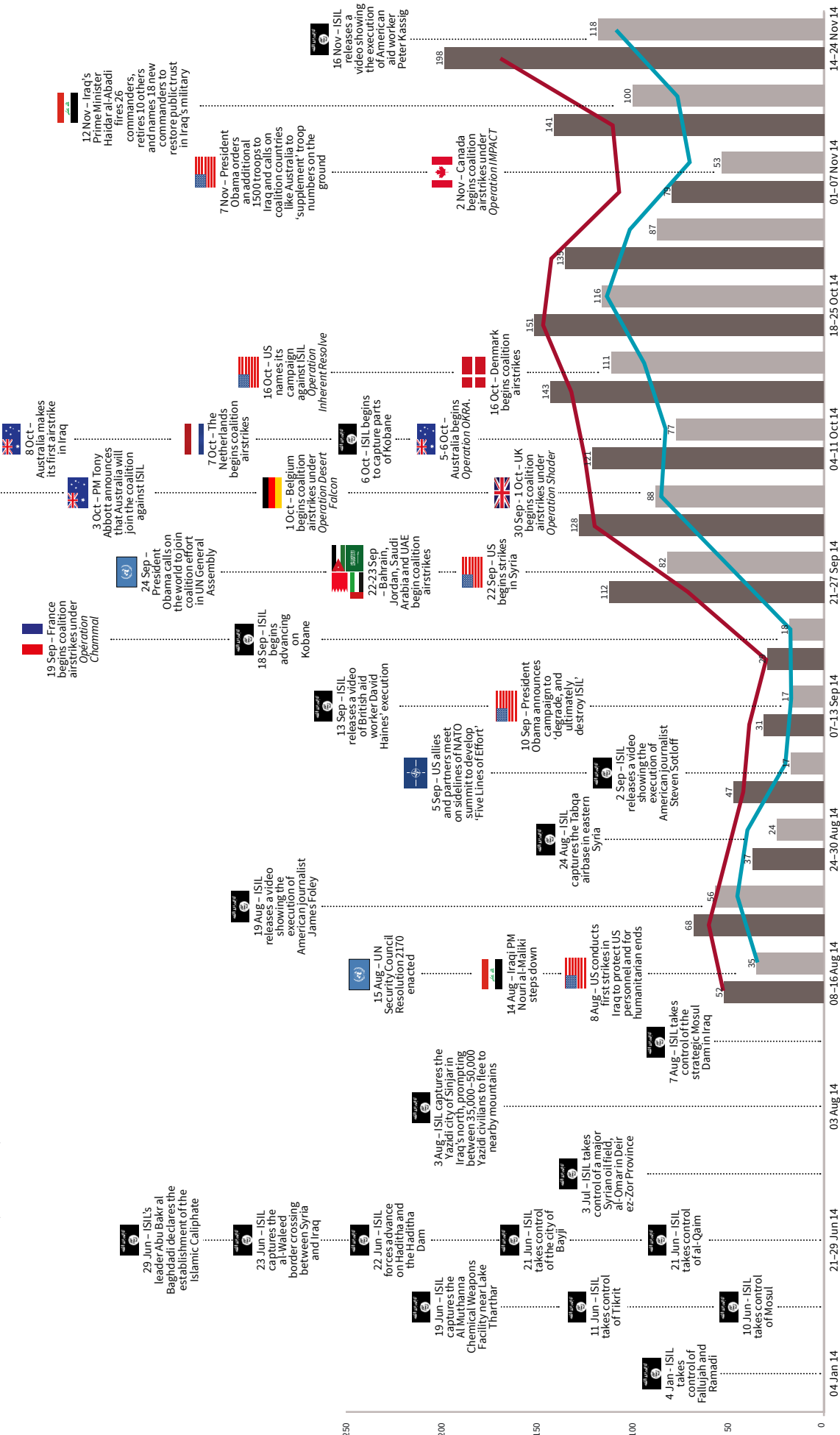
Figure 2: Coalition contributing countries (humanitarian and military aid)



Compiled by author from various open sources.

Figure 3: Coalition campaign timeline

Total weekly minimum targets
 Total airstrikes
 2 per. mov. avg. (total weekly minimum targets)
 2 per. mov. avg. (total airstrikes)



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CHAPTER 5

According to the data: the first 100 days

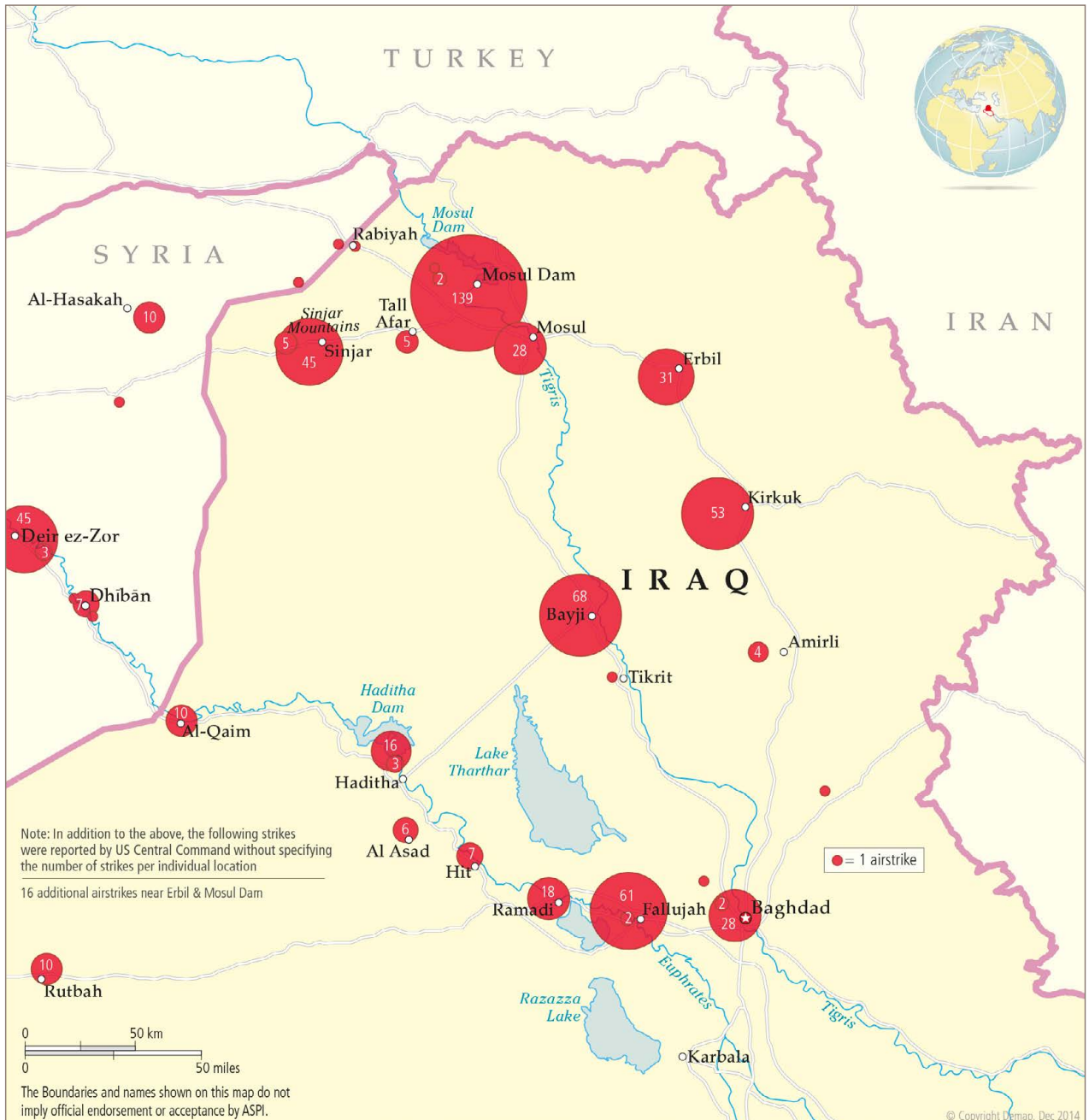
Daniel Nichola

On 7 August 2014, US President Barack Obama authorised two operations in Iraq: targeted airstrikes to protect US personnel and—at the request of the Iraqi Government—a humanitarian effort to assist Iraqi civilians on Mount Sinjar.¹ The following day, the US carried out three airstrikes near Erbil, an Iraqi city about 350 kilometres north of Baghdad. At the time of writing, the US and its coalition partners have conducted almost 1,000 airstrikes across Iraq and Syria. The strikes are a key component of the US-led strategy to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL, and they've generated plenty of coverage and commentary. Based on publicly available information from US Central Command² and other coalition governments, this section of the report provides an overview of the first 100 days of the campaign, detailing strike patterns in intensity, location, purpose and effect.

US airstrikes commenced on 8 August to halt ISIL's advance on Erbil and to protect American diplomats and civilians serving at the US consulate and American military personnel advising Iraqi forces in that city. Using F/A-18 aircraft and 500-pound laser-guided bombs, the US conducted three airstrikes against ISIL vehicles, a mortar position and a mobile artillery piece. On 9 August, using a mix of fighter and remotely piloted aircraft, the US conducted four airstrikes to protect civilians trapped on Mount Sinjar and to help break the ISIL siege there. In the subsequent week, US aircraft continued to strike areas around Erbil and Sinjar, destroying mainly ISIL vehicles (including armoured personnel carriers, armed trucks and Humvees) as well as a couple of ISIL checkpoints and mortar positions. In the first week of the campaign, 26 airstrikes were carried out in the vicinity of Erbil and Sinjar.

On 16 August, the focus of US airstrikes shifted to the area around the Mosul Dam (Iraq's largest dam) on the Tigris River upstream of Mosul, Iraq's second-largest city. ISIL fighters had seized the dam on 7 August, leading to fears that they could flood Mosul and other cities or cut off vital water and electricity supplies. From 16 to 18 August, a mix of US fighter, bomber and remotely piloted aircraft carried out about 36 airstrikes near the dam, destroying ISIL vehicles, fighting positions and artillery and weaponry (including IED emplacements and vehicle-mounted anti-aircraft artillery). On 18 August, President Obama declared that Iraqi and Kurdish forces had recaptured the Mosul Dam with the support of US airstrikes.³

Figure 4: The first 100 days—coalition airstrikes in Iraq



Based on data sourced from US Central Command news releases, 8 August to 24 November 2014, [online](#).

US airstrikes continued to focus on the area around the Mosul Dam from 19 August to 5 September, albeit with less intensity. In that 17-day period, the US conducted around 49 airstrikes near the dam (14 of them on 20 August) to support operations by Iraqi security forces and Kurdish fighters. Concurrently, a mix of US attack and remotely piloted aircraft carried out approximately six strikes near Erbil, targeting ISIL vehicles (between 24 and 27 August and on 4–5 September).

Also during this period, at the request of the Iraqi Government, the US conducted airstrikes near Amirli in support of an operation to deliver humanitarian assistance to that town. As part of their June offensive, ISIL militants had advanced on Amirli and cut off food, water and medical supplies to the population there. On 30 August, two US C-17 and two US C-130 transport aircraft dropped 109 bundles of humanitarian aid to the people of Amirli, delivering around 10,500 gallons of fresh drinking water and 7,000 ready-to-eat meals. Aircraft from Australia, France and the UK also dropped humanitarian aid. To support this operation, US fighter aircraft carried out three airstrikes near Amirli in coordination with Iraqi security forces, destroying ISIL vehicles, including Humvees and a tank.⁴ On 31 August, Iraqi troops and militias, aided by US airstrikes, raised the two-month siege of the town.⁵

From 6 September, the US expanded its airstrike campaign to target ISIL fighters threatening the Haditha Dam—the largest dam on the Euphrates River, in the western Iraqi province of Anbar. Iraqi security forces and local tribes had been battling ISIL in the area since January, when ISIL took control of Fallujah and most of Anbar Province. On 6 September, at the request of the Iraqi Government, a mix of US fighter and bomber aircraft conducted four airstrikes near Haditha in support of Iraqi security forces and Sunni tribes protecting the dam. The strikes destroyed ISIL vehicles and a checkpoint and damaged an ISIL bunker. From 6 to 9 September, the US carried out nine airstrikes near the Haditha Dam, targeting mainly ISIL vehicles, including some transporting anti-aircraft artillery.

During this period, the US also continued to conduct airstrikes near Erbil (six airstrikes from 4 to 9 September) and near the Mosul Dam (one airstrike on 6 September). These strikes exclusively targeted ISIL vehicles (Humvees, trucks, armed vehicles and one armoured personnel carrier).

On 10 September, President Obama announced his administration's strategy to 'degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL'. The President foreshadowed an expansion of US efforts in Iraq beyond humanitarian missions and protecting US citizens to include 'hitting ISIL targets as Iraqi forces go on offense'. President Obama also announced his intention to 'take action against ISIL in Syria'.⁶

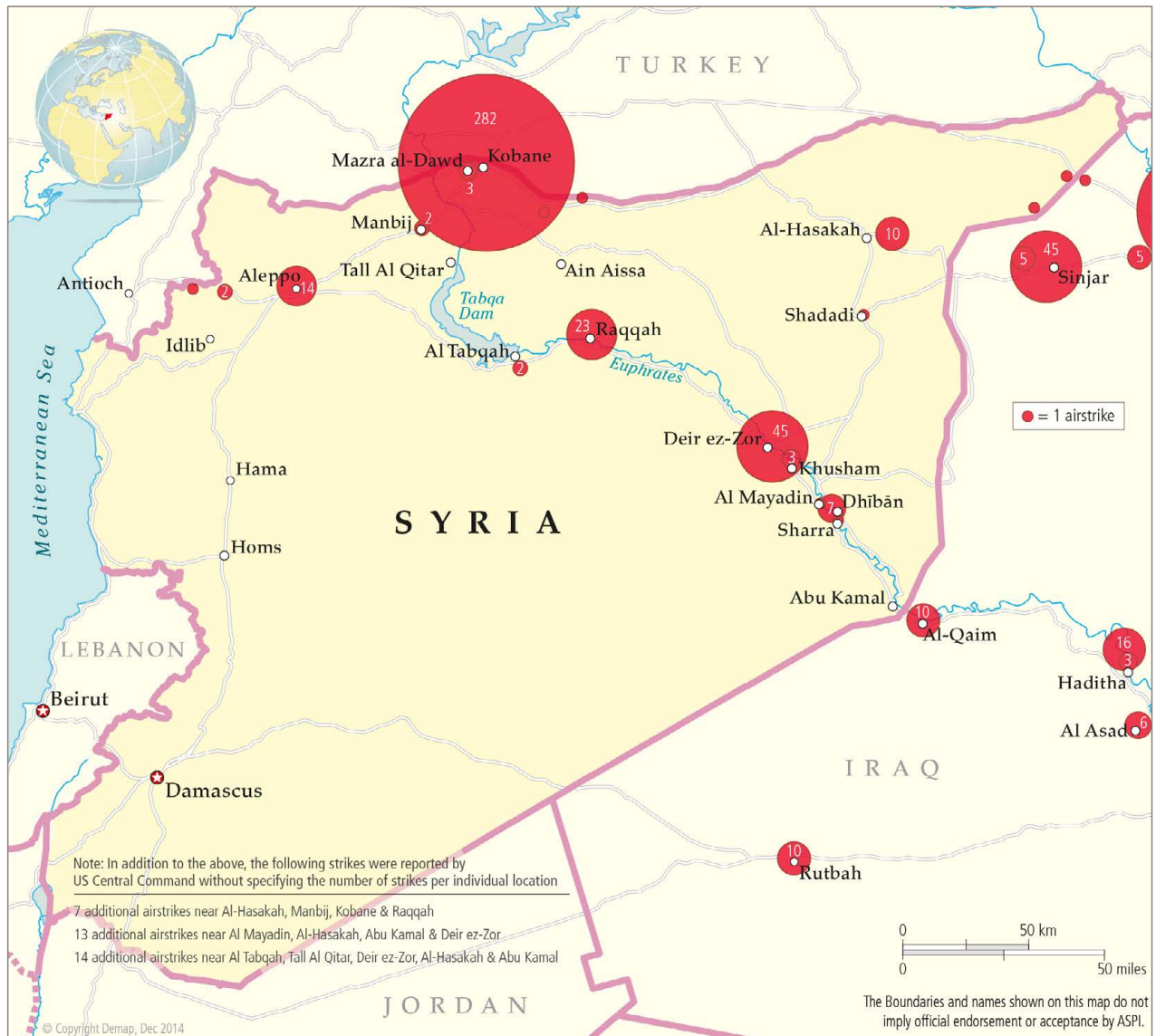
As part of these expanded efforts, on 14 September the US commenced airstrikes in the vicinity of Baghdad. From 14 to 19 September, a mix of US bomber, fighter, attack and remotely piloted aircraft carried out 11 airstrikes southeast and southwest of the city. The strikes targeted ISIL ground units and fighting positions, ISIL-occupied buildings and vehicles, artillery and ammunition stockpiles, and four small boats on the Euphrates River that were resupplying ISIL forces in the area.

Following President Obama's call for an expanded campaign, on 19 September French Rafale fighter aircraft carried out strikes in northeast Iraq (the first strikes by a coalition partner of the US).⁷ France's Defence Ministry confirmed that the strikes destroyed an ISIL logistics depot that contained vehicles, weapons and fuel.⁸ A spokesman for the Iraqi military stated that four French airstrikes had hit the town of Zumar.⁹

As part of its expanded efforts in Iraq, on 22 September the US also conducted its first airstrikes near Kirkuk, a town about 230 kilometres north of Baghdad contested by ISIL and Kurdish forces since June.¹⁰ A mix of US attack, fighter and remotely piloted aircraft carried out four airstrikes, destroying ISIL vehicles and a tank.

From 22 September, the airstrike campaign extended to Syria when the US, Bahrain, Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE carried out 14 strikes against ISIL targets using a mix of fighter, bomber and remotely piloted aircraft. The US also launched 47 Tomahawk land-attack cruise missiles from the guided-missile destroyer USS *Arleigh Burke* and the guided-missile cruiser USS *Philippine Sea* operating in international waters in the Red Sea and northern Arabian Gulf as part of the USS *George HW Bush* carrier strike group. These strikes destroyed or damaged multiple ISIL targets in the vicinity of Raqqah, Deir ez-Zor, al-Hasakah and Abu Kamal, including ISIL fighters, training compounds, headquarters, command and control facilities, storage facilities, a finance centre, supply trucks and armed vehicles.

Figure 5: The first 100 days—coalition airstrikes in Syria



Based on data sourced from US Central Command news releases, 8 August to 24 November 2014, [online](#).

On the same night, the US also conducted eight strikes in Syria west of Aleppo against the so-called Khorasan Group to ‘disrupt the imminent attack plotting [*sic*] against the United States and Western interests’.¹¹ These strikes targeted training camps, an explosives and munitions production facility, a communication building and command and control facilities.

The coalition campaign has struck ISIL targets in both Iraq and Syria almost every day since 22 September.

On 24 September, the focus of US and partner nation airstrikes in Syria shifted to modular oil refineries providing fuel for ISIL operations and helping to finance the group’s activity. Using a mix of fighter and remotely piloted aircraft, the US, Saudi Arabia and the UAE carried out 13 airstrikes against 12 ISIL-controlled modular oil refineries in remote areas of eastern Syria near al-Mayadin, al-Hasakah and Abu Kamal.

In Iraq, airstrikes continued to hit locations and targets similar to those in previous weeks. From 22 to 30 September, the US conducted 44 airstrikes against targets near Baghdad (11 airstrikes), Erbil (6), Kirkuk (11), Fallujah (4), Sinjar / northwest Iraq (9), the Mosul Dam (2) and al-Qaim (1). These strikes mainly destroyed ISIL vehicles, fighting positions and checkpoints. On 25 September, France conducted its second sequence of airstrikes in Iraq, targeting four ISIL-controlled hangars containing military equipment near Fallujah.¹²

In Syria during this period, coalition airstrikes targeted mainly ISIL-controlled infrastructure, in contrast to the mainly mobile targets in Iraq. From 26 to 29 September, the US and various combinations of Saudi Arabian, UAE and Jordanian aircraft carried out 27 strikes in northern and eastern Syria near al-Hasakah (5 airstrikes), Manbij (3), Kobane (2), Raqqah (8), Deir ez-Zor (7) and Aleppo (2). These strikes destroyed ISIL buildings and compounds, command and control facilities, modular oil refineries, training camps, garrisons, vehicles and tanks and struck two ISIL-held airfields (one near Raqqah and the other in northwest Syria near Aleppo).

This period also marked the beginning of coalition airstrikes near Kobane, northeast of Aleppo on the Syria–Turkey border. Kurdish forces in the area had been fighting to halt ISIL's advance towards Kobane since 15 September.¹³ On 26–27 September, the US (with the participation of Saudi Arabia, Jordan and the UAE) conducted two airstrikes at the Kobane border crossing. A mix of fighter and remotely piloted aircraft destroyed an ISIL building and two armed vehicles. On 29–30 September, the US (without the participation of Arab coalition partners) carried out three airstrikes near Mazra al-Duwud, about a kilometre outside of Kobane, destroying one artillery piece and damaging another, and destroying two rocket launchers. The US conducted a further three airstrikes near Kobane on 30 September to 1 October, destroying one armed vehicle, an artillery piece and a tank.

On 30 September, the UK conducted its first airstrikes in Iraq. Two RAF Tornado GR4 attack aircraft conducted two strikes in northwest Iraq to assist Kurdish troops. One Paveway IV guided bomb was dropped on an ISIL heavy weapon position engaging Kurdish ground forces, and a Brimstone missile struck an armed pick-up truck.¹⁴ Concurrently, the US also carried out 11 airstrikes in Iraq and 11 airstrikes in Syria (without the participation of Arab coalition partners). These 24 coalition airstrikes across Iraq and Syria mark 29 and 30 September as two of the most active days of the campaign to date.

In the first week of October, the focus of airstrikes in Syria shifted to Kobane. From 1 to 7 October, the US and differing combinations of Jordan, the UAE and Saudi Arabia carried out 11 airstrikes near Kobane to destroy mainly mobile targets, including ISIL checkpoints, fighting positions and vehicles. During this period, the US and its Arab coalition partners also continued airstrikes on other ISIL strongholds in Syria, carrying out 24 airstrikes near Raqqah (8 airstrikes), Deir ez-Zor (5), al-Hasakah (5), Aleppo (2), Tabqah airfield (2), Rabiya (1) and al-Mayadin (1). Following the pattern of previous airstrikes in Syria, these strikes targeted mainly ISIL-controlled buildings and facilities.

On 5–6 October, the US launched its first strikes in Iraq using rotary-wing aircraft. While details were not reported officially, the helicopters were likely to have been AH-64 Apaches operated by the US Army out of Baghdad International Airport.¹⁵

This period also saw other coalition partners commence airstrikes in Iraq. On 6–7 October, Belgium conducted its first airstrikes with the US northeast of Sinjar. On 7–8 October, the Netherlands carried out five airstrikes near Fallujah, Ramadi and Sinjar with the US and the UK. Australia conducted its first strikes in Iraq on 8 October, destroying an ISIL facility. On 16 October, Danish aircraft participated in their first mission over northern Iraq, but did not conduct any strikes.¹⁶

From 7 October, airstrikes in Kobane intensified. From 7 to 13 October, the US, Saudi Arabia and the UAE carried out 43 airstrikes near the border town, targeting mainly ISIL fighting units, staging facilities and vehicles. On 13 and 14 October, in two of the most active days of the campaign to date, the US and Saudi Arabia conducted 22 airstrikes near Kobane to interdict ISIL reinforcements and resupply and to prevent ISIL from massing combat power against the Kurdish-held parts of the town. These strikes targeted mainly ISIL compounds and staging facilities. From 14 to 17 October, the US (without Arab coalition partners) carried out a further 38 airstrikes near Kobane for this purpose, targeting mainly ISIL-occupied buildings and fighting positions.

At the request of the Iraqi Government, on 10 and 11 October the US conducted multiple airdrops in the vicinity of Bayji, a city about 220 kilometres north of Baghdad on the main road to Mosul. ISIL fighters had seized Bayji in June, threatening to capture the city's oil refinery, which is the largest in Iraq.¹⁷ US aircraft dropped 36 container delivery system bundles containing 7,328 halal meals, 2,065 gallons of water and 16,000 pounds of ammunition to resupply Iraqi security forces engaging ISIL fighters in the area.¹⁸

From 16 to 18 October, the focus of US airstrikes in Syria shifted to ISIL-controlled oil assets in order to degrade ISIL's financing capacity. The US carried out 14 airstrikes in eastern Syria, targeting ISIL's oil production, collection, storage and transportation infrastructure. A mix of US fighter and bomber aircraft struck ISIL oil collection equipment near Shadadi, including several petroleum, oil and lubricant tanks and a pump station; an ISIL military camp southwest of Ain Aissa; a modular oil refinery southeast of Deir ez-Zor; a crude oil collection point, crude oil collection equipment and a modular oil refinery east of Dhiban; a crude oil collection point northeast of Khusham; and a modular oil refinery east of Sharra.

In Iraq from 16 October, the coalition increased strikes in the vicinity of Bayji. The US first conducted airstrikes near Bayji on 14 and 15 October, targeting an ISIL building, a Humvee, a machine gun and an artillery piece with four airstrikes. From 16 to 19 October, the US, France, the UK and an unidentified partner nation carried out 10 strikes near Bayji, targeting mainly ISIL vehicles, fighting positions and facilities.

On 19 October, US C-130 transport aircraft conducted multiple airdrops in the vicinity of Kobane to resupply Kurdish forces defending the city against ISIL. The aircraft delivered weapons, ammunition and medical supplies that were provided by Kurdish authorities in Iraq. On the same day, the US confirmed that its forces had conducted more than 135 airstrikes against ISIL in Kobane and that there were indications that these strikes had 'slowed ISIL advances into the city, killed hundreds of their fighters and destroyed or damaged scores of pieces of ISIL combat equipment and fighting positions'. However, US Central Command noted that the security situation in Kobane 'remains fragile' and that the town 'could still fall'.¹⁹

Also on 18–19 October, the US struck and destroyed an earthen berm (or land bridge) southwest of Fallujah near the Fallujah Dam. The berm was built by ISIL to increase the flow of the Euphrates River into Abu Ghraib canals, which flooded civilian neighbourhoods in east Fallujah and forced the locals to evacuate. The berm also enabled ISIL to control downstream water supplies to surrounding areas. At the request of the Iraqi Government, US bomber aircraft destroyed the berm, which the US deemed a legitimate military target.²⁰

From 18 to 25 October in Syria, the US and its coalition partners continued to focus airstrikes around Kobane. On 18 and 19 October, the US, the UAE and Saudi Arabia conducted 11 airstrikes near Kobane, destroying 20 ISIL fighting positions, two ISIL-held buildings and five vehicles. From 19 to 25 October, the US carried out a further 27 strikes near Kobane using a mix of bomber, fighter and attack aircraft. The strikes targeted mainly ISIL units and fighting positions.

In Iraq during this period, coalition airstrikes focused on targets near Fallujah, Bayji and the Mosul Dam. From 18 to 25 October, the US and unidentified partner nations²¹ carried out 32 airstrikes near the Mosul Dam, targeting mainly ISIL fighting positions and staging locations; 19 airstrikes near Fallujah, targeting mainly ISIL units and vehicles as well as destroying an ISIL training facility and suppressing an ISIL attack (on 20–21 October); and 14 airstrikes near Bayji, targeting mainly ISIL units, fighting positions, buildings and an ISIL training camp as well as destroying four ISIL boats and damaging at least four others.

From 25 to 31 October, US airstrikes in Syria continued to focus on Kobane. Using a mix of fighter, bomber and attack aircraft, the US (without Arab coalition partners) carried out 35 airstrikes near the town, targeting mainly ISIL units, fighting positions, buildings and vehicles. In Iraq, most coalition airstrikes continued to target the areas near Fallujah, Bayji and the Mosul Dam, but with less intensity than in the previous week. The US and unidentified partner nations conducted 16 airstrikes near the Mosul Dam, targeting ISIL vehicles, units and buildings; 10 airstrikes near Fallujah, targeting mainly ISIL units; and four airstrikes near Bayji, targeting mainly ISIL units and vehicles.

From 31 October to 7 November, target and location trends largely continued, but the number of strikes decreased further. In Syria, the US and Arab coalition partners (absent from strikes since 18–19 October) conducted 24 airstrikes near Kobane, targeting mainly ISIL units and fighting positions as well as a dump truck used to construct fighting positions. In Iraq, US and unidentified partner nations carried out relatively small numbers of strikes on various locations near the Mosul Dam (2 airstrikes), al-Qaim (4), Bayji (7), Fallujah (8), Sinjar (2) and Ramadi (5). These strikes targeted mainly ISIL units and vehicles, as well as destroying seven bulldozers and a dump truck involved in creating obstructions and berms near Fallujah. On 2 November, Canada launched its first airstrikes in Iraq, involving two CF-188 fighter aircraft dropping GBU-12 500-pound laser-guided bombs near Fallujah.²²

On the night of 5 November, the US carried out its second wave of strikes on the Khorasan Group. In the vicinity of Sarmada, a town about 50 kilometres west of Aleppo, a mix of US bomber, fighter and remotely piloted aircraft struck five Khorasan Group targets, including individuals and several vehicles and buildings assessed to be meeting and staging areas, IED-making facilities and training facilities. US Central Command noted that the group was ‘plotting to attack in Europe or the homeland’.²³

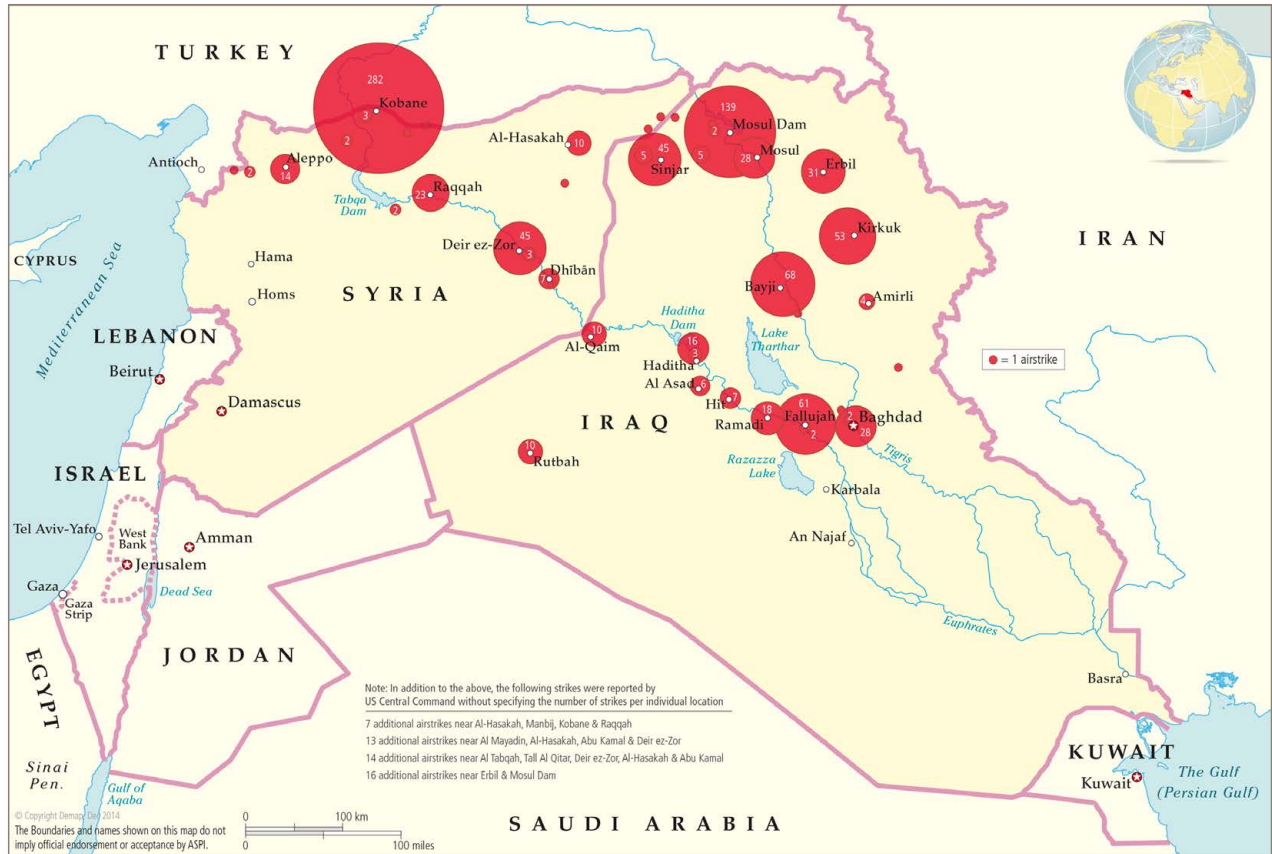
From 7 to 14 November, coalition airstrikes increased markedly from the previous week. The US and Arab coalition nations again targeted ISIL oil collection equipment and infrastructure in Syria. Sixteen coalition airstrikes hit ISIL-controlled oil collection facilities near Deir ez-Zor (14 airstrikes) and al-Hasakah (two airstrikes). Also in Syria in this period, the US and unidentified Arab coalition nations again increased airstrikes on Kobane, carrying out 40 strikes near the town and targeting mainly ISIL units and fighting positions. From 12 to 14 November, the US conducted a further strike on the Khorasan Group in northwest Syria west of Aleppo, targeting people associated with the network.

In Iraq during this period, the US and its coalition partners increased strikes near Kirkuk and continued regular strikes near Bayji. From 7 to 14 November, the US and unidentified partner nations launched 10 airstrikes near Kirkuk, targeting mainly ISIL units as well as a weapons bunker. Near Bayji, the US and unidentified partner nations carried out 15 airstrikes, targeting mainly ISIL units and vehicles as well as destroying two sniper positions.

From 14 to 24 November in Iraq, coalition airstrikes continued to focus on Kirkuk. The US and unidentified partner nations conducted 21 airstrikes in the vicinity of the town, targeting mainly ISIL staging areas and fighting positions and destroying five bunkers and a tunnel. Regular coalition airstrikes continued near Bayji (14 airstrikes), targeting mainly ISIL units and fighting positions. The US and unidentified partner nations also launched 18 airstrikes near Mosul, targeting mainly ISIL units and vehicles, and four near Sinjar that destroyed two barracks, a bunker, a storage facility, a guard post, two ISIL units, at least eight armoured vehicles and a truck in a vehicle storage yard. A mix of US and partner-nation fighter, attack, bomber and remotely piloted aircraft also damaged an ISIL-occupied airfield in a strike in Tal Afar.

In Syria from 14 to 24 November, the US and Arab coalition nations continued to focus on Kobane, carrying out 27 airstrikes near the town and targeting mainly ISIL units, fighting positions and staging areas. The coalition again targeted ISIL oil collection equipment and infrastructure in Syria. From 14 to 21 November, three airstrikes launched by the US and Arab coalition nations hit ISIL-controlled oil collection facilities near Deir ez-Zor (two airstrikes) and al-Hasakah (one airstrike). From 17 to 19 November, the US conducted another strike on the Khorasan Group in northwest Syria near Haram, destroying a storage facility associated with the network.

Figure 6: The first 100 days—coalition airstrikes in Iraq and Syria



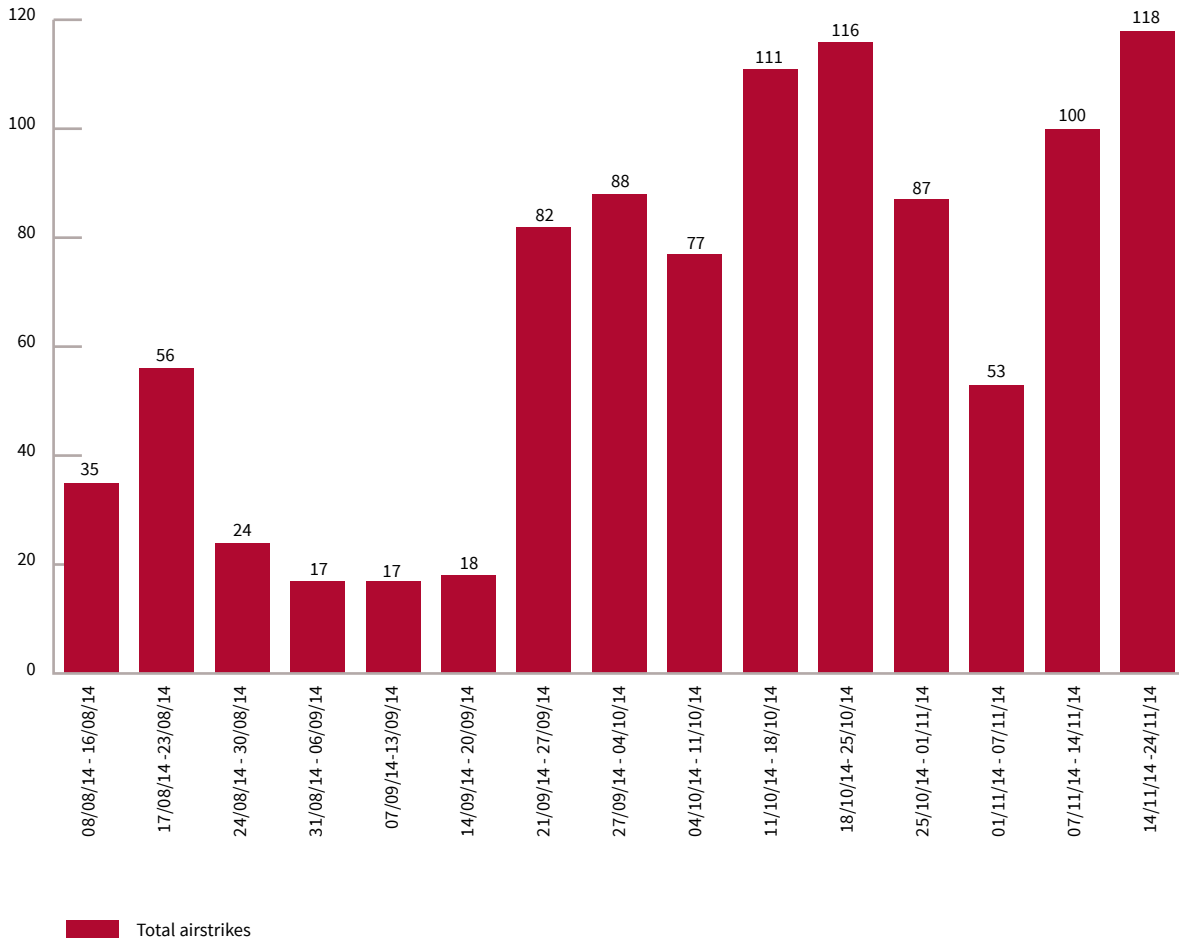
Based on data sourced from US Central Command news releases, 8 August to 24 November 2014, [online](#).

On our count, in just over 100 days from the first US airstrikes near Erbil to the time of writing (8 August to 24 November), the US-led coalition launched 999 airstrikes in Iraq and Syria. Of those 999, 435 struck in Syria and 564 in Iraq (see Figure 6 above and also Appendix 2 to this report).

In total, coalition airstrikes targeted 597 ISIL vehicles; 428 ISIL units, fighting positions and mortar positions; 332 ISIL buildings, structures and facilities (including checkpoints, camps and training facilities); 48 ISIL armaments components (including weapons caches, ammunition stockpiles and artillery pieces); and 40 ISIL oil refineries, collection points and stores (see also Appendix 2 to this report).

With some ebb and flow, the pattern of coalition airstrikes during the first 100 days has been relatively limited yet increasing in number (see Figure 7 below). Since the spike when strikes commenced in Syria, the coalition has launched an average of about 94 airstrikes per week (about 13 per day). Current indications suggest that coalition airstrikes will continue this trend, as the US continues to signal its intention to lead the anti-ISIL campaign ‘through a steady, relentless effort to take out ISIL wherever they exist, using our air power and our support for partner forces on the ground’.²⁴

Figure 7: The first 100 days—total weekly airstrikes



Based on data sourced from US Central Command news releases, 8 August to 24 November 2014, [online](#).

Notes

- 1 US President Barack Obama, statement, 7 August 2014, *The White House*, [online](#).
- 2 For US Central Command sources, see ASPI's airstrikes database at first100days.aspi.org.au.
- 3 US President Barack Obama, statement, 18 August 2014, *The White House*, [online](#).
- 4 See US Central Command, 'US military conducts airstrikes against ISIL, airdrops humanitarian aid near Amirli', news release, 30 August 2014, [online](#).
- 5 Abigail Hauslohner, Erin Cunningham, 'US airstrikes help Iraqi forces break Islamic State's siege', *Washington Post*, 31 August 2014, [online](#).
- 6 US President Barack Obama, *Statement by the President on ISIL*, 10 September 2014, *The White House*, [online](#).
- 7 Office of the French President, 'Iraq', media release, 19 September 2014, [online](#).
- 8 Martin Chulov, Kim Willsher, 'French planes carry out air strikes on Isis targets in Iraq', *The Guardian*, 20 September 2014, [online](#).
- 9 Jonathan Marcus, 'France launches first air strikes on IS in Iraq', *BBC*, 19 September 2014, [online](#).
- 10 Patrick J McDonnell, 'Oil-rich Kirkuk in Iraq's north fears attack by Islamic State', *Los Angeles Times*, 22 September 2014, [online](#).
- 11 See US Central Command, 'US military, partner nations conduct airstrikes against ISIL in Syria', news release, 23 September 2014, [online](#).
- 12 Julien Ponthus, Nicholas Vinocur, 'France says carried out air strikes in Iraq on Thursday', *Reuters*, 25 September 2014, [online](#).
- 13 Rebecca Collard, 'US air strikes target Islamic State fighters in Kobani', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 September 2014, [online](#).
- 14 UK Ministry of Defence, *RAF conducts first air strikes of Iraq mission*, 30 September 2014, [online](#).
- 15 Dan Lamothe, 'In launching helicopter airstrikes in Iraq, the US increases the risk to troops', *Washington Post*, 6 October 2014, [online](#); see US Central Command, 'US military, partner nations conduct airstrikes against ISIL in Syria and Iraq', news release, 6 October 2014, [online](#).
- 16 'Danish F-16s carry out first mission against Isis', *The Local*, 16 October 2014, [online](#).
- 17 Harleen Gambhir, 'ISIS risks losing Baiji City', *Institute for the Study of War Iraq Updates*, 14 November 2014, [online](#).
- 18 See US Central Command, 'US military conducts airstrikes against ISIL in Syria and Iraq', news release, 11 October 2014, [online](#).
- 19 See US Central Command, 'US military conducts aerial resupply of Kurdish forces fighting ISIL', news release, 11 October 2014, [online](#).
- 20 See US Central Command, 'US Military conducts aerial resupply of Kurdish forces fighting ISIL'.
- 21 From 20 October, US Central Command stopped reporting the participation of individual nations in coalition airstrikes, instead referring to 'partner nation forces' and referencing all coalition nations, including Australia, Belgium, Denmark, France, the Netherlands and the UK (and Canada from 3 November) operating in Iraq, and Bahrain, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates operating in Syria (note that Qatar isn't mentioned).
- 22 Government of Canada, *Statement by the Honourable Rob Nicholson, Minister for National Defence*, 2 November 2014, [online](#).
- 23 See US Central Command, 'US military forces conduct airstrikes against Khorasan Group terrorist network in Syria', news release, 6 November 2014, [online](#).
- 24 US President Barack Obama, *Statement by the President on ISIL*, *The White House*, 10 September 2014, [online](#).

CHAPTER 6

The cost of operations against ISIL

Mark Thomson

An official estimate of the cost of Australian operations against ISIL awaits the release of the government's mid-year budget update.¹ However, in mid-September, the Prime Minister provided a 'ballpark' figure of 'about a quarter of a billion [dollars] every six months', or around \$500 million a year.² On past experience, the final figure may be less; ADF operations in Iraq between 2002 to 2008 cost in the vicinity of \$400 million to \$600 million a year, yet involved a significantly larger contingent than is currently deployed.

In comparison, Australian operations in Afghanistan cost between \$1 billion and \$1.6 billion per year between 2006 and 2013. But our contribution to operations against ISIL is smaller and less logistically difficult than our deployment to Afghanistan. Indeed, the cost of operations in and around Iraq is moderated by access to established infrastructure and pre-existing supply lines.

Even if the cost does reach \$500 million a year, it will still only amount to less than 2% of Defence's annual \$29.3 billion budget. It remains to be seen how much of the additional cost will be absorbed from within Defence's base funding. By convention, the government usually (though not always) supplements Defence for the net additional cost of deployments.

From the perspective of the federal budget, half a billion dollars represents just 0.12% of annual outlays.³ More importantly, the current fiscal situation makes it unlikely that \$500 million will be the difference between surplus and deficit over the next few years.

As the leader of the anti-ISIL coalition, the US has been spending around US\$8 million per day on operations, which translates to US\$2.9 billion a year.⁴ However, in November the White House requested US\$5.6 billion to cover the cost of operations against ISIL in 2015—still less than 1% of the Pentagon's FY15 budget of US\$575 billion and only 8% of its US\$71 billion war funding component.⁵

The relatively low cost of operations against ISIL for both Australia and the US reflects the limited scale of the endeavour. It's a carefully targeted campaign with high reliance on air power to support Iraqi ground forces. If successful, the strategy will have been remarkably cost-effective.

Financial measures rarely capture the total cost of armed conflict. There's always an unavoidable opportunity cost in not having assets available for other contingencies. In the case of Australia's commitment, the eight-aircraft Air Task Group and 200-strong Special Operations Task Group are unavailable for other missions. However, in each case, the deployed elements are only a small fraction of their type in the ADF. It's very unlikely that a contingency will arise that would make their absence felt. Conversely, and more importantly, the ADF elements deployed in the international coalition against ISIL are gaining valuable experience far beyond what might otherwise be achieved in peacetime training.

More generally, the costs incurred by Australia are more than offset by the prospect of destroying the scourge of ISIL while, at the same time, strengthening our relationships with allies and partners.

Notes

- 1 Australian Government, *Budget 2014–15, Budget overview*, [online](#).
- 2 Daniel Hurst, ‘Tony Abbott: Military action against Isis will cost half a billion dollars a year’, *The Guardian*, 16 September 2014, [online](#).
- 3 Australian Government, *Budget 2014–15, Budget overview*, [online](#).
- 4 US Department of Defense, *Operation Inherent Resolve: targeted operations against ISIL terrorists*, [online](#).
- 5 John T Bennett, ‘Rep. McKeon calls Obama’s Islamic State operation “underfunded”’, *DefenseNews*, 7 November 2014, [online](#).

CHAPTER 7

The advise and assist mission: land forces on the ground

Ken Gleiman

The US has had combat advisers in Iraq since August 2014; however, Australian special operations forces joined Operation Inherent Resolve on the ground in mid-November. The initial 200-man Australian element joined a force of advisers from various countries that are part of the official coalition. They also find themselves dealing with the reality of other influences on the ground, the most notable being the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps Quds force.

While much of the media focus has been on airstrikes and air power, the land component advisory force has been busy setting the conditions for the current and future efforts of the Iraqi security forces to force ISIL out of Iraq and reassert control over Iraqi territory and its population. These 'advise and assist' efforts have been constrained by restrictions on activity and complicated by the armed politics of a fragile and broken Iraq. We're already seeing how some of these trends and tactical pressures are forcing operational and strategic decisions, including the recent addition of 1,500 more US troops and the request directly from President Obama to Prime Minister Tony Abbott for more Australian advisers.

One of the first things that an advisory force must do is make an assessment of the units that they will advise. Because the US and other coalition partners were already on the ground before the arrival of Australian special operations forces, much of the initial assessment of the Iraqi forces was already done. The Australian adviser force received reports providing it with the right information for planning and preparation. According to official ADF sources, the Australian advisers are working with the Iraqi Counter Terrorism Service. The service is an independent agency of the Iraqi Government that works directly for the prime minister. The Iraqi Special Operations Force (ISOF) is the primary operational arm of the service.

The ISOF is probably Iraq's most trusted and capable military unit. However, when Iraqi Army units disintegrated *en masse* earlier this year, the ISOF brigades held together and were forced to do much of the fighting. As a result, they've suffered a very high attrition rate and by some accounts are at 50% strength. Therefore, the Australian advisers face a severely weakened unit with a core cadre of capable and experienced fighters and a lot of inexperienced replacements. Much like business consultants hired by a once profitable corporation, Australian special operations forces have to establish trust and rapport with these experienced soldiers and officers. They'll need to focus on assisting the unit with its systems and processes. This will probably include advice and assistance on operations, but, more importantly, it will include efforts to sustain the organisation in the long run. Logistics, maintenance, personnel systems and the training of replacements are likely to demand the time and effort of the Australian advisers in the near term.

To accompany or not to accompany?

The current dataset on the airstrikes demonstrates that ISIL has been degraded and has adapted. In the first several weeks of airstrikes, coalition forces destroyed numerous tanks, armoured personnel carriers and other armed vehicles, often in convoys or groups of more than five. After several weeks, however, particularly around the beginning of October, the coalition began targeting more static positions, including suspected headquarters, checkpoints, fighting positions and key assets associated with energy infrastructure. This trend in targeting indicates both the effectiveness of the targeting and the probable adaptation of ISIL forces. As their higher end assets were destroyed, ISIL commanders recognised that convoys of multiple vehicles and high-signature armoured vehicles provided easy targets for coalition air power. They've clearly dispersed their forces and concealed any remaining armoured assets. ISIL still holds key terrain and will likely defend much of it, or return to guerrilla action and insurgent attacks after Iraqi security forces have seized territory. This change in tactics will make airstrikes less effective over time and increase the demand from Iraqi security forces leaders and their advisers for close air support directed by tactical air controllers embedded with ground units.

Such a shift will require a revision of current constraints, which only allow advisers to be physically present at battalion headquarters and above. To continue to take advantage of coalition air power in the subsequent phases of Operation Inherent Resolve, this minor change in tactics is appropriate and likely. There will be some domestic challenges to explain the intentional proximity of advisers to combat. The promises of 'no boots on the ground' and coalition soldiers not being involved in combat will have to be modified.

In addition to providing more effective air support, allowing advisers to accompany their Iraqi counterparts will help to moderate the influence of Iranian Quds force operatives and their increasingly powerful Shia militias. Quds force advisers have been accompanying their militia counterparts and lending direct combat advice and support during offensive operations for several months, even before coalition airstrikes began.

Western coalition advisers working with ISOF and Iraqi Army units will be able to boost the influence of official state organisations and counter the armed political influence of militias only if they can have the operational and tactical flexibility to accompany their counterparts and ensure their success on the battlefield. If the Iranian-advised militias are permitted to seize more territory, they'll probably extract a painful price from Sunni minority communities (several already have) and will have even more political capital in post-ISIL Iraq.¹ To ensure that Iraqi state institutions recover their credibility, the Iraqi Army needs to achieve tactical success and demonstrate that it can secure Sunni areas and incorporate Sunni tribal militias in a manner that will encourage more Sunnis to reject ISIL and work with the government.

A slightly heavier 'light' footprint

Immediately following the US mid-term congressional elections, the US administration authorised the deployment of an additional 1,500 combat advisers to Iraq. This increases the US footprint to around 3,000 soldiers. Part of President Obama's iterative strategy, this action probably resulted from an operational decision point that had two criteria. The first was a reduction in the targeting pay-off of airstrikes demonstrating that ISIL forces were being degraded or some similar indication of a halt to ISIL momentum (the data suggests in about October). The second criterion was a clear indication and commitment from the new government of Haider al-Abadi to work with and support Sunnis who turn against the ISIL forces. The administration probably made the decision in mid-October, but waited until after the mid-terms to make the announcement. This is clearly not a short-term effort, but represents a long-term commitment to the post-ISIL foreign internal defence campaign for Iraq, based on the 'light footprint' model.² The US administration is clearly rejecting large-scale assistance efforts executed over a hurried timeline, as were seen during Operation Iraqi Freedom and its sequel, Operation New Dawn. The new strategy will be characterised by limited advice and assistance over a long period, which will be contingent on political decisions.

These new forces will be responsible for training and advising 12 Iraqi brigades, some of which will reinforce and resecure Anbar, the Sunni-dominated province that makes up much of western Iraq. The US-led coalition currently

has no advisers in Anbar, and it would be unwise and perhaps unthinkable to allow Shia-dominated militias to enter the province. The US initially refused to send advisers to Iraqi security force elements in this ISIL stronghold until the Abadi government agreed to arm Sunni tribes who agree to fight ISIL. This has been the most understated quality of the Obama strategy, which was characterised by the withholding of support to influence Iraqi leaders to take steps that will set the conditions for a post-ISIL Iraq. That method first manifested itself when the Obama administration withheld US military support until Nouri Al-Maliki resigned and a new government was formed. In early November, Abadi's new Defence Minister, Khaled al-Obaidi, sacked 36 ineffectual officers from the ranks of the Iraqi Army, signalling reform and accountability. This announcement coincided with the US announcement of more advisers and a stepped-up assistance effort.³

At this time, one ISOF battalion remains in ISIL-controlled Ramadi, fighting to retain its foothold (Australian advisers may join them.) The coalition will soon initiate a program to arm Sunni groups willing to ally with the government. Arming Sunnis in Anbar will give them influence in the armed politics of Iraq, but could also backfire, setting conditions for further sectarian war and violence. Advisers will find themselves in the middle of these highly charged political situations and will have to work with the Iraqi state security forces to ensure that Sunnis are respected in post-ISIL Iraq and that Shia-dominated security force elements and militia pursue the government's objectives rather than sectarian ones.

The question of Syria

The civil war in Syria is an integral part of the strategic environment in Iraq. It's clear that the coalition has adopted an 'Iraq first' strategy, but it's equally clear the objective of destroying ISIL can't be completed without an appropriate branch plan for Syria. The current Syrian side of the campaign consists of a disturbingly weak and flawed economy-of-force effort. There appears to be growing recognition within the coalition that a Syrian sequel plan to the Iraq campaign requires better shaping efforts and a clear objective concerning the fate of Bashar al-Assad.

The US administration has adopted a timid 'train and equip' strategy rather than a comprehensive strategy that leverages unconventional warfare capability. Very few rebel groups are actually receiving any US support, and the most reliable of those recently surrendered to or were absorbed by al-Qaeda linked radical Islamists (the Al-Nusra Front).⁴ Unfortunately, the approach is proving to be inadequate and may actually be helping both ISIL and the Assad regime grow stronger within Syria. The failure to commit to a comprehensive strategy of unconventional warfare as early as 2012 has left the coalition in a very difficult position when it comes to setting conditions for a post-ISIL Syria because only three factions have a reasonable chance of reasserting state-like control of the country: ISIL, the Islamic Alliance (which includes al-Nusra) and the Assad regime.⁵

Rather than engaging directly with the sub-elements of the loose coalition of the Free Syrian Army, the US administration insisted on vetting the militia groups before providing any significant support or advisers. That process has proved too slow, inadequate, and methodologically flawed.⁶ Proxy forces don't need to be ideologically pure or even be free from accusations of human rights violations. They just need to be willing to fight Assad, willing to remain independent of ISIL and al-Nusra and willing to accept advice and support from the coalition. Would any US proxies from the Afghan Northern Alliance in 2001 have passed the vetting process?

The minimal support that the US did send wasn't simply not enough. Additionally, the US has decided to recruit, train and equip a new proxy force formed from scratch. If reports are correct, this force of 5,000 will be a pure US proxy force but won't even be available for more than a year.⁷ While this may increase the ability of US principals to control their proxy agents in Syria, the proxy forces will have little credibility with other elements of the anti-Assad resistance and the Syrian population is unlikely to take them seriously. The US administration has already said that these forces would not be trained to fight ISIL or Assad, but rather to hold territory already seized, which raises the question: seized by whom?

Although the non-ISIS / non-al-Qaeda rebel groups in Syria mightn't be the ideal examples of forces we'd like to support, those groups have formed naturally out of the real and desperate social conditions of a civil war. Their members are committed to their own survival, the destruction of Assad and the future security of Syria. Like most groups caught in the armed politics of a civil war, they had to make their own strategic decisions, taking into account their own survival and the prioritisation of their ultimate goal of defeating Assad. By not supporting these naturally emergent groups, the US administration has all but guaranteed that they'll fall to or be absorbed by the groups that have reliable sponsors and therefore the resources to ensure success. Al-Nusra, the Islamic Alliance and ISIL have plenty of state and non-state sponsorship and have therefore already absorbed several groups that were reasonably 'moderate', but could no longer afford to remain so.⁸ ISIL, al-Nusra and the Islamic Alliance have now joined forces and agreed to work together in a temporary tactical alliance.⁹ As David Killcullen recently pointed out, Assad was lying in 2012 when he claimed that all of the Syrian resistance elements were radical Islamic terrorists. In 2014, however, that statement is a lot closer to the truth.¹⁰

This situation may be irreversible, but the coalition should consider reversing its decision on the Syrian opposition if that's at all possible and embedding small special operations teams with what's left of the non-ISIL, non-al-Nusra Syrian opposition, especially in the south near Deraa. The only way to vet the remaining forces and then influence their political direction is to be there on the ground with them and to interact with them on a personal level. If there's any hope of splitting more moderate members of the Islamic Alliance away from al-Nusra, it must be done by demonstrating that remaining moderate groups like the Syrian Revolutionary Front have strength and credibility. If the situation's untenable, then advisory forces should be withdrawn.

Without an effective proxy within Syria, the coalition will soon have to articulate an unpalatable sequential strategy for the defeat of ISIL in Syria. To keep Iranian influence in check in Iraq, the coalition may need to negotiate an end to the Assad regime that allows Alawite leaders and regime associates to retain some influence in the future government of a post-ISIL Syria. Kurds, Alawites and Sunni factions will need to be convinced about a post-Assad, post-ISIL political order before any decisive military action can be connected to an acceptable post-conflict political objective. Without this, even achieving the general destruction of ISIL won't lead to a more secure political order.

Notes

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CHAPTER 8

ISIL and international terrorism

Tobias Feakin

Until the meteoric rise of ISIL, al-Qaeda and those inspired by its ideology had been deemed the most significant terrorist threat to Western states' security. Al-Qaeda's leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, disavowed Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's group from its ranks in the spring of 2014—after the group had previously been considered an al-Qaeda affiliate—for failing to follow his orders. Al-Zawahiri clearly saw the group as a liability to the al-Qaeda leadership and their cause. Yet, following the split, ISIL achieved substantial military and geographical gains, expanding its footprint in northern and eastern Syria and across large parts of northern Iraq to the outskirts of Baghdad. It achieved something that had eluded Bin Laden—the announcement of the establishment of a caliphate in June 2014—and demanded that Islamist extremist groups around the world swear loyalty to al-Baghdadi. While not achieving the immediate reaction that ISIL may have expected, this clearly lit a fire of inspiration under those toying with the idea of joining the group, as foreign recruitment surged in the wake of the call, and has arguably led to ISIL becoming the predominant global Islamist extremist group.

There's no doubt that the rapid rise of ISIL in Syria and especially Iraq caught the international community by surprise. The group had been monitored by governments in the region and the West and was considered to be a risk, but deemed not to be of strategic concern. However, the speed of its military success, which no Islamist extremist group had previously matched, meant that the international community was playing catch-up in its understanding of the evolving threat the group presented and what the appropriate responses might be.

Beyond the rotten domestic political situations in Syria and Iraq and the increased sectarianism permeating both nations, which ISIL fuelled and fed from, it's important to examine three core contributing factors to ISIL's growth as an organisation:

- ISIL's ability to recruit large numbers of international fighters to its cause
- its understanding of how to propagate a strong social media propaganda campaign to draw and sustain support for its cause
- its ability to generate large financial sums to build its armoury, pay fighters and support its interpretation of state building.

Recruitment of foreign fighters

Around 15,000 people from at least 80 nations have travelled to Syria and Iraq to join extremist groups. Of those, it's estimated that around 80% have joined ISIL, in which foreign fighters—including at least 2,000 Westerners—make up half the fighting ranks. Most of the foreign fighters come from Arab nations, such as Tunisia (3,000), Saudi Arabia (2,500), Jordan (2,089) and Morocco (1,500), but smaller contingents come from nations as far away as France (412),

Belgium (296), Indonesia (60) and Australia (150).¹ Those are the official numbers of those who are known about, but the real figures may well be much higher.

The conflict in Syria and Iraq has drawn in foreign fighters at a faster rate than any past Middle Eastern conflict, including the Afghan War of the 1980s or recent US operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. According to a report released by the UN in October, the speed at which people from outside Syria and Iraq are swarming into the territory is unprecedented: ‘numbers since 2010 are now many times the size of cumulative numbers of foreign terrorist fighters between 1990 and 2010—and are growing.’² Following ISIL’s declaration in June that it had established its Islamic Caliphate, recruitment of foreign fighters was said to have surged.

Propaganda via social media—online Jihad 3.0

Over the past 15 years, we’ve seen increasing moves towards higher and diversified levels of online activity by Islamist extremist groups and their target audience as a mechanism for recruitment and communications. There’s no more powerful example than the current media campaign by ISIL, which has largely outrun governments’ ability to keep up. Whether it’s ISIL’s well-oiled media machine, al-Hayat, or the social media feeding frenzy of its fighters and supporters, the group has reached a broader audience than al-Qaeda managed to in the past.

It’s possible to point to three key stages of development in the online activity of al-Qaeda, its affiliates and now ISIL. During the early to mid-2000s, the internet was a primary tool for planning operations and organising meetings between those involved in a network. A second evolution took place as it became a conduit for sermons and propaganda, and YouTube videos of jihadists in Iraq, Somalia, Yemen and Afghanistan became easily available. Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula was perceived as the long-term leader for the way it disseminated its material to a global online audience through its magazine, *Inspire*. Its charismatic figurehead, Anwar al-Awlaki, was famed for his English-language YouTube sermons, blog and Facebook page, which influenced various people to carry out acts of terrorism.

We’ve now reached a third stage in the evolution of modern jihadist propaganda, which a *New York Times* article has named ‘online Jihad 3.0’. ISIL members, who’ve grown up with the technology, are adept at using the entire range of disseminating tools at their disposal. JustPaste is used to publish summaries of battles that have taken place, SoundCloud to release audio reports of activities, WhatsApp and Kik Messenger to communicate and send images and videos, and Instagram, Facebook and Twitter to share images, propaganda and messages from the front lines. On Twitter, ISIL uses ‘twitter bombs’ to redirect trending hashtags to Twitter content and websites related to ISIL. The group also uses ‘twitter bots’ that repeatedly post the same content several times a day, along with popular hashtags such as #worldcup2014 to ensure that references to ISIL trend highly and that ISIL’s messages—designed to both intimidate and inspire—reach the broadest possible audience. One analyst, tracking mentions of ISIL on Twitter in February 2014, found that ISIL registered more than 10,000 mentions of its hashtag per day.³ There are even Q&A on Ask.FM sessions about joining the group, the logistics involved and what it’s like to be on the front lines. ISIL’s messages are tailored to its audiences and change depending on whether they’re intended for a local audience or Western would-be recruits. What ISIL has managed to do is to bring the battlefield, its gore, and those doing the fighting into the bedrooms of millions, in a way unparalleled in the past.

One thing’s for sure—ISIL’s rapid battlefield success, wealth and claims of a caliphate have been an intoxicating blend for those considering joining. A photo shared by pro-ISIL Twitter users shows three bullets, each with a different top: ‘A bullet. A pen. A thumb drive ... There is a different form of jihad’.⁴

Generating funds

Al-Qaeda depended mainly on funding from benefactors, beginning with Bin Laden himself and extending to a global network of sympathisers. Its affiliates have gained financially through similar means, along with kidnap for ransom, extortion and a range of other criminal activities. At its peak, al-Qaeda’s financial network was estimated

to be worth around US\$300 million.⁵ ISIL has managed to transform itself from a group that was largely reliant on wealthy Persian Gulf donors to one that's largely self-sustaining, with financial resources estimated to be as high as US\$2 billion, far outweighing al-Qaeda's financial muscle.⁶

US intelligence estimates that, at its peak, ISIL was earning more than US\$3 million per day from oil resources, looting, kidnapping, human trafficking, smuggling and the taxation of populations it occupies. Before the coalition airstrikes, ISIL had control of about 12 oilfields in Syria and Iraq estimated to have a potential production capacity of more than 150,000 barrels per day, which could then be smuggled across the borders and sold in the black markets of Syria, Turkey, the Kurdistan region of Iraq and, potentially, Iran.⁷

Following its battlefield successes and occupation of various cities, most notably Mosul, ISIL has looted banks, museums and businesses to extract currency and valuable antiquities, which are sold in regional black markets. Millions more are made from ransoms paid for kidnapped individuals, even though there's been a recent shift towards executing kidnapped journalists and workers from non-government organisations. The sale of women and children as slaves has added millions to ISIL's finances, and the taxation of populations in areas that the group controls is a rich source of funding, especially since refusal to pay results in death. It's estimated that ISIL benefited by \$8 million per month from this form of extortion in Mosul alone.⁸

Being so cash-rich means that ISIL can afford to acquire new weapons on the black markets, supplementing those it has taken from retreating Iraqi forces. It also means that the group can maintain large numbers of frontline fighters and make financial donations to the families of those who die while fighting for it. This financial autonomy means that targeting ISIL's financial resources is pivotal to reducing its capacity to fight and recruit, and should be an absolute priority in lowering its appeal and striking its strongholds in Syria and Iraq.

What international terrorist threat does ISIL present?

ISIL has devoted a great deal of effort to trying to build an 'Islamic State' and calling on Muslims from across the globe to join its ranks, assist in fighting to build that state and expand the borders of its self-styled 'caliphate'. However, no other major established jihadist groups have pledged full allegiance to the caliphate. Those that have supported it have been various splinter groups attempting to use the ISIL brand to gain additional support for their own organisations. Indeed, some groups have used ISIL's emergence to reaffirm their solidarity with al-Qaeda, illustrating that al-Qaeda isn't finished as part of the global terrorist threat.

Rather than having a strategy of directly targeting Western nations, as al-Qaeda does, ISIL has wanted to build a caliphate as the basis for strengthening its organisation, ideology and finances. Despite this apparently inward focus, there's no doubt that beyond its 'state building' phase ISIL presents a threat to Western nations, as al-Baghdadi's globalist ambitions have never been hidden. With the onset of coalition air strikes, ISIL has begun to sharpen its focus on Western nations, and attacks in Canada and Belgium and foiled plots in Australia, France and the UK (among other countries) demonstrate the growing internationalism of the group. Its chief spokesman, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, has increasingly called for attacks on the West, including to defeat both Washington and Rome.⁹

The number of foreign fighters being drawn into ISIL's ranks is of great concern. Many national governments are concerned about the repercussions of the return of battle-hardened fighters to their states of origin. This is a problem most of all for nations with weak domestic security forces, but which have contributed many fighters to ISIL (such as Tunisia, Morocco, Libya and Indonesia). The appeal of ISIL's ideology outweighs the popular appeal that al-Qaeda once had, and dealing with its ideology and recruits is stretching the policy mechanisms of many states.

However, ISIL hasn't sought to carry out large-scale attacks in Western nations, such as those launched by al-Qaeda's networked terrorist cells in the past. The former US Director of the National Counterterrorism Center, Matthew Olsen, stated that ISIL has no cells in the US, and that it 'is not al Qaeda pre-9/11'.¹⁰ However, degrading

its capability now, rather than waiting for it to grow and have the capacity to develop such networks, is a prudent approach.

ISIL has pushed for its supporters to carry out attacks using low-level weaponry in their own nations and filming those attacks to promote ISIL and draw more supporters to its cause. Networked cell-structured groups are more likely to be detected by counter-terrorism forces due to their need to communicate, potentially hold physical meetings, and move among a large number of people who might report suspicious behaviour. But an individual working alone is more difficult to detect and can be more unpredictable in their actions, creating considerable difficulties for government counterterrorism agencies, especially when those agencies aren't well developed.

It's likely that ISIL will continue to push for international attacks by its followers, especially as it comes under increasing pressure from airstrikes in Iraq and Syria, but the direct threat that the group poses to those nations closer to its centre of gravity is far greater. Nations such as Tunisia, Turkey, Libya, Morocco and Indonesia, significant numbers of whose citizens have been drawn to ISIL's ranks as fighters, must all be supported to cope with the spread of the ideology and the repercussions of fighters returning home.

Notes

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CHAPTER 9

US strategy in Iraq: a glass half full

Benjamin Schreer

Most initial assessments of the first three months of the US-led military operation in Iraq have criticised the limited use of air power and ‘boots on the ground’ against ISIL fighters. This strategy is seen as ineffective to ‘destroy’ ISIL and to restore political stability in Iraq. Instead, critics have called for the ‘decisive’ use of air power and increased ground forces. However, such criticism fails to recognise the bigger strategic picture behind the US approach to the conflict. It also doesn’t acknowledge that the military campaign is long-term, iterative and incentive-based, and is aimed to manage the threat by ISIL rather than defeat it. While the strategy certainly faces significant risks and challenges in the future, President Obama’s measured approach shouldn’t be dismissed lightly.

Iraq 2014 isn’t Iraq 2003

Critics might argue that the US President isn’t really invested in ‘winning’ the conflict in Iraq but is instead applying a minimalist use of force for purely domestic reasons. Having just achieved his goal of ending America’s costly military engagement in Iraq, he might want to leave the problem to his successor after he leaves office in late 2016. While this calculus might influence Obama’s decision-making, it’s likely that his Iraq strategy during the period in question has been influenced by a much more substantial domestic factor. After the experience of spending significant blood and treasure in Afghanistan and Iraq for limited returns, the American public increasingly supports a grand strategy of restraint when it comes to ‘wars of choice’. By and large, there’s bipartisan scepticism about a massive military re-engagement and nation-building in Iraq. This is also emblematic of the fact that, while ISIL constitutes a security problem, it’s not an existential threat to the US and most coalition partners (including Australia). That is, even if ISIL can’t be defeated permanently, it might be sufficient to ‘manage’ the threat.

Moreover, a key lesson learned from more than a decade of fighting ‘small wars’ in Iraq and Afghanistan is that long-term success depends ultimately on political conditions in the host country. Even a large military footprint and billions of dollars in civilian assistance didn’t generate lasting solutions. Iraq’s track record is very poor, indeed. One key factor of ISIL’s success has been the failure of the previous Iraqi regime to develop effective state structures. Indeed, in many ways it systematically undermined them.¹ Chances are low that repeating a costly and lengthy US-led intervention would be successful this time, given the complicated political and socioeconomic dynamics in Iraq, as well as the ambiguous role played by powerful neighbours such as Iran.

In combination, these factors have led the Obama administration to pursue a different Iraq strategy in 2014 compared to the 2003 war. On a grand strategic level, the US is sending a signal to the Middle East that this time it won’t fight ‘other people’s wars’. Instead, Washington will conduct a long-term, light-footprint campaign, focused on supporting those groups in Iraq that are willing to fight for their country and work towards a political solution.² That’s why the coalition has insisted on certain criteria being met before commencing military operations.

For instance, the air campaign was contingent on Prime Minister Maliki's resignation and the formation of a new government. As well, the deployment of an additional 1,500 military advisers to Anbar Province was dependent upon the agreement of the new Prime Minister, Haider al-Abadi, to incorporate the Sunni minority into the government and to arm Sunni tribes. It can be expected that further military operations will also be incentivised.

The military strategy has also been designed from the start to be iterative. Both Obama and the US military leadership have been careful in stating that air power alone is insufficient. Rather, in the first 'advise and assist', airstrikes have been a primary means and have arguably had some success in halting ISIL's momentum and preventing the fall of Baghdad. In particular, they've stopped the advance of ISIL fighters in many areas and forced them to adapt their tactics through dispersal and concealment. As the airstrike data in this report shows (see Appendix 2 to this report), coalition warplanes have increasingly run out of targets.

Consequently, Obama announced a 'new phase' of the military campaign, using air power and indigenous ground troops to 'start pushing [ISIL] back'. And, as of late November, there were encouraging signs that the Iraqi Army, supported by Shia militias and coalition air power, had been successful in doing so in some instances (recapturing the key oil refinery in Baiji was one example). Allied air attacks in Syria have also made it more difficult for ISIL to sustain operations in Iraq. It's fair to conclude that the air campaign—in combination with some ground operations conducted by mostly indigenous forces—has put ISIL on the defensive.

Can it work?

It's too early to tell. Admittedly, the strategy carries significant risks. The second phase ('building partner capacity') will be much more protracted and risky, and the outcome is more uncertain. It requires the coalition to provide more training and mission assistance to local forces on the ground (thereby increasing the risks), to strengthen its human intelligence capacity and to conduct close air support. It also depends on the ability to rapidly build up a sizeable and combat-capable indigenous force able to operate with diverse groups, including Iranian special forces. It remains to be seen whether indigenous Iraqi forces will be able to start 'rolling back' ISIL forces across the country as planned by next year.

The third phase (sustained 'security sector reform' in Iraq) will be even more challenging, particularly since it's not clear yet what the political end-state would look like. Will the political actors in Iraq be able to reconcile their differences and launch a joint approach against ISIL? What's an acceptable role of Iran in the future of Iraq?

And the coalition has to make some very tough choices on Syria, since the conflicts are interconnected. Particularly, the future of Syrian President Assad is a conundrum, given that many Arab countries want to see him removed while powerful players, such as Iran and Russia, remain loyal to him. As a result, the Obama administration has reinforced its efforts to find a Syria strategy to deal with the ISIL problem.³

Therefore, the military campaign is still in search of a viable political endgame in both Iraq and Syria. In the long term, this problem might render the coalition's efforts rather futile. Nevertheless, at this point it's difficult to perceive a politically acceptable alternative strategy.

From an Australian perspective, it's important to keep the overall US approach to the campaign in mind. This isn't an application of the Weinberger/Powell doctrine of using overwhelming force to determine the outcome on the ground. Rather, in a break with past US practice, it's a case of 'nudging the conflict in the right direction'.⁴ After all, this approach also provides opportunities to improve the US's troubled relationship with Iran. It also entails relatively low risks for coalition forces and costs only a fraction of the price of previous wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. It's therefore prudent to assume that the US is willing and able to sustain this approach for quite some time.

But what if the strategy proves unworkable regardless? While US commanders have indicated that under such conditions they would reassess the approach to the war in Iraq and Syria, Washington is likely to be very careful to avoid another 'mission creep' à la Vietnam. Instead, the light-footprint approach would allow the coalition to withdraw from the theatre relatively quickly. There might well be a scenario in which the US decides to leave Iraq and Syria to their own devices and to focus on much bigger geostrategic challenges in other parts of the world.

Notes

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APPENDIX 1

Airstrikes database methodology

ASPI's airstrikes database is available at first100days.aspi.org.au.

Data sources

The primary source of data for this study's airstrikes database is US Central Command (CENTCOM) news releases. Other sources include CENTCOM's YouTube channel and other US Government websites. Only open-source information has been consulted.

To prevent the duplication of CENTCOM information, other coalition country briefings were not included in the airstrikes database. For that reason, if a coalition partner has carried out airstrikes not reported by CENTCOM, those airstrikes are not captured here.

So far as we can tell, this database is the most accurate open-source collation of information on coalition airstrikes in Iraq and Syria to date. The methodology we have used ensures no inadvertent duplication of information.

Data collation

Total airstrikes

The primary unit of observation for this database is defined as a *strike*: a kinetic action launched against a single target or specified group of targets. This unit of observation doesn't include the type of ordnance used or the number of sorties flown in a single strike. Those are variables within the single unit of observation.

Furthermore, the total number of strikes in this report may not be an exhaustive count of current strike activity.

Total strikes per location also vary based on CENTCOM reporting (see 'Location' below).

Location

The locations of almost all strikes have been identified based on CENTCOM news releases. The latitude and longitude of the locations is based on geographical coordinates supplied by Google Maps, Mapcarta and Geographic.org. The locations of strikes are reported by CENTCOM as in, near or in relation to specific towns or geographical features, so the coordinates used are not specific to exact locations of strikes or targets. Therefore, the latitude and longitude used may give a false degree of accuracy and specificity in relation to the true strike location.

Where precise strike locations are not provided by CENTCOM, coordinates were based on geographical vicinity of CENTCOM reporting. For example, CENTCOM news release #20140937 reported strikes in northwest Iraq. In this instance Sinjar is used as a point of reference for mapping purposes.

Furthermore, some CENTCOM news releases didn't account for the number of strikes per location, but instead listed the total number of strikes for multiple locations (for example, strikes reported in CENTCOM news release #20140818 on 16 August 2014). In those instances, a minimum and a maximum number of strikes were given to each location and the maximum count was listed as less than or equal to (\leq) the maximum strikes possible on any given location, based on the total strike locations.

Strike times

Times of strikes are included where available and are given in 24-hour format. Data over 12- (overnight), 24-, 48- and 72-hour periods are listed based on CENTCOM reporting periods. Times are listed as NA (not available) where strike times were unreported. All times reported are displayed in Arab Standard Time (AST, UTC+3).

Coalition countries

When reported by CENTCOM, international coalition countries taking part in strikes have been listed. When countries have not been specified (for example, for strikes listed in CENTCOM news release #20141107), coalition countries are listed as *US & Undetermined Partner Nation/s*.

The coalition nations conducting airstrikes in Iraq are the US, Australia, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, the Netherlands and the UK. Coalition nations conducting airstrikes in Syria include the US, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Jordan, Qatar and Bahrain.

Platform

The platforms used to conduct strikes are listed based on CENTCOM news releases. They include a mix of US and partner nation attack, bomber, fighter and remotely piloted aircraft (and rotary wing aircraft and Tomahawk land-attack missiles, each on one occasion). The aircraft type is listed where available. The type of ordnance used was not reported by CENTCOM and is not listed.

Strike effects and outcomes

Effect classifications

Assessments of the effects of airstrikes are given as *suppressed*, *struck*, *damaged*, *severely damaged* or *destroyed*, based on initial reports. These classifications reflect those made in CENTCOM news releases.

Unclear data

Targets are also divided into minimums and maximums, with the maximums showing NA where the total number of units is unclear or hasn't been provided.

Minimums are shown in the dataset to be greater than a particular number (e.g. >2) where outcomes reported were unclear. For example, assessments by CENTCOM news release #20141107 of airstrikes conducted southeast of Deir ez-Zor between 7 and 10 November 2014 reported damage to *several* structures of an ISIL oil collection facility. In this case, the minimum damage is shown to be greater than two (>2) and two is used as the basis for analysis.

Target classifications

Command and observation posts

For the purposes of data entry, *Command Posts* are presumed to be ISIL structures, while *Observation Posts* are presumed to be mobile ISIL fighters. Note that *Observation Posts* haven't been included in *Total Reported Killed* but have instead been accounted for alongside *ISIL Mortar Positions*, *Fighting Positions and Units* in the dataset.

Units

Units are classified into *small*, *large* and *tactical* variants in tables but are represented only as units in primary datasets.

Total reported killed

CENTCOM news releases don't specify total numbers of fighters killed in strikes. Total fighters killed have been included into the research data only where ISIL casualties have been reported by CENTCOM. Due to vague reporting on total casualties (such as in CENTCOM news release #20140925 on 23 September 2014), numbers listed in the data are based on total minimums and are shown in the dataset to be greater than two (>2).

Other

Other includes strikes made on Khorasan Group targets and a stray resupply bundle from a US airdrop of Kurdish supplies made on 19–20 October 2014. Khorasan Group targets have not been included in strike effect and outcome graphs or tables unless otherwise mentioned.

APPENDIX 2

Airstrikes data

Table 3: Coalition airstrikes by location

Location	Total strikes
Ain Aissa, Syria	1
al-Asad, Iraq	6
al-Hasakah, Syria	10
al-Mayadin, Syria	1
al-Qa'im, Iraq	10
Aleppo, Syria	14
al-Malikiyah District, Syria	1
Amirli, Iraq	4
Ar Raqqah/ Raqqah, Syria	23
Ar Rutbah/ Rutba, Iraq	10
Aynzalah, Iraq	1
Baghdad, Iraq	28
Bayji/ Baiji, Iraq	68
Dayr az Zawr/Deir ez-Zor, Syria	45
Dhībān, Syria	7
Erbil/ Irbil, Iraq	31
Fallujah Dam, Iraq	2
Fallujah, Iraq	61
Haditha Dam, Iraq	16
Haditha, Iraq	3
Haram/ Harem, Syria	1
Hayy al-Arabi, Iraq	1
Hit, Iraq	7
Khusham, Syria	3
Kirkuk, Iraq	53
Kobani/ Kobane, Ayn al-Arab, Syria	282
Manbij, Syria	2

Location	Total strikes
Mazra al-Duwud, Syria	3
Mosul Dam, Iraq	139
Mosul, Iraq	28
Qurayat al-Hajjaj (Al Kuray 'at), Iraq	2
Rabiyah/ Rabiaa/ Rabia, Iraq	2
Ramadi, Iraq	18
Sarmada, Syria	2
Shadadi, Syria	1
Sharra, Syria	1
Sinjar Mountain, Iraq	5
Sinjar, Iraq	45
Tabqah/ Tabqa Airfield, Syria	2
Taji, Iraq	1
Tall Abyad, Syria	1
Tall Afar/ Tel Afar/ Tal Afar, Iraq	5
Tikrit, Iraq	1
Zumar, Iraq	2
Combined strikes	
al-Hasakah, Manbij, Kobani/ Kobane and Ar Raqqa/ Raqqa (Syria)	7
al-Mayadin, al-Hasakah, Abu Kamal and Dayr az Zawr/ Deir ez-Zor (Syria)	13
al-Tabqah/ Tabqah, Tall al-Qitar, Dayr az Zawr/ Deir ez-Zor, al-Hasakah and Abu Kamal (Syria)	14
Erbil/ Irbil and Mosul Dam (Iraq)	16
Total at 24 November 2014	999

Based on data sourced from US Central Command news releases, 8 August to 24 November 2014, [online](#).

Table 4: Coalition airstrikes by target type

Target type	Total suppressed, struck, damaged, severely damaged or destroyed
ISIL vehicles	
Armed trucks / trucks (non-descript)	34
Armed vehicles*	166
Armoured Personnel Carriers (APC)	17
Armoured vehicles	17
Boats on Euphrates River	12
Construction vehicles (non-descript)	1
Convoys	2
Convoy vehicles	17
Dump trucks	2
Front-loaders	3
Excavators	4
Humvees / High-mobility multipurpose wheeled vehicles (HMMWVs)	62

Target type	Total suppressed, struck, damaged, severely damaged or destroyed
ISIL bulldozers	11
Light armoured vehicles	1
Mine-resistant ambush-protected (MRAP) vehicles	2
Motorcycles	1
Support vehicles	3
Supply trucks	4
Tanks	34
Transport vehicles (including anti-aircraft artillery transport vehicles)	7
Vehicles (non-descript)*	197
Total at 24 November 2014	597
ISIL camps and training facilities	
Military camp	1
Training camps	8
Training compounds*	2
Training facilities	3
Total at 24 November 2014	14
ISIL weaponry	
Ammunition caches / stockpiles*	2
Anti-aircraft artillery pieces	4
Artillery pieces	15
IEDs	1
ISIL heavy weapons (non-descript)	2
Machine guns (including heavy machine guns)	5
Mobile artillery	1
Mortar placements	2
Mortar tubes	2
Mounted machine guns	1
Rocket launchers	2
Vehicles mounted with / carrying anti-aircraft artillery guns*	8
Weapons cache / stockpile*	3
Total at 24 November 2014	48
ISIL oil refineries, collection points and stores	
Generator used for oil production	1
ISIL-controlled modular oil refineries	23
ISIL-controlled oil collection points	6
Oil collection equipment, holding tanks (including petroleum, oil and lubricant tanks) and pump stations*	6
Oil collection facilities and structures*	4
Total at 24 November 2014	40

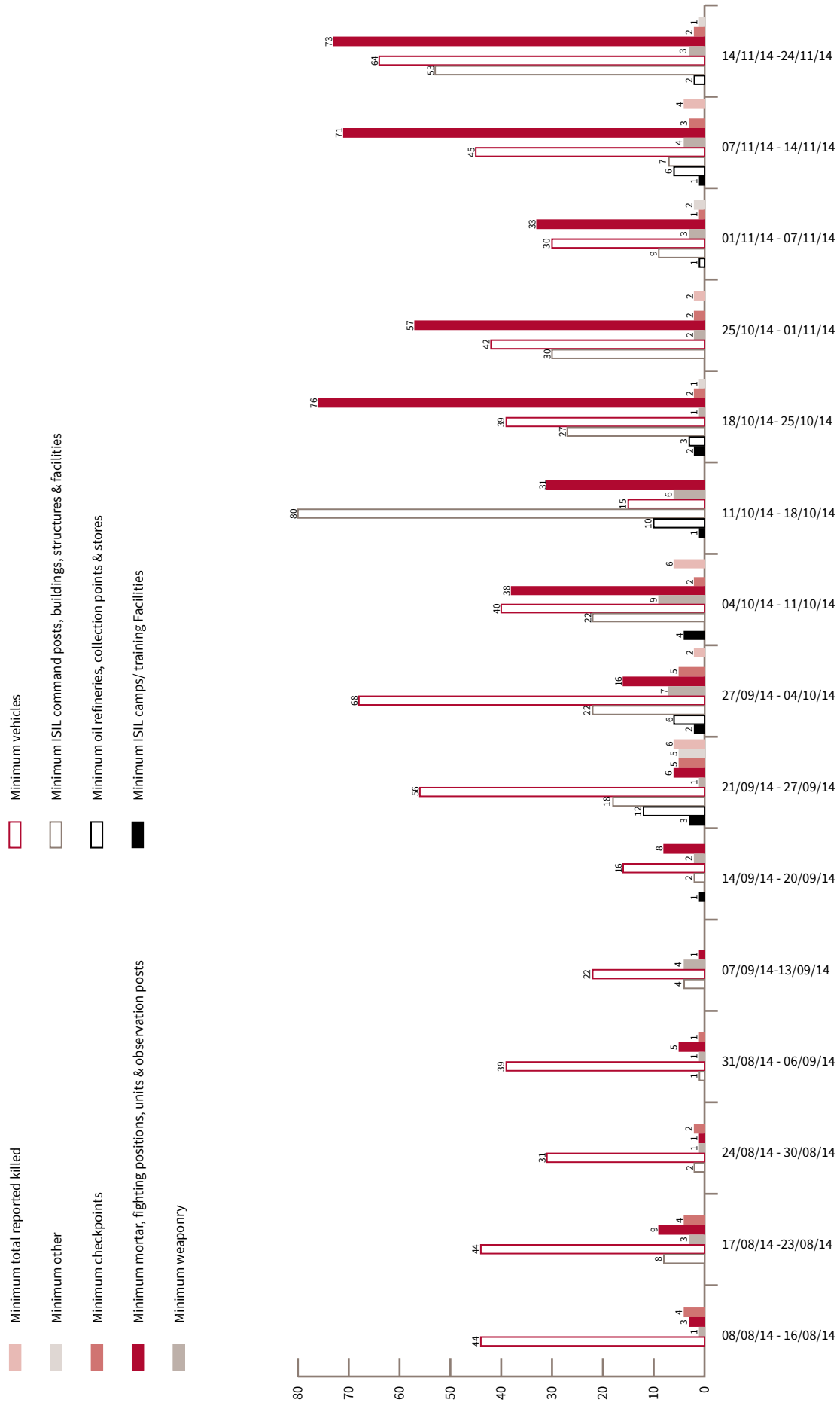
Target type	Total suppressed, struck, damaged, severely damaged or destroyed
ISIL buildings, structures and facilities	
Airfields (including Tabqah Airfield and other ISIL held airfields)	4
Air observation buildings	1
Armoured vehicle compounds	1
Barracks	3
Buildings held (non-descript)*	98
Bunkers	16
Command and control facilities	6
Command posts	3
Compounds (non-descript)*	6
Depots and logistics buildings / complexes	4
Emplacements (including IED emplacements, fighting emplacements, machine gun emplacements and emplacement belts)	10
Garrisons	3
Guard towers / posts / shacks	10
Headquarters	4
ISIL facilities (non-descript)*	4
ISIL finance centres	1
ISIL safe houses	1
ISIL-built earthen berm	1
ISIL occupied buildings (non-descript)	54
ISIL tunnels	1
Obstructions	1
Production facilities	1
Staging areas / building / facilities (e.g. armoured vehicle staging facility)	42
Security building	1
Storage areas / buildings (e.g. occupied building used for ammunition stockpile)	1
Storage facilities (e.g. artillery storage facility)	4
Support buildings	1
Vehicle shelters	2
Weapons factories (e.g. IED factory)	1
Total at 24 November 2014	285
ISIL mortar positions, fighting positions and units	
Artillery positions	3
Command and control nodes	3
Fighting positions*	173
Firing positions	6
Machine gun firing positions (including heavy machine gun firing positions)	2
Large ground units	30
Mortar positions	16
Mortar teams	2

Target type	Total suppressed, struck, damaged, severely damaged or destroyed
Observation posts	3
Small ground units*	127
Sniper positions	5
Suppressed attacks	1
Tactical units	40
Units (non-descript)	17
Total at 24 November 2014	428
Checkpoints	
Checkpoints	33
Total at 24 November 2014	33
Reported killed and other	
Reported killed—ISIL fighters*	20
Other—Khorasan Group targets / stray resupply bundles*	9
Total at 24 November 2014	29

*Includes figures that are 'greater than or equal to' (\geq) and 'greater than' ($>$) e.g. ≥ 5 is counted as 5.

Based on data sourced from US Central Command news releases, 8 August to 24 November 2014, [online](#).

Figure 8: Coalition airstrikes by target type—week by week



Based on data sourced from US Central Command news releases, 8 August to 24 November 2014, online.

APPENDIX 3

Coalition capability contributions

US—Operation Inherent Resolve¹

- US Air Force assets in the region under US Air Forces Central Command (AFCENT):
 - Approximately 90 fighter, bomber or other strike aircraft, including
 - » A-10 fighter aircraft
 - » F-15E Strike Eagle fighter aircraft
 - » F-16 Fighting Falcon fighter aircraft
 - » F-22 Raptor fighter aircraft
 - » B-1 Lancer bomber aircraft
 - » MQ-9 Reaper attack and reconnaissance remotely piloted aircraft
 - Approximately 190 other aircraft supporting intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, command-and-control, tanker or airlift missions, including
 - » E-3 surveillance aircraft
 - » E-8 surveillance aircraft
 - » RC-135 surveillance aircraft
 - » C-17 Globemaster III transport aircraft
 - » C-130 Hercules transport aircraft
 - » KC-10 transport and aerial refuelling aircraft
 - » KC-135 aerial refuelling aircraft
 - » RQ-4 Global Hawk surveillance remotely piloted aircraft
 - » MQ-1 Predator reconnaissance remotely piloted aircraft
- Aircraft taking part in the campaign from the USS *Carl Vinson* carrier strike group (approximate numbers):²
 - » 12 x F/A-18E Super Hornet fighter aircraft
 - » 12 x F/A-18F Super Hornet fighter aircraft
 - » 20 x F/A-18C/D Hornet fighter aircraft
 - » 5 EA-18G Growler electronic warfare aircraft
 - » 5 x EA-6B Prowler electronic warfare aircraft
 - » 4 x E-2C Hawkeye all-weather airborne early-warning aircraft
 - » 2 x C-2A Greyhound logistics aircraft

- » 8 x MH-60S Seahawk helicopters
 - » 10 x MH-60R Seahawk helicopters
- Other surface vessels deployed with the USS *Carl Vinson*:
 - » Guided-missile cruiser USS *Bunker Hill*
 - » Guided-missile destroyer USS *Gridley*
 - » Guided-missile destroyer USS *Sterett*
 - » Guided-missile destroyer USS *Dewey*
- The Makin Island Amphibious Ready Group and the embarked 11th Marine Expeditionary Unit (approximate numbers):³
 - » Amphibious assault ship USS *Makin Island*
 - » Amphibious transport dock ship USS *San Diego*
 - » Dock landing ship USS *Comstock*
 - » More than 2000 marines
 - » 12 x MV-22B Osprey tilt-rotor aircraft
 - » 8 x AV-8B Harrier attack aircraft
 - » 4 x CH-53E Super Stallion heavy-lift helicopters
 - » 4 x AH-1W Super Cobra attack helicopters
 - » 3 x UH-1Y Venom utility helicopters
- (Unconfirmed) AH-64D Apache attack helicopters (operating from Baghdad)⁴ equipped with AGM-114 Hellfire missiles

Australia—Operation Okra⁵

- 6 x F/A-18F Super Hornet fighter aircraft, equipped with 500-pound laser- and GPS-guided bombs
- 1 x E-7A Wedgetail airborne early warning and control aircraft
- 1 x KC-30A multi-role tanker transport aircraft

Bahrain⁶

- 2 x F-16 Fighting Falcon fighter aircraft

Belgium—Operation Desert Falcon⁷

- 6 x F-16 fighter aircraft
- 1 x C-130 Hercules transport aircraft

Canada—Operation Impact⁸

- 6 x CF-188 Hornet fighter aircraft
- 1 x CC-150T Polaris aerial refueller aircraft
- 2 x CP-140M Aurora surveillance aircraft
- 1 x CC-130J Hercules transport aircraft
- 1 x CC-177 Globemaster III strategic airlifter

Denmark—Operation Inherent Resolve⁹

- 7 x F-16 fighter aircraft
- 1 x C-130J transport aircraft

France—Opération Chammal¹⁰

- 9 x Rafale fighter aircraft, equipped with:
 - GBU-12 Paveway II laser-guided air-to-ground bombs
 - Armement Air-Sol Modulaire (Air-to-Ground Modular Weapon) precision-guided munitions
- 6 x Mirage fighter aircraft
- 1 x Airbus A400M Atlas transport aircraft
- 1 x C-135F tanker aircraft
- 1 x E-3F airborne early warning and control aircraft
- 1 x Atlantique 2 long-range maritime patrol aircraft
- On 28 October, the anti-aircraft frigate *Jean Bart* joined the US Fifth Fleet deployed in the Persian Gulf, under the command of the US admiral commanding the USS *Carl Vinson* carrier strike group.

Iraq¹¹

- 3 x Cessna AC-208B Combat Caravan attack aircraft
- 2 x SB7L-360 Seeker surveillance aircraft
- 5 x Beech 350ER King Air surveillance aircraft
- 3 x C-130E Hercules transport aircraft
- 6 x C-130J-30 Hercules transport aircraft
- 6 x Antonov An-32B Cline transport aircraft
- 8 x Cessna 208B Grand Caravan light transport aircraft
- 8 x Cessna 172 light transport aircraft
- 1 x Beech 350 King Air light transport aircraft
- 26 x Mi-17 Hip H multi-role helicopters
- Approximately 4 x SA342 Gazelle multi-role helicopters
- 10 x OH-58C Kiowa reconnaissance helicopters
- 8 x Mi-171Sh transport helicopters
- 16 x Bell 205 (UH-1H Huey II) light transport helicopters
- 10 x Bell 206B3 Jet Ranger light transport helicopters
- 24 x Bell T407 light transport helicopters
- 5 x Sukhoi Su-25 fighter aircraft (delivered by Russia on 28 June 2014; a further 7 are to be delivered)¹²
- 3 x Sukhoi Su-25 fighter aircraft (delivered by Iran in July 2014)¹³
- 23 x Mi-28 Havoc attack helicopters (delivered by Russia in September 2013 and January 2014)¹⁴
- Purchasing 36 x F-16 fighter aircraft and 24 x Apache attack helicopters from the US (delivery expected to begin in early 2015)¹⁵

Italy¹⁶

- 4 x Tornado aircraft (for reconnaissance missions in Iraq only)
- 1 x KC-767A air-to-air refuelling tanker aircraft
- 2 x (unarmed) Predator remotely piloted aircraft
- 1 x C-130J transport aircraft

Jordan¹⁷

- Up to 6 x F-16 fighter aircraft

Netherlands¹⁸

- 8 x F-16 fighter aircraft

Qatar¹⁹

- 2 x Mirage fighter aircraft

Saudi Arabia²⁰

- 4 x F-15S Eagle fighter aircraft

Singapore²¹

- 1 x KC-135R aerial refuelling aircraft

United Arab Emirates²²

- 4 x F-16 fighter aircraft

United Kingdom—Operation Shader²³

- 8 x Tornado GR4 strike aircraft, equipped with:
 - Brimstone air-to-ground attack missiles
 - 500-pound Paveway IV laser- and GPS-guided bombs
 - Storm Shadow air-launched cruise missiles
- MQ-9 Reaper remotely piloted aircraft, equipped with AGM-114 Hellfire missiles
 - authorised to fly surveillance missions over Iraq and Syria
 - authorised to conduct strikes in Iraq; not authorised to use weapons in Syria
- RC-135W Rivet Joint reconnaissance aircraft
 - authorised to fly surveillance missions over Iraq and Syria
- 1 x Airbus A330 multi-role tanker transport Voyager aircraft
- 2 x C-130 transport aircraft
- 4 x CH-47 Chinook heavy-lift helicopters
- On 3 October, HMS *Defender* was assigned to protect the US carrier launching aircraft into Iraq and Syria.

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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ADF	Australian Defence Force
AQI	Al-Qaeda in Iraq
CENTCOM	US Central Command
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
IED	improvised explosive device
ISI	Islamic State of Iraq
ISIL	Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant
ISOF	Iraqi Special Operations Force
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
RAAF	Royal Australian Air Force
RAF	Royal Air Force
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
US	United States of America

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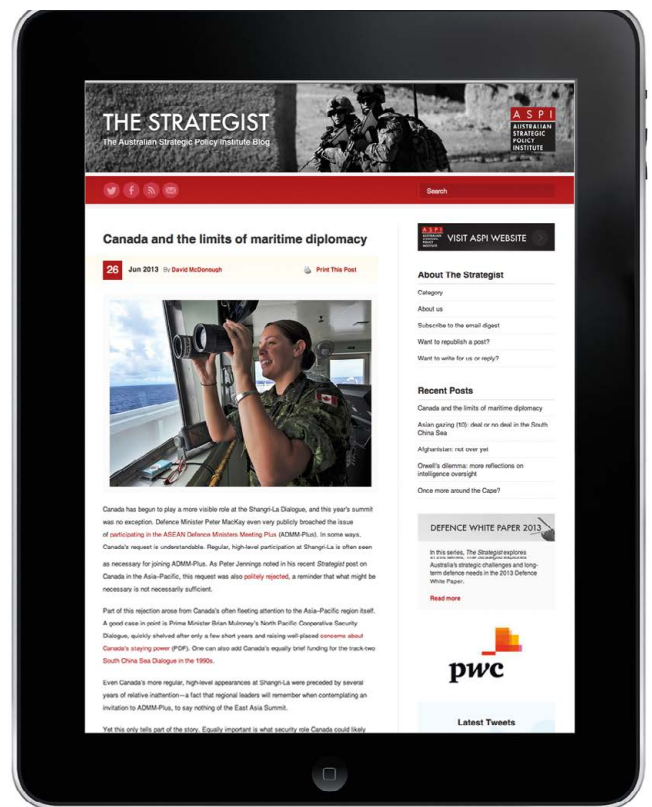
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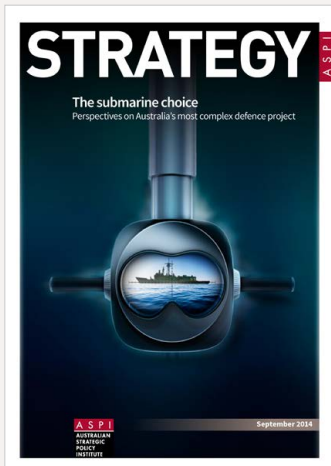
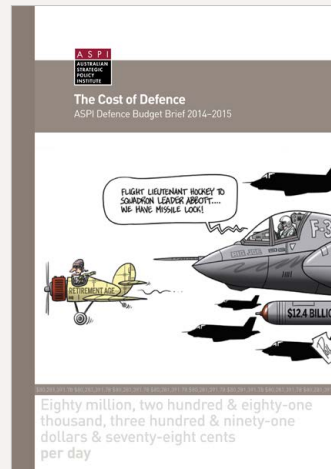
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Strike from the air

The first 100 days of the campaign against ISIL

This ASPI report is the first publication from a continuing, open-source study of the coalition campaign against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). With Australian blood and treasure committed to the efforts of the coalition, it is important for ASPI to provide research and constructive commentary on the campaign efforts and dedicate the time and expertise of our analysts to the understanding of events, decisions, costs, risks and potential outcomes.

Australia's role in the international coalition is currently limited to airstrikes on targets in Iraq and an evolving commitment to training elements of the Iraqi security forces. Both roles are indefinitely sustainable, given the ADF's capacity to rotate forces and projections of defence spending. The broader challenge for Canberra will be to explain how this fits into a credible international strategy with a realisable political objective.

This report is designed to be read in conjunction with ASPI's interactive map of coalition airstrikes, which details the date, location, target and effect of all strikes reported by US Central Command at the time of writing. It also shows coalition humanitarian and military airdrops.

ASPI's research team will continue to study and assess the campaign against ISIL as long as the campaign affects the future of Australian strategic policy. We expect to publish future reports and analysis that will be timely and relevant to the strategic discourse in Australia.



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