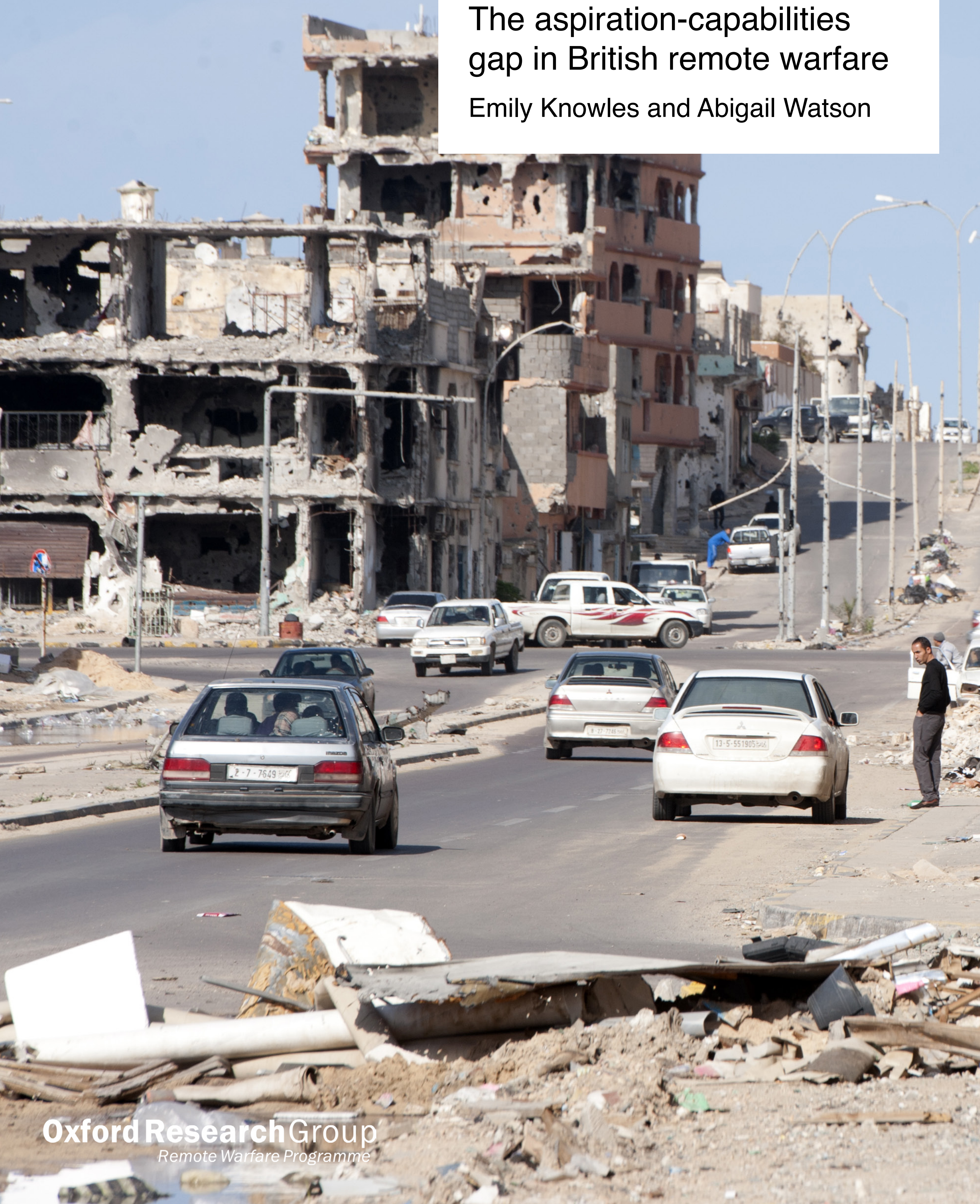
NO SUCH THING AS A QUICK FIX

The aspiration-capabilities gap in British remote warfare

Emily Knowles and Abigail Watson



Oxford Research Group
Remote Warfare Programme

This report has been written by staff at the **Oxford Research Group's Remote Warfare Programme**, formerly known as the Remote Control Project. We were set up in 2014 to examine changes in military engagement, with a focus on remote warfare. This is the trend in which countries like the United Kingdom choose to support local and regional forces on the front lines rather than deploying large numbers of their own troops.

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Introduction

Following two long and costly military interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, Western military powers have shifted their defence and security strategies. Governments acknowledge that the terrorist activity that thrives in the world's ungoverned or weakly-governed spaces continues to threaten their security. However, they also accept that placing large numbers of Western boots on the ground can be both politically unpalatable (at home and abroad) and technically difficult to deliver during a period of economic slowdown and budget cuts. Moreover, a failure to build long-term stability in either country revealed the limits of Western intervention when it lacks local ownership.

Subsequent studies have suggested that a key reason for this failure was that the government had a propensity for "groupthink". This was described by the Iraq Inquiry (also known as the Chilcot Report after its chairman Sir John Chilcot) team as the result of decision-making being in the hands of "a group of people [who] conform in their thinking to the extent that their decision-making has an irrational or dysfunctional outcome – reflecting insufficient challenge and a lack of diversity of thought."[1] In response to these criticisms, the UK government has sought to improve the internal strategic decision-making process within government, most notably in the creation of the National Security Council (NSC). Parliament has also become much more assertive in its right to hold government to account over the decision to use force.

However, our research suggests that there is currently a gap between aspirations and capabilities when it comes to current British military engagement overseas. While successive National Security Strategies have set high ambitions for a British role in building peace and security abroad, actual responses to contemporary crises have been very military-focussed, and, beyond that, very counter-terrorism oriented. As such, we have seen the government set out broad aims for stability in countries like Iraq, Syria, and Libya, only for the bulk of activity to focus narrowly on defeating IS.

To complicate matters, this activity has taken place against the backdrop of high political risk aversion and a low appetite for deploying Western ground troops.

As a result, the UK is increasingly adopting a lighter footprint and working with local groups in important regions for counter-terrorism: the Middle East, the Sahel-Sahara, East Africa, and Central Asia. Local troops are now expected to do the bulk of the frontline fighting against adversaries such as Boko Haram, Islamic State (IS), al-Shabaab, and the Taliban. To support them, small teams of special forces, military advisers, military training teams, and air/ISR (Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance) support are often provided by Western partners. This is a remote form of warfare, which places Western militaries increasingly in a supporting role, while some unilateral counter-terrorism strikes and raids continue.

The current gap between aspirations and activities heightens the risk that contemporary British military activity is not sufficiently integrated into an overarching political strategy. This not only undermines the post-Chilcot goals of a comprehensive approach to conflict, but may end up actively damaging – or at least complicating – longer-term British interests. In particular, the imperatives of conducting a swift counter-terrorism campaign without the deployment of Western ground troops has led to the empowerment of a large number of local and regional actors, which may have long-lasting implications for stability in these regions.

This report is a first attempt to evaluate the gaps between contemporary strategies and activities in Iraq, Syria and Libya. It is structured around two main sections:

- Analysing the post-Iraq changes to the internal decision-making structure and the system of external oversight in the UK.
- The long-term prognosis for stability and the strategic coherence of current military operations, focussing on the anti-IS Coalition in Iraq, Syria and Libya.

This report is aimed at those seeking to implement the post-Chilcot recommendations and looks at how well the UK government has been able to achieve a "whole of government" strategy for its current engagements. It does not cover military skills, training, and doctrinal gaps, or the legal environment that also shapes British approaches to modern warfare. Those aspects are covered by two other reports – "Lawful but Awful? Legal and political challenges of remote warfare and working with partners"[2] and "Remote Warfare: Lessons Learned from Contemporary Theatres"[3] which complete this series.

What is "remote" about remote warfare?

Many aspects of remote warfare are not new. Wars have been fought alongside and integrated with allies and partners since antiquity.[4] The arming and supporting of rival factions reached fever pitch in the Cold War, when proxy wars enabled great powers to clash indirectly and – crucially – below the threshold for nuclear retaliation. However, contemporary British operations have moved on from these past templates of waging war – not least in terms of the UK's own restricted reach and influence over the forces it fights alongside, who are not merely "proxies". Political, legal, and ethical landscapes have also shifted. This raises a number of new challenges that need careful attention.

The central pillar to remote warfare is that it precludes the deployment of large numbers of a country's own ground troops. On one end of the spectrum, this type of engagement can still be seen in some unilateral action in the face of a perceived imminent threat, like the strike against IS propagandist and British citizen Reyaad Khan who was killed in Syria in August 2015.[5]

More generally, however, the "remoteness" comes from a country's military being one step removed from the frontline fighting – which tends to be carried out by local groups or regional coalitions. For example, UK support to Kurdish forces in Iraq and Syria can be seen as remote warfare because the UK is supporting actions through the supply of arms, training, advice and assistance. In the event of a large scale deployment of British troops to combat IS, where troops were assigned combat roles and rules of engagement (ROEs) and undertook the bulk of frontline fighting, this would cease to be remote warfare, at least for the purposes of our work.

Figure 1: IS enters Raqqa (Image Source: Wikimedia Commons).

This is not to say that remote warfare is anything other than the deployment of combat troops. The UK provides a lot of assistance to allies that cannot be sensibly characterised as “war” – for example, the majority of short term training teams, arms sales, joint exercises and so on are designed and delivered in the absence of conflict for a whole range of reasons other than empowering frontline groups. It is important not to focus on “remote” to the detriment of “warfare” – a term going through its own identity crises thanks to growing attention to so-called “hybrid” or “greyzone” conflicts. In the most basic sense, remote warfare requires there to be an adversary that the UK is mobilising to degrade or counter – it cannot just be activities designed to support partners.

The last point to emphasise is that remote warfare is not always carried out via remote weapons systems. While drone strikes, air strikes, cyber-attacks or autonomous weapons no doubt have the potential to increase the physical distance between operator and target, they can be used to support any sort of operation. In this sense, the “remote” in “remote warfare” speaks more to strategic than physical distance.

Section 1: the UK's strategic machinery

One of the most comprehensive strategic audits of UK defence policy in recent history is the Iraq Inquiry that followed the UK's sustained commitment to military operations in the country from 2003-2011.[6] The intervention initially had relatively broad public and parliamentary support. Although many campaigned against the war, 54% of the British public thought the U.S. and the UK were right to intervene and then-Prime Minister Tony Blair won the parliamentary vote on intervention by 412 votes to 149.[7]

However, this support faltered when evidence of Saddam Hussein's "weapons of mass destruction" – the original justification for the intervention – failed to materialise.[8] Soon after, accusations of "dodgy dossiers" and deliberate attempts by Blair and his inner circle to deceive Parliament began to abound.[9] The "long shadow" of this scandal is still visible in British political discourse around the use of force abroad today.[10] The publication of an extensive report into the failings of the UK has led to much soul-searching over how the government has done and should do strategy.

One of the key findings – which was also present in the 2006 Butler Review into the Iraq War – was that devising strategy in closed circles led to poor strategic thinking.[11] The late Rt Hon Robin Cook MP, who resigned as Foreign Secretary because the UK intervened in Iraq without a second UN resolution, said that the cabinet discussions of Iraq in 2002 and 2003 rarely involved the expression of "frank doubts" about Iraq policy.[12] Rt Hon Des Browne MP, former Defence Secretary, has said of the Iraq War: "we should have asked more questions."[13] These experiences created renewed enthusiasm for a well-worn concept within government – that of full-spectrum strategies, comprehensive approaches to conflict, and the general recognition that different government departments needed to work better together.

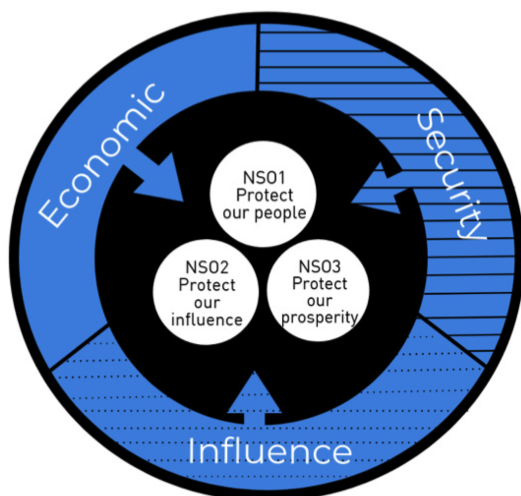

Figure 2: Fusion Doctrine (developed from the UK National Capability Review, 2018).

When he came to power in 2010, former Prime Minister David Cameron bemoaned the damage "group think" and short-termism had done to the UK's efforts. His government and subsequent governments have sought to build a system which encourages cross-government commitment to addressing the root causes of conflict.[14] This is seen most clearly in the creation of the NSC, which was championed as a way to bring the different strands of government together to debate and discuss UK engagement. The 2010 Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) said that addressing the threat of terrorism required "bring[ing] enduring stability to …fragile and conflict affected countries… through an integrated approach that brings together our diplomatic, development, defence and intelligence resources."[15]

In addition to restructuring the government's internal strategic decision-making processes, the experiences of the Iraq War have pushed successive governments to commit to greater external oversight over decisions to use military force. The most visible part of this is the War Powers Convention: the norm of seeking parliamentary approval before launching military combat operations abroad.[16] This began under Blair but was seen to be established under Cameron who invited Parliament to vote in advance of British combat deployments overseas on several occasions – and accepted its decision when they did not give approval for military action in Syria 2013.[17]

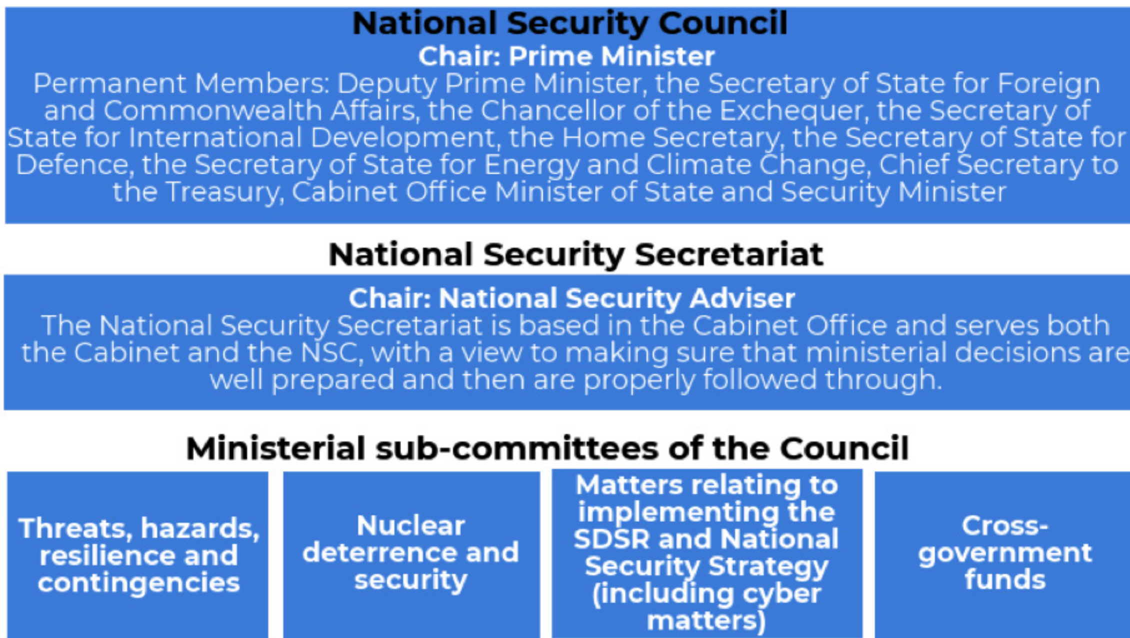

Figure 3: Structure of NSC (although some of this may change with the introduction of the Fusion Doctrine).

Institutionalising diverse discussions

The NSC was set up in 2010 as a culmination of efforts to institutionalise diverse and rounded discussions (albeit internal to government) about foreign policy.[18] Given the sensitivity of the issues dealt with by the NSC many details of its meetings, such as agenda and priorities, remain secret. However, we do know that it is attended by all departments with an interest in security, including the FCO, the MOD, the Home Office, DFID, the intelligence agencies and the Cabinet Office. The aim is to make sure that "the national security strategy is being developed with all Departments concerned."[19]

The NSC also has a designated Secretariat and a National Security Adviser (NSA).[20] The National Security Secretariat (NSS) is responsible, among other things, for providing policy advice to the NSC. It has between 180 and 200 officials drawn from the Cabinet Office and across government including the MOD, FCO, and Armed Forces.[21] Its officials meet to consider "the main strategic issues a few weeks ahead", with the aim of "bringing issues to the Council … in a more strategic format."[22] Discussions are chaired by the NSA, "the Secretary of the [NSC], responsible for ensuring the effective implementation across government of the Council's direction and guidance."[23]

Shadow NSC meetings

We heard that the government has attempted to institutionalise diverse thinking on NSC priorities by developing shadow NSC meetings. These are aimed at lower-level personnel in a bid to get more junior staff thinking strategically, as well as with the anticipated benefit of diversity of thought. This is an interesting initiative and may be a useful model for getting external voices in high level and confidential NSC discussions.

Added to this, the new Fusion Doctrine – detailed in the latest National Security Capability Review (NSCR) in 2018 – has given the NSC additional responsibility for developing a "culture of common purpose across departments."[24] This will include designating a Senior Responsible Official (SRO) to "be accountable for the development of options … and implementation" for each of the NSC priorities.[25] The review stated that "this approach will ensure that in defending our national security we make better use of all of

our capabilities: from economic levers … to our wider diplomatic and cultural influence on the world's stage. Every part of our government and every one of our agencies has its part to play."[26]

Many commentators have championed the NSC. Alastair Burt MP, Minister of State for the Middle East and North Africa, argued that "a more formalised structure … is a good thing, and … an opportunity to bring together various political aims with what's happening militarily."[27] The Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy (JCNSS) also stated that the NSC "has been a valuable addition to the machinery of government" and has provided "a regular forum for all relevant Ministers, including those not traditionally considered, to have a voice in security affairs."[28]

There appears to have been a conscious effort by NSC members to implement responses to lessons that continue to surface from the Chilcot team. This includes the Chilcot Checklist, which asks practitioners to – among other things – avoid "group think".[29] Some of its suggestions include:

- *"Building in sufficient challenge, diversity of thought and critical thinking to head off groupthink.*
    - *"Challenge can come through 'redteaming' (where an independent group offers challenge); inviting diverse thinking (including independent or external viewpoints) into the process; and wargaming."*
- *"As the demands on your time grow – briefing, attending meetings, dealing with an overloaded inbox, making phone calls, travelling – you need to ensure that due process isn't neglected. Success rests on it.'*[80]

Interviews undertaken for this report indicate that many of these lessons are being learnt. Some note there being substantive discussions around the Chilcot Checklist and between departments at every NSC meeting. One said that "every major country in the world is trying to do a whole of government approach and ours is comparatively quite good."[31] However, given that very little information is released about NSC discussions, priorities and strategies this is often hard to judge for external experts.

Remaining challenges

Despite these signs of progress, a number of problems do still remain with the NSC. Many reported that the NSC remains too operationally focussed. In a 2014 report for the Institute for Government, Josh Harris and Joe Devanny note that while the NSC "would be a logical place to have longer-term strategic discussions about the direction of government policy … in practice its focus has been much more on tactical and operational decisions."[32] More recently, Chair of JNSSC, Dame Margaret Beckett asked the current NSA, Mark Sedwill, whether "the NSC was being strategic, and worried that it was being too operational and driven by day-to-day events."[33] Some have also noted that the time designated for each meeting, about an hour once a week, may not provide enough room to be any more strategic than this.

Relatedly, the nature of the NSC means that there may be a bias towards action, even when inaction may be more strategic. Alastair Burt MP recently noted the importance of sometimes "standing back" and knowing when it is not yet the time for "political breakthroughs."[34] However, where agendas and priorities are framed by public, parliamentary and ministerial outrage and a sense that the UK needs to act – combined with a desire to stay relevant on the world stage – it is unclear how much the decision not to act is considered as a serious policy option. This is a difficult problem to fix, as Jeremy Shapiro and Andrew Miller noted in a recent piece in War on the Rocks: "Some people excel at nothing. Others … grow restless, resent the loss of initiative and control, and, more deeply, they feel that 'something' is inherently, even morally, superior to nothing."[35]

It also appears that the NSC has struggled to overcome inter-departmental conflict and engender more consolidated problem-solving. In conversations for this report it was said that heads of departments often come to meetings and "read their own briefs" and remain unable to see the

problem through the lens of others. Sir Peter Ricketts also noted that cross Whitehall cooperation "works up to, but not including, the point where money becomes involved, … responsibility for the money can be a real obstacle to genuinely joined up work."[36] James de Waal, from Chatham House, also recommended in evidence to the JCNSS that more joint funding pots could improve the implementation of NSC priorities.[37]

In December 2010, then-Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) Sir Jock Stirrup said: "If the new doctrine is to be successful, and not just the whim of the year, it will require a fundamental shift in culture... However, a change of culture is one of the most difficult things to achieve."[38] We heard that there had been an internal report written into how to foster a strategic culture in NSC meetings, but that although this was meant to be included as an annexe in a published NSCR, it never appeared in the final version.

Ewan Lawson from RUSI suggests that the creation of SROs for NSC priorities could be an indication of a failure to achieve cultural change within departments.[39] The 2018 NSCR stated that "despite the linkage we made in the SDSR between security and economic goals, we have not fully integrated our approaches."[40] Its plan to "enhance the cross-government funds …by merging the secretariats into a single Fusion Unit" may go some way in developing more cross-government thinking.[41] This will also be helped by the designation of SROs to deliver NSC strategies which may well be a useful way of "allocating clearer responsibilities" for unifying departmental objectives and driving change.[42] But ensuring the SROs are given the resources and authority to navigate and coordinate cross-government will be an important determinant of success.

The secrecy which surrounds many aspects and activities of the NSC – which may, to a large extent, be necessary given the sensitivity of many of the operations it discusses – can also have implications for the ability of government to draw on a truly diverse range of voices when devising policy.

Ensuring external oversight

In the 2010 SDSR, the UK government recognised the need to "win the battle for information, as well as the battle on the ground" and acknowledged that "a more transparent society" aided by "the speed and range of modern global communications" would submit British operations to intense scrutiny.[43]

Parliament is well placed to play this role. In a paper for Policy Exchange last year, John Bew and Gabriel Elefteriu argued that Parliament has "a rich tradition of serious engagement with, and high-quality debate about, international affairs and Britain's place in the world. … parliament has also acted as the focal point for a healthy and robust dissenting tradition that challenges the core assumptions of the government of the day."[44]

The 2013 parliamentary vote on the principle of military action in Syria, after a chemical weapons attack in Ghouta, is an important demonstration of this. It revealed the willingness of Parliament to challenge the government in the face of a poor strategy. During the debate, "strategy" or "objective" were mentioned 70 times. The argument by Rt Hon Sir Malcolm Bruce MP (former Deputy Leader of the Liberal Democrats) that "the desire that something be done… is very dangerous if we do not decide that that something will work" was reflective of the general mood of the Chamber.[45]

As Conservative MP John Baron put it: "We must also ask questions about the military objectives—there are many questions on, for example, the scope of the operation and the potential for mission creep. What happens if Assad uses chemical weapons again or if the rebels use them?"[46] The Democratic Unionist Party MP Jeffrey Donaldson asked: "If we intervene, where does it begin and end?"[47] Former member of the ISC, Rt Hon George Howarth MP, stated: "the Prime Minister was not able to give enough information…to convince me that his proposed course of action would achieve [his stated] end."[48] Caroline Lucas MP, leader of the Green Party, stated: "I have yet to hear what the strategy would be for Syria and the wider region in the event of an attack."[49]

A number of MPs also drew attention to the complexities on the ground in Syria and expressed concern that the UK could end up exacerbating instability. Conservative MP Bob Blackman said he would oppose military action because it could escalate tension with Russia and Syria "and probably end the chances of peace in the Middle East."[50] Labour MP Robert Flello said: "Action that is taken that makes things worse creates a worse situation."[51] Labour MP Jim Sheridan asked: "Does my right hon. Friend agree that any reckless or irresponsible action could lead to full war in that area?"[52] Liberal Democrat MP Sir Menzies Campbell also said: "My concern is that if we open the gate once, it will be difficult to close it."[53]

These views reflected those raised two months prior in an open letter by 81 Conservative MPs who called on Cameron to take the decision over arming Syrians rebels to a parliamentary vote because there are "many, many sides and no end."[54] As well as those of Lord Dannatt, the former head of the army, who reportedly said that he did not support the intervention.[55] Lord Hurd, the former Foreign Secretary, also said: "I can't see how [airstrikes] is going to lessen the suffering of Syrian people. I think it's likely to increase and expand the civil war in Syria."[56]

We concluded after research into the vote that "far from being a statement of parliamentary pacifism, the vote was a result of parliamentary pragmatism in the face of an unconvincing strategy for how British military strikes would build stability in Syria."[57] However, this does not seem to be the lesson that has been drawn by many government commentators, for whom the Cameron government's defeat has become a symbol of the perils of the democratisation of the decision to use force.[58] In 2017, Alistair Burt MP stated: "the Syria conflict has illustrated that … [w]e don't know as a Parliament what we would take action on now."[59] Many also wondered whether Prime Minister Theresa May's decision to bypass parliament before launching strikes in response to a chemical weapons attack in April this year was, in part, motivated by a fear of having a similar vote defeated in Parliament.[60]

Remaining challenges

Despite the positive role that Parliament has played in providing a check on bad strategy in the past, the confidential nature of many aspects of remote warfare make Parliament's ability to play this role in contemporary operations difficult. These types of engagements tend to be less transparent than larger deployments for a number of reasons:

First, where the UK is using armed drones to conduct intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance missions rather than combat missions, these deployments are not disclosed or voted on in Parliament. This is in line with the treatment of other "non-combat" missions, which do not fall under the War Powers Convention. However, there is now also a precedent for the UK to use these armed drones to carry out targeted strikes, such as the one that killed Reyaad Khan in Syria, when parliamentary authorisation had not been given for British military engagement in the country.[61]

Second, where the UK carries out operations with special forces rather than with regular troops, parliamentary authorisation or notification is not required. This allows them to operate in combat roles in countries where Parliament has not voted on military action[62], as well as in places where the relevant authorisations specifically preclude the

Figure 4: David Cameron at the Dispatch Box (Image Source: UK Parliament/ Wikimedia Commons).

deployment of UK troops in ground combat operations.[63] Scrutiny is also severely restricted by the MOD's long-held policy not to comment on special forces.[64] For instance, despite a number of reports of UK special forces operating on the frontline in Iraq, Syria and Libya, questions about the legality, strategy and implications of these activities have all been met with the standard line that "[i]t is our longstanding policy that we don't comment on special forces operations."[65]

Third, where the UK provides capabilities to allies rather than taking an active lead in operations, it does not necessarily need to report them to Parliament. This allows the government to have troops involved in combat without having to declare a UK role in offensive missions, and without having to bring their engagement to a vote in Parliament. For example, in 2015 it was revealed that a small number of UK pilots embedded with the U.S. military had carried out airstrikes in Syria against IS targets before parliamentary authorisation was given.[66] Again in May this year, a British soldier – Sgt Matt Tonroe (from the 3rd Battalion the British Parachute Regiment) – was killed in Manbij, Syria, while embedded in U.S. forces on a kill or capture mission, despite claims that the UK is not involved in combat missions on the ground in Syria.[67]

Finally, there is little information in the public domain about the military's advise and assist activities, even when they take place in close proximity to frontline conflict. The government has insisted that training missions in Libya, Iraq and Syria are away from frontline operations and, as such, do not require recourse to Parliament.[68] However, in a debate on Libya, when asked how the government will maintain the distinction between combat and non-combat when training forces on the frontline, then-Foreign Secretary Rt Hon Philip Hammond MP simply insisted that "we are clear that we can make that distinction."[69] Subsequent media reports have indicated that it may not be so clear-cut. For instance, in 2016, there were reports that British troops in Erbil would participate in combat in Mosul alongside their Kurdish trainees.[70]

While some narrative is given in the MOD's annual reports,[71] this only gives a snapshot of activities in a selection of countries where the UK works. Because budgetary information is rarely given, and because the information given is not necessarily comparable or consistent between countries or over time, it is very difficult to get a sense of how much time and effort the UK is putting into capacity building and engaging with its local allies. This makes attempts to understand what approaches are working very difficult.

Similarly, while committees have a long history of overseeing British action abroad, it is unclear how many aspects of remote warfare can be scrutinised. The Foreign Affairs Committee, Defence Committee and Joint Committee on Human Rights have all expressed concern over their ability to scrutinise these types of actions.[72] Moreover, while the JCNSS – set up to consider the National Security Strategy – provides a well-qualified and important place for oversight, they are likely to be hindered by many of the same restrictions.[73] It, like other external bodies, has also continually struggled to get information on what the NSC is doing and what its priorities are, meaning that its reports are often based on headline figures and public releases.

This also has implications for oversight by other external experts. A 2010 Institute for Government study found that: "Compared to some other countries, the UK was much less porous, with less interchange between the outside world (think tanks, academia) and Whitehall."[74] At a recent event in London, when a former senior British civil servant was asked whether the declining role of civil servants in developing policy needed to be rectified, he noted the importance of using the think tank community for the research civil servants no longer have time to undertake. Likewise, the Public Administration Select Committee said in 2010: "The single most important thing which can be done to restore our strategic capacity is to have a community of strategists, both inside and outside Whitehall."[75] However, during interviews for this report a number of participants with experience of Whitehall and

the NSC were unconvinced that think tanks could have a positive role in the development of policy. This is arguably not helped by the current system of NSC consultation, which sees external experts consulted rarely and, when they are, asked specific questions about a region or theme rather than being engaged in a meaningful discussion.

The aspirations-capability gap

The UK has not stopped aiming high when it comes to its foreign policy goals. The 2011 BSOS was the first clear step towards adopting a more preventive approach to conflict, with its emphasis on stability, political settlements to crises, and conflict-sensitive international engagement abroad, stating that:

"The starting point needs to be a focus on conflict sensitivity – to analysing and understanding the situation to ensure that work designed to build stability does not unintentionally make things worse. The chances of success are greatest when the international community gets behind a political settlement that lays the foundations for tackling the causes of conflict in a country."[76]

Yet, at the same time, it emphasises the importance of "[r]apid crisis prevention and response: improving our ability to take fast, appropriate and effective action to prevent a crisis or stop it spreading or escalating."[77]

Acting quickly to address an imminent crisis while maintaining operations that are conflict-sensitive, politically-aware, full-spectrum, and beneficial to the long-term stability and capacity of allies is no small ask of the British military. Indeed, the latest iteration of UK military doctrine on "shaping a stable world" notes that "balancing the nation's security risks and its values presents a constant challenge for our Government as it decides how, when and where to tackle instability at source. … In a globalised, competitive world, states will legitimately set out to secure their own national security and achieve influence. Our national strategy will be contested across the diplomatic, economic, military and informational contexts."[78]

In addition, the logic of BSOS appears to be that building partner capacity now will allow local forces to provide security in their countries and regions more autonomously in the future. The strategy states: "Effective and accountable military and police forces can also play a role in regional and global stability through troop and police contributions to peacekeeping missions", but notes that this will require:

"…support to build the capacity of security forces [to] be matched with efforts to build accountability, legitimacy and respect for human rights, for example through strengthening civilian oversight of the armed forces; ensuring the proper functioning of parliaments, the media and civil society organisations; and through such measures as educating the police on dealing appropriately with sexual violence."[79]

Herein lies the problem for remote warfare: if most of the military activity in contemporary campaigns – including the training and equipping of local forces – is focussed on countering terrorism, short-term objectives are likely to take priority. This incentivises British decision-makers to pick local partners on the basis of their ability to counter groups like IS rather than based on a careful assessment of which groups might help to build an effective, accountable, legitimate force that might improve long-term prospects for peace and security.

This was captured by in Foreign Affairs by Frances Z. Brown and Mara Karlin in their critique of the "deeper dilemma with … the by-with-through approach":

"…the fact that it uses military criteria to choose a partner for a relationship that often evolves into a political one. If, as Clausewitz famously wrote, "war is a mere continuation of politics by other means," the by-with-through model inverts this dictum, subordinating politics to … choices on the battlefield.'[80]

This heightens the risk that decisions are made throughout the course of the campaign – particularly when it comes to empowering and equipping local armed groups – that can leave a negative legacy from the perspective of longer term stabilisation and reform efforts.

This is especially problematic in the case studies below. In Iraq, Syria and Libya the UK has expressed a desire to work towards a political solution by, for example, strengthening local capacity and bringing warring parties together. However, in each case, the more immediate aim of tackling IS has taken preference, with an end result that could fracture already fragile defence and security sectors even further.

Section 2: Counter-terrorism in the driving seat?

Amidst the chaos that followed the Arab Spring, a hitherto little-known group calling itself Islamic State in Iraq and Syria sprang onto the international stage when it seized the Iraqi city of Fallujah, which sits just 43 miles west of Baghdad. A few weeks later, IS stormed into the Syrian city of Raqqa and announced it as the group's headquarters. By the end of June 2014, Mosul and Tikrit had also fallen, and IS had declared the establishment of a caliphate, naming its leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as Caliph and successor to the Prophet Mohammed.

The group also turned their efforts to Libya, which following the 2011 NATO mission and fall of General Muammar Gadhafi had been engulfed by violence. IS first appeared in Libya in mid-2014 in the eastern town of Derna. While it was never able to make the same territorial gains within Libya as it did in Iraq and Syria, it still took 125 miles of Libyan coastline, as well as Sirte and some of the surrounding area – which placed it 25 miles from Libya's main oil terminals.[81]

Military operations to counter the group have had some success. The territorial gains of IS have been dramatically cut. In June 2015, Libyan forces ousted IS from Derna.[82] In December 2016, an eight-month battle saw Sirte liberated.[83] The Iraqi government announced the liberation of Mosul in July 2017 and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) declared Raqqa liberated in October 2017.[84]

However, the UK and its allies have engaged in much broader conflicts with a short-term objective of defeating IS. As Robert Malley states in Foreign Policy: "[f]or most of the United States' allies in the Middle East, … their gaze was fixed on the wars after the war against the Islamic State."[85] Thus, as these groups begin to refocus their gaze to their long-term goals, the legacies of Western choices made in the name of countering IS are likely to loom large in the region for many years to come.

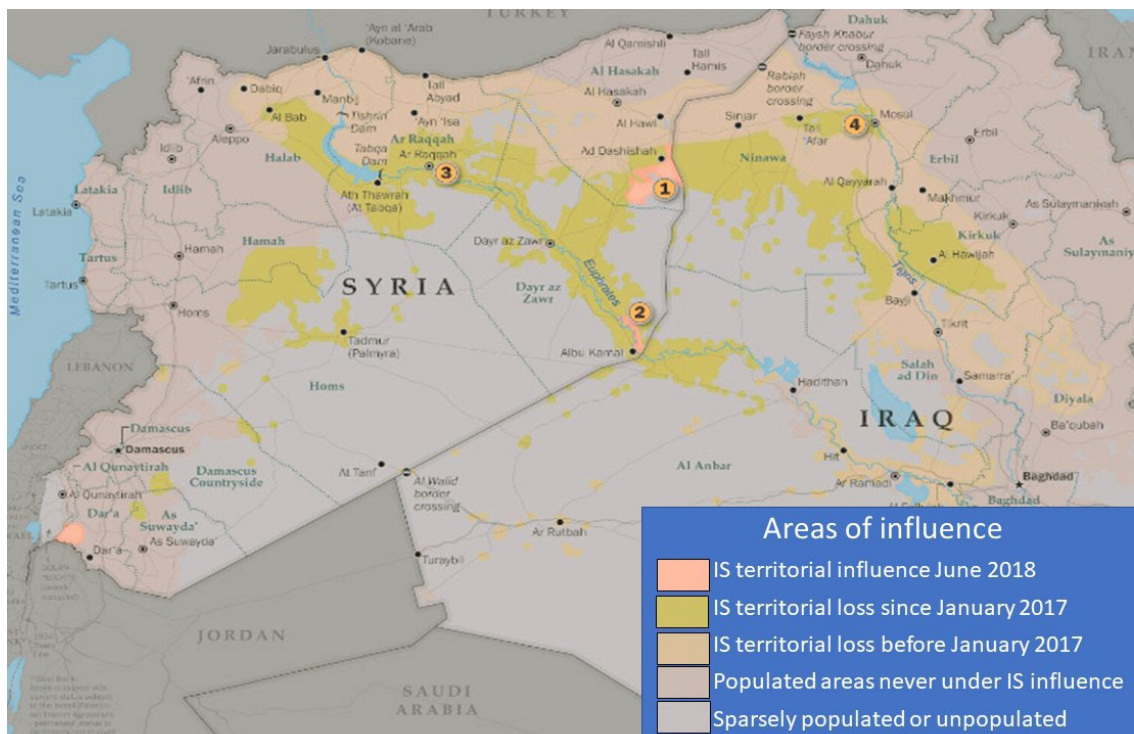

Figure 5: IS-controlled areas (Image source: US Department of State).

Iraq

Wider UK objectives

When giving evidence to the Defence Committee, then-Secretary of State for Defence Rt Hon Sir Michael Fallon MP said: “Airstrikes are only one component in a military strategy which must be accompanied by a political solution to deliver long-term peace and security to the region.”[86]

Indeed, alongside providing the second-largest military contribution to the anti-IS coalition (behind the U.S.) the UK has shown leadership on broader aspects of Iraqi security sector reform. For example, the U.S., the UK and Germany led talks on Peshmerga reform in 2017, aiming to strengthen the process of unifying Peshmerga brigades – which are split along party lines between the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) – under one Ministry of Peshmerga.[87]

In evidence for a Foreign Affairs Committee inquiry on Kurdish aspirations, Karwan Jamal Tahir, the UK representative of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), referred to a “permanent commander from Britain [being] stationed at the Ministry of Peshmerga” and thanked the UK for its efforts to unify the Peshmerga, which has suffered from factional divides.[88]

The Conflict, Stability and Security (CSSF) fund also reports a spend of £10,650,000 on programmes in Iraq for FY17-18, with efforts focusing on stabilisation, community reintegration, advisory and governance support.[89] The overall aims of the programme were listed as:

“To support the Government of Iraq in delivering services for all Iraqi citizens; and to ensure that returns of displaced people are safe and sustainable. This contributes to our intended impact of a more stable, secure and unified Iraq. UK funding will support: local authorities to plan and deliver stabilisation activities that respond to the diverse needs of communities (women and men); communities to hold the government to account; and activities that deliver greater cohesion between communities.”[90]

Figure 6: Timeline of the UK’s involvement in the anti-IS coalition in Iraq and Syria.

A further £7,485,000 was allocated under the CSSF Security and Justice Programme for Iraq for FY17/18, with allocations for Security Sector Reform (SSR), tackling violent extremism, explosive threat management, and support to transitional justice and reconciliation. The case for UK support in particular is made in reference to the UK's "strong theoretical and evidence-based understanding of what works in Iraq, of the risks and limitations and of the challenges of building a sustainable continuum between stabilisation and long-term development interventions."[91]

The report goes on to state that:

"The range of interventions are targeted to address immediate security and justice needs as part of broader stabilisation efforts, while laying the foundations for longer term work to address underlying grievances and help promote enduring peace and security. It takes a three pronged approach of strengthening Iraqi capacity to prevent security and justice violations; responding to security threats and ensuring accountability to victims and citizens – women as well as men."[92]

It is therefore clear that the UK has goals broader than defeating IS when it comes to supporting the Iraqi security sector. Indeed, when we were in Baghdad in November 2017 there was a lot of talk about what the British contribution to disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration (DDR) could be, as well as how best to encourage other international partners to stay once the threat from IS diminished.

Kurdish Groups in Iraq

In Iraq, Kurds represent between 15% to 20% of the total population. They have enjoyed greater autonomy than Kurdish communities in neighbouring countries but have also "faced brutal repression."[93] Saddam Hussein resettled Arabs in Kurdish areas throughout the 1970s and 1980s and "unleashed a campaign of vengeance" when they supported Iran in the Iran-Iraq war – most shockingly in the chemical attack on Halabja in March 1988.[94]

After Iraq's defeat in the 1991 Gulf War, the violent suppression of a Kurdish rebellion prompted a U.S. no-fly zone. This resulted in a power-sharing agreement, but tensions erupted again in 1994.[95] Kurdish forces cooperated with the 2003 invasion, and governed in coalition in the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), created two years later to administer Dohuk, [Erbil] and Sulaimaniya provinces with Massoud Barzani as president.[96] Under the 2005 Iraqi constitution, Kurdistan was recognized as a federal region within the state of Iraq. However, 27 territories claimed by the KRG and the state of Iraq, including Kirkuk, were labelled as "disputed".[97]

The counter-terrorism lens

Nevertheless, while support to Peshmerga reform, broader SSR, and DDR could have a positive impact on the Iraqi security sector in the long-term, initial efforts have taken on a distinct counter-terrorism flavour. Much of the support given to Kurdish forces has fallen under the rubric of the counter-terrorism. As described by the FCO:

"As part of the package of assistance provided by the Global Coalition to counter Daesh, we have provided the Peshmerga with military support, channelled through the Coalition and distributed based on requirements: UK training teams have trained over 57,000 members of the Iraqi Security Forces, including 9,000 Peshmerga fighters; since September 2014 we have gifted £3 million of arms and ammunition to the Peshmerga; and the UK has given air support to the Peshmerga as part of the Coalition."[98]

Many high-level officials we engaged with complained behind closed doors that there was insufficient focus on the post-IS phase throughout the campaign, including when it came to the support that was provided to Peshmerga.[99] This is especially true in light of the violence in Kirkuk in October last year, when Iraqi forces retook the city in response to the Kurdish independence referendum.[100] This raised doubts among the Peshmerga over whether Western support would continue after the fall of IS and exacerbated divisions between the two Kurdish groups, with accusations that PUK forces had abandoned KDP leader and then-President of the Iraqi Kurdistan Region Masoud Barzani.[101]

Alongside Western support to the Peshmerga, the UK has lacked a clear direction over how to deal with the Popular Mobilisation Forces (al-hashd al-shaabi, or PMF). We were told that a decision had been made not to conduct strikes in direct support of the PMF due to the Iranian links of some of their units, but there was no clear answer when it came to what level of indirect support would be tolerated, particularly if strikes were called in by Iraqi partners to protect joint Iraqi Army/PMF operations. In fact, Major General Rupert Jones (deputy commander of the Combined Joint Task Force for Operation Inherent Resolve) recently acknowledged that the PMF, including its Iranian-backed brigades, are "incidentally" benefiting from Western "support provided to Iraqi security forces under the control of Baghdad."[102]

Former intelligence minister Mohammad Ghabban confided in an interview that "the Hashd [PMF] was born out of necessity", with "[o]ne-third of Iraq was occupied at the time" and state forces lacking the ability to tackle them.[103] Now, following the fall of IS, the PMF are "generally more effective than the Iraqi security forces."[104]

Who are the PMF?

The Popular Mobilisation Forces (al-hashd al-shaabi, or PMF) is a conglomeration of predominantly Shia Iraqi militias formed during the early stages of the anti-IS campaign in reaction to the weak response of the Iraqi National Army.[105]

Far from being a cohesive organisation, the groups that compose the PMF fall into three distinct major clusters. The most powerful groups are those that maintain strong links with Tehran and pledge spiritual allegiance to Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei.[106] These groups have also been fighting for Iranian interests across the border in Syria. They consider themselves part of Iran's "axis of resistance" and "obliged to follow Ayatollah Khamenei" – sometimes even disobeying the orders of Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi.[107]

Many of the groups that fall under this first category have existed for a long time, including the Badr Organisation (established in 1982), Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (2006), Kata'ib Hezbollah (2007), Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada (2013), Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba (2013), and Kata'ib Jund al-Imam (1991).[108]

The second group are those who mobilised following Iraqi-Shia Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani's 2014 fatwa to drive the Islamic State from the country. These forces are not necessarily loyal to Iran – and Sistani himself has been openly critical of the Iran regime.[109]

The third group are those loyal to Iraqi Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr's Peace Regiments (Saraya al-Salam), which had links with Iran but no longer receives Iranian funding.[110] There are also small numbers of Sunni armed groups (known as the Sunni hashd) that have been used by PMF leaders to gain cross-sectarian political popularity.[111]

Following the loss of Mosul in June 2014, then-Prime Minister of Iraq Nouri al-Maliki moved to institutionalise and embed the PMF within the Iraqi security sector under a new Commission. The Commission gained legal recognition in November 2016 when the Iraqi parliament approved Law 40, which acknowledges the PMF as an "independent military formation as part of the Iraqi armed forces and linked to the Commander-in-Chief."[112] Analysts have been quick to note that the word "independent" has allowed the PMF to co-exist alongside the rest of the Iraqi security sector, rather than being reformed and integrated.[113]

Fallout from the counter-terrorism campaign

The Kurdish referendum

In September 2017, an independence referendum was held in the Kurdistan region and in the disputed areas seized by the Peshmerga in 2014 – including Kirkuk. In them, 92% of the roughly 3 million people who turned up voted for independence.[114] Following this, the KRG said the result "gave them a mandate to start negotiations with Baghdad."[115] However, al-Abadi demanded that it be annulled and that Kurdish forces withdraw from the areas they have controlled since 2014.[116]

In October, after they failed to do so, Iraqi pro-government forces retook the disputed territory held by the Kurds, in a "major blow to Kurdish aspirations for their own state."[117] In the month following the referendum, Iraqi government forces have retaken one-fifth of Kurdish-controlled territory.[118] Abadi said: "We have only acted to fulfil our constitutional duty to extend the federal authority and impose security and protect the national wealth in this city, which we want to remain a city of peaceful coexistence for all Iraqis."[119]

The move has split the nascent Kurdish unity that had been fostered by the anti-IS operations. Only KDP forces were present in Kirkuk when the Iraqi forces confronted them – PUK Peshmerga members had left the city. This raised suspicions that a deal had been cut with Baghdad in retaliation for Barzani having called the referendum.[120] Barzani blamed PUK for the loss of Kirkuk, stating: "the withdrawal of Kurdish Peshmerga troops in Kirkuk was [the] result of a political party's unilateral decision." Leading PUK members, including Iraqi MP Alaa Talabani, the daughter of the recently-deceased former KRG President Jalal Talabani, responded: "We won't sacrifice for the sake of stolen oil fields, whose money went to the pockets and accounts of individuals."[121]

More broadly, following the failure of the referendum to force real change, conversations we had in Iraq in November 2017 suggested that Baghdad would now feel empowered to centralise control. This would mean renegotiating relationships with the Kurds (and other separatist elements – for example in Basra) from a position of strength. This carries a risk of alienating groups further, particularly given the boost in legitimacy and credibility of local forces following their successful role in the anti-IS

Figure 7: Peshmerga soldiers prepare to conduct a combined arms live-fire exercise near Erbil, Iraq (Image Source: Wikimedia Commons).

fight. We heard parliamentarians in Baghdad refusing to acknowledge that the Kurds had fought IS at all – a position bound to inflame tensions.

The U.S., the UK and a number of other countries made it clear that they disagreed with the referendum. In evidence to the Foreign Affairs Committee, Alistair Burt MP detailed the considerable effort that the UK had put into dissuading the Kurds from holding the referendum:

"The UK made strenuous efforts in the weeks and months before the referendum … to persuade the Kurdish leadership to postpone … in return for talks on all areas of dispute between the Kurdistan Regional Government and the Government of Iraq, supported by the international community and with no pre-conditions. Our Ambassador and Consul General worked tirelessly in the months leading up to the referendum to persuade then President Barzani and others to take this alternative. The UK Ambassador visited the Kurdistan Region multiple times during this period, coordinating his activities with the US Ambassador and UN Special Representative. I visited Erbil on 4 September 2017 and discussed the referendum in depth with Kurdish leaders. On 17 September, the Foreign Secretary called Masoud Barzani to make the case for postponement. And the Secretary of State for Defence pressed Masoud Barzani in Erbil when he visited on 18 September."[122]

However, relations with Kurdish groups and Western forces – especially the U.S. – have since faltered. Kurdish forces have accused the Trump administration of withholding their salary in response to the referendum, and many feel that the U.S. sided with the government in Baghdad over the results.[123] When Iraqi forces moved into Kirkuk, the U.S. maintained it had not picked a side and "call[ed] for dialogue between Iraqi and Kurdish authorities."[124] However, analysts said the U.S. was not helping Kurdish forces because they "had turned down an American offer to preside over open-ended negotiations with Baghdad if the Kurds called off the vote."[125] In fact, the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad explicitly declared its support for the Iraqi state, saying: "We support the peaceful reassertion of federal authority, consistent with the Iraqi constitution, in all disputed areas."[126]

The U.S. State Department also recently failed to acknowledge Peshmerga efforts in the fight against IS, causing anger among their ranks.[127] David Phillips, the director of the Program on Peace-Building and Rights at Columbia University's Institute for the Study of Human Rights, notes: "The Iraqi Kurds sacrificed thousands of fighters at our behest, and when it was crunch time, we just walked away."[128]

Now, with the fall of IS, there are fears among these groups that the U.S. will abandon them. As one Iraqi Kurd put it: "We hope that we will have good relationship with the U.S., with the coalition, and this relationship will continue after Daesh, and not just be temporary this time."[129]

Enduring weakness of the Iraqi security sector

Groups like the Peshmerga and the PMF have been essential to the fight against IS. However, their empowerment throughout the course of the campaign now threatens to weaken the unity of an already fragmented Iraqi security sector. Now, many Iraqis had begun claiming that the Iraqi Army "is lucky if it can be considered the fourth-strongest army in Iraq - behind, Kurdistan's Peshmerga forces, the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF, largely Shia paramilitaries) and Iraqi tribal fighters."[130]

Strong support for both the KDP and the PUK in the recent elections (allegations of voter fraud notwithstanding)[131] suggest that neither party will feel under pressure to move forward with Peshmerga reform in the near future, meaning that the fragmentation of these groups may simply spring back to pre-IS levels. Similarly, the strong performance in the May 2018 elections of the Fateh Alliance led by Hadi al-Ameri, whose list represents many of the groups under the PMF, also signals that any effort to reform or integrate those units into the wider Iraqi security sector may now stall as they grow in political power as well as military might.

Sunni delegations we spoke to in the aftermath of the main anti-IS campaign were unhappy both with the international community's unconditional support of the Iraqi army – whose sectarianism they saw as a big driver of the rise of IS in the first place – and with the way that militias were

allowed to drive the anti-IS campaign.[132] There were complaints that Sunni cities were being occupied by militias, and that the office of the Prime Minister had proved inept at forcing these armed groups to return home. The importance of allowing local governments to have a say in security policy in their areas was often cited as paramount if communities were to feel safe, even if this meant replacing policing by militias by a greater Iraqi National Army presence in some Sunni areas and perhaps reversing this in Shia areas.

However, many of our conversations with the international community on security sector reform suggested that there would be a heavy initial emphasis on narrow DDR, particularly on issues that could be made reasonably apolitical like reducing the number of weapons (estimated at around 18 million) circulating in Iraq. While it was acknowledged that broader SSR was an issue, a lot of the thinking was focussing on how to facilitate the "disarmament with dignity"[133] of the PMF. Iraqi parliamentarians, in contrast, warned against singling out the PMF for reform, and were particularly unconvinced that powerful players like Sistani would risk revoking the fatwa that had established them in the first place because of the reputational damage that would follow if the order was ignored or resisted.

Syria

Wider UK objectives

The UK was one of the first to respond to the humanitarian crisis caused by the civil war in Syria and has since committed to spending £271 million on the country in its 2018/19 planned budget.[134] In a statement in February 2012, then-Foreign Secretary Rt Hon William Hague MP set out the steps that the government intended to take to deal with the civil war, including supporting the Arab League, the UN, the EU and the Syrian opposition to build a political solution, ensuring "those responsible for crimes in Syria are held to account" and maintaining communication with the Syrian governments "to push for an end to violence."[135]

Over the summer of 2011, the UK joined many of its allies, including France, the U.S. and Germany in calling on Assad to "step aside".[136] This culminated in a meeting of world powers in Marrakesh at the end of the year where 130 international representatives argued that Assad had lost legitimacy and should stand aside to allow "a sustainable political transition process," and warned that any use by Assad's government of chemical or biological weapons would be met by a "serious response".[137]

Figure 8: Kurdish YPG fighters (Image Source: Flickr Creative Common/ Kurdishstruggle).

As the conflict has progressed the UK government has continued to condemn "the brutal repression of the Assad regime and support diplomatic efforts to end the suffering and establish political transition" – including supporting the Syrian National Council (SNC).[138] In March 2018, a joint statement by Boris Johnson and Penny Mordant said: "The Assad regime and those who back it bear overwhelming responsibility for the destruction of the country, its infrastructure and the lives of its people."[139]

At the same time, the UK government has backed away from direct confrontation with the regime – with some arguing there has become an implicit acceptance of his role in the future of Syria.[140] This was seemingly confirmed when in the face of a chemical weapons attack in August 2013, Cameron failed to get a vote through the House of Commons, which led Obama to worry about alienating Congress and France was also forced to back down. Instead, Obama pursued a Russian-U.S. deal for destruction of the Syrian government's arsenal of chemical weapons. However, five years later, it seems that Assad has not followed his side of the bargain.[141]

When the U.S., France and the UK launched strikes in April 2018 against Assad regime targets in response to another wave of chemical weapons attacks in Douma, it represented one of the most united stances against Assad since the beginning of the civil war – especially given the support from other key allies such as Germany, Canada and Turkey.[142] However, while France and Britain have called on the U.S. to "form a long-term strategy aimed at a cease fire and a political settlement to the seven-year-old civil war", there seems to be little appetite within the US administration to do so.[143] It still remains unclear what the UK, France and U.S. strategy is for the future of Syria, with many commentators asking: "now what?" in the ever more complicated, violent and seemingly intractable conflict.[144]

Kurdish groups in Syria

Roughly 10% of Syria's population are ethnic Kurds. In 1958 the Syrian regime banned speaking or teaching the Kurdish language and in 1962 a census stripped around 120,000 Kurds of their citizenship.[145] In 1980, following a military coup in Turkey, many leaders within the Kurdish Workers Party's (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê,PKK), a group leading an armed insurgency against the Turkish state, fled to Syria.[146] Despite its leader being sent back to Turkey, the group maintained a presence in the country.[147] Many in Turkey believe that the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat, PYD) – who were founded in 2003 and formed the People's Protection Units (Kurdish: Yekîneyên Parastina Gel YPG) as its armed wing in 2004 – is affiliated with the PKK.[148]

With the outbreak of Syrian civil war in 2011, many Kurdish parties initially avoided publicly taking sides, with many fearing repression and resenting Arab apathy in their own political struggles.[149] Regime forces tried to make concessions with Kurdish groups, giving some citizenship, and withdrew from Kurdish areas to concentrate on anti-regime groups.[150] This began to change in 2012. In May 2012 regime forces arrested some members of the PYD and in July the PYD took over some government buildings in Kurdish areas.[151] The relationship between the international anti-IS coalition and the YPG was forged when IS moved to take Kobani, a Syrian Kurdish town on the border with Turkey, in September 2014.

The counter-terrorism lens

The SDF began life as the Kurdish-dominated YPG from northern Syria. The relationship between the international anti-IS coalition and the YPG was forged when IS moved to take Kobani, a Syrian Kurdish town on the border with Turkey, in September 2014. With allied air support to Kurdish fighters on the ground, IS suffered significant casualties and the siege of the town was successfully broken. As commentators note, this was the moment when "an operational

relationship was born. The midwife was tactical necessity. Larger issues of national security objectives, overall strategy for Syria, and an important bilateral relationship with a NATO partner were made subordinate to the singular focus on attacking ISIS."[152]

The UK Parliament did not approve UK military action in Syria until December 2015; however, in July 2015, the MOD admitted that UK RAF pilots had been undertaking strikes in Syria while embedded in U.S. forces.[153] UK intelligence officers were also supporting U.S. strikes. For example, it was claimed the UK worked "hand in glove" with the U.S. when undertaking the strike against Mohammed Emwazi – dubbed Jihadi John by the press.[154]

In October 2015, US special operations forces were deployed to north-eastern Syria and began to build a militia "to move east of the Euphrates in preparation for the eventual assault on Raqqa." This resulted in the YPG rebranding and becoming the primary troop contributor to the SDF alongside several Arab-majority Free Syrian Army (FSA) units.[155]

In October 2016, the UK government said British personnel would be deployed to provide "members of moderate Syrian opposition groups with the skills they need to continue to take the fight to Daesh", including infantry tactics, command and control, explosive hazard awareness training and medical training.[156]

However, by June 2016, reports had begun to emerge that UK special forces were fighting alongside local forces on the frontline against IS.[157] In August 2016, the BBC published images of what it said were UK special forces in al-Tanf. While a New Syrian Army's spokesman refused to comment on the pictures, he said: "We are receiving special forces training from our British and American partners. We're also getting weapons and equipment from the Pentagon as well as complete air support."[158]

In April this year, a Pentagon spokesperson said that the UK's first and only casualty in Syria, Sgt. Matt Tonroe (from the 3rd Battalion of the British Parachute Regiment), was killed while embedded in U.S. forces "in an advise, assist and accompany capacity with our partners…conducting a mission to kill or capture a known ISIS member."[159]

While working with these local groups has greatly helped U.S. and UK effort in the fight against IS, with some senior U.S. officials saying that many of its operations would not have been possible without local eyes and ears on the ground, it has had a number of broader implications.[160] Within Syria, it has exacerbated divides between Kurdish and Arab communities and internationally it has caused problems for the West's relationship with NATO-ally Turkey.

Fallout from the counter-terrorism campaign

Syria's domestic tensions

The weight that Kurdish forces carry within SDF has made it difficult for the group to gain legitimacy among the wider Syrian population. As Haid Haid, of Chatham House and the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, notes: "many Syrian Arabs saw the SDF's attack on rebel-held areas …as a Kurdish pretext to take advantage of U.S. support and expand their territories in areas where Arabs are a majority."[161]

Responding to U.S. concerns about perceptions of the group as a Kurdish force, the SDF made efforts to diversify its ranks.[162] However, while its ranks have grown to include a "notable number of Arab recruits" with 60% of its fighters now Arab, "in practice it remains squarely under YPG command and wholly reliant upon the PKK-trained Kurdish fighters who form its backbone."[163] In April last year, Crisis Group argued:

"Thousands of Arabs now participate in YPG-led military efforts – whether due to conscription, need of salaries or desire to liberate home areas from IS. But they are doing so on behalf of an organisation whose militantly secular culture clashes with local norms, whose Kurdish identity many view as a threat and which has shown no inclination to share power meaningfully."[164]

The SDF and its political affiliate, the Syrian Democratic Council, have set up bureaucratic structures in liberated territory at record speed and now control between 30-40% of Syria. However, Crisis Group argues that "[o]utside majority-Kurdish areas … [the YPG] governance model appears fragile."[165] They describe efforts "to achieve Arab buy-in to its project" as "partial and haphazard" rather than "meaningful".[166] Haid goes further, stating: "reported violations committed by some Kurdish groups against Arab communities, have led to ethnic tensions between local communities."[167] For example, in 2015 there were reports that Syrian Kurds were forcibly removing people from their homes by "deliberately demolishing civilian homes, in some cases razing and burning entire villages."[168]

Relations with Turkey

Fellow NATO member Turkey has long held that the YPG is an armed Syrian branch of the PKK which Turkey – and the U.S. and the UK – has designated a terrorist organisation.[169] Turkish President Recep Tayyib Erdoğan called the decision by the U.S. and the UK to continue arming Kurdish groups "unacceptable."[170]

Tensions between Turkey and its NATO allies have only worsened as the fight against IS has continued. By July 2017, a Turkish state news agency released the locations of ten U.S. military bases in northern Syria, including listing the numbers of troops in some areas, and revealed the presence of French special forces in other areas.[171] Conversations we had within NATO suggested that the poor relationships were making many alliance activities unworkable, especially when it came to intelligence-sharing, as people would simply stop talking if Turkish delegates entered the room.

Figure 9: President Donald J. Trump and President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan of Turkey at the United Nations (Image Source: US Embassy and Consulates in Turkey).

At the end of last year, Erdoğan announced that Turkey had signed a deal to purchase a Russian S-400 surface-to-air missile system. This is an important step, as currently no other NATO ally has bought a Russian missile system in this way.[172] Moreover, NATO officials reported that they had not been briefed on the purchase.[173] Worse, at the same time as buying it, Turkey's state-run news agency, Anadolu, published an infographic "showcasing the types of U.S. aircraft the S-400 system was capable of shooting down."[174] In response, the U.S. has debated whether to block an F-35's sale to Turkey.[175]

In January 2018, Turkey launched an air-ground operation against Kurdish forces in the Afrin district in response to U.S. efforts to build a Kurdish led "border security force" – which would have positioned "potentially… thousands of Kurdish militia fighters along Turkey's southern border."[176] A two-month military campaign saw Turkish-backed militias take over Afrin in a major blow to Kurdish forces.[177]

Now, Emile Nakhleh, former member of CIA's Senior Intelligence Service said: "Current U.S.-Turkish relations are at the lowest point they have been in years. … the two countries see no common ground in their strategic calculus for the region."[178] In conversations for this report, respondents were more optimistic about how reparable this damage was, noting that there are limits to how much Turkey can work with countries such as Russia and that the UK's relationship with Turkey was much less damaged than the U.S.'s. However, the current Russia-Turkey counter forces will have serious implications for U.S. – and therefore UK – efforts to have leverage in the future of Syria and the wider region.

Libya

Wider UK objectives

In its evidence to the Foreign Affairs Committee, the FCO stated that: "The guiding principles" of the UK's strategy towards Libya "should be Libyan-owned and co-ordinated by the UN."[179] Competing factions, particularly the Misratan-dominated General National Congress (GNC) and the House of Representatives, were brought together in December 2015 to sign the UN-backed Libyan Political Agreement, which created the Government of National Accord (GNA), headed by the Presidency Council which is led by Fayez al-Sarraj.[180] Although dogged by suspicion of Western interference, the GNA was – at the time – the best hope of a unified government in Libya.[181]

In April 2016 then-Foreign Secretary Rt Hon Philip Hammond MP flew to Libya and met Sarraj in Tripoli – pledging £10m in funding for the new government and offering "training support to the administration's armed forces."[182] Later, in conjunction with Italy, the UK considered an "assistance mission [Libya International Assistance Mission] (LIAM) to train the Libyan armed forces, if requested by" the GNA.[183] Hammond confirmed that this would involve providing training and technical support to Libyan security forces, rather than directly providing security for the Libyan government, and the focus would be away from any front-line operations.[184]

A few months later, the UK said: "[b] efore engaging in any military operation in Libya, we would of course have to seek an invitation from the Libyan Government, … [t]he GNA has not invited the UK to deploy combat troops."[185]

However, whilst supporting the GNA politically and publicly the UK appears to also have worked with local groups, especially from the Libyan city of Misrata, on the frontline in the fight against IS.[186]

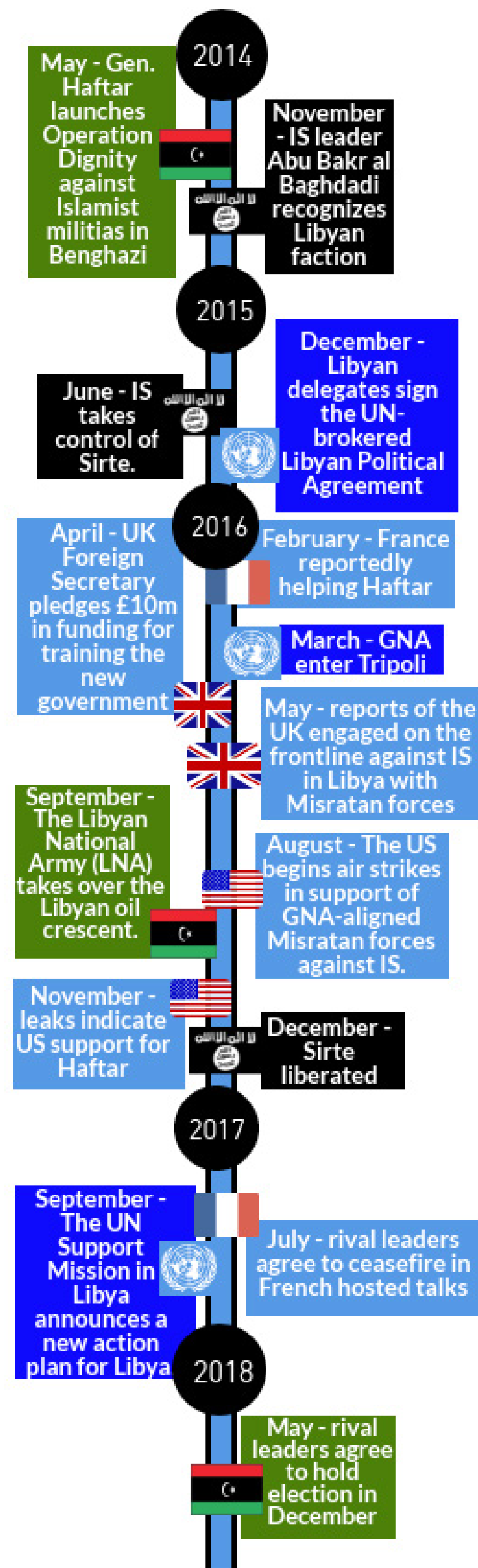

Figure 10: UK, French and U.S. operations in Libya.

The counter-terrorism lens

Following the rise of IS in Libya, it has been reported that small contingents of UK and other special forces have been involved in

building the capacity of forces from the Libyan city of Misrata – with some also supporting General Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA).

Attacks in Abu Grein, a village situated roughly halfway between Misrata and Sirte, seemed to suggest that IS "planned to extend its influence westward." Thus, Misratan forces found themselves drawn into difficult urban fighting which they were not properly trained for.[187]

Since then, there have been numerous reports of UK special forces supporting Misratan forces on the ground. For instance, in May 2016, The Times reported that UK special forces had been supporting Misratan forces on the frontline against IS.[188] It cited Mohamed Durat, a commander in Misrata, who explained, "My unit works just with English…I have met with them personally and they have destroyed two suicide vehicles that were targeting my fighters."[189] He was quoted again in August saying "'We co-ordinate with the Americans and British. When they are targeting a site we move back, they strike, and we move forward further. Together we can complete this mission."[190]

A number of the UK's allies have also supported General Haftar and his forces, the LNA, including France and the U.S.[191] For example, in January 2016, "a limited number of French special forces … helped the LNA to push back its opponents (including IS) from many of Benghazi's neighbourhoods."[192] It is unclear how much the UK has joined them. For instance, in July 2016, tapes obtained by Middle East Eye seemed to indicate that the UK, France and the U.S. were coordinating air strikes in support of groups in the east of Libya.[193]

While this support may have greatly enabled both groups to push IS out of the country, it may also have serious ramifications for the UK's broader objectives and, more specifically, the legitimacy and strength of the GNA. As the Foreign Affairs Committee noted back in September 2016: "special forces operations in Libya are problematic because they necessarily involve supporting individual militias associated with the GNA rather than the GNA itself, which does not directly command units on the ground."[194] As Libya expert, Alison Pargeter notes: "there are long-term consequences of working with particular local groups in the interests of countering IS. Doing so alters the balance of power on the ground, which has the potential to further undermine the prospects for peace."[195]

Fallout from the counter-terrorism campaign

Challengers to the GNA

Misratan forces initially had no ideological opposition to IS and some Misratan factions were linked to jihadist groups in the east. Even since Misratan forces began fighting the group, IS has never been the main focus of Misratan forces; during the conflict, they have prioritised their fight against Haftar. As the head of one Misratan television station expressed in early 2015: "This is about priorities: we first have to defeat Haftar and then get rid of Ansar al-Sharia."[196]

While Misratans have supported the GNA, this support cannot be taken for granted. Initially, Misratans were opposed to the GNA, taking control of a rival political force; however, as Pargeter argues, the prospect of being the armed force of an internationally recognised organisation prompted some factions within the Misratan forces to back the GNA.[197] While parts of the Misrata are currently aligned with the GNA, the GNA does not exercise much control over them. Serraj lamented in November 2016: "They do as they please... Whenever they want to go out and fight, they don't ask us and we end up firefighting these battles."[198]

By directly supporting Misratan groups rather than going through the GNA, Western forces have shown "how little [the GNA] was actually able to deliver to the forces on the ground in terms of weapons, money or political support. In the end, armed groups from Misrata did most of the heavy-lifting, with some help from foreign forces."[199] More recently, while Misratan forces had been "among the strongest and most powerful supporters of the GNA", clashes in Tripoli at the beginning of last year – including "hostile protests against Misrata and violent attacks against its … citizens in Tripoli" – led the Misrata local government to suspend its contacts with the Presidential Council.[200]

Arming Misratan groups could also have wider implications for regional stability. For instance, some tribes in Sirte see the Misratan-led victory as less of a liberation and more of a conquest — in fact, it was their grievances against Misratan domination that gave IS an opening in the first place.[201] Many Libyans were concerned about bolstering Misrata. For example, former Justice Minister, Saleh Marghani, warned: “Misrata’s political size may need to be checked in order to control any negative influence from its feeling too influential that might impede the compromises needed for a political settlement.”[202]

Similarly, while Haftar succeeded in ridding the city of IS, the campaign “severely ruptured the city’s social fabric, displacing thousands and unleashing exclusionary forces such as tribalism and ultraconservative Salafism.”[203] His political support base scarcely extends beyond the distinctive eastern region, and even there he remains a problematic figure, especially given his past links to the Gadhafi regime and his ongoing iron-fisted policies against “Islamists”.[204] In the west and south, “the LNA units have a distinctly tribal composition, provoking suspicion among neighbouring communities that view them as little more than tribal militias.”[205]

In supporting Haftar, Western countries have strengthened his “hand with both his ‘domestic’ opponents and rivals in eastern Libya and vis-à-vis the government in Tripoli.”[206] He has long rejected the GNA. At the end of last year, he stated that the UN-led peace process had expired and, with it, so too had the GNA and the Presidency Council.[207] He also said that his own forces, the LNA, were the “sole legitimate institution” in Libya.[208] Thus, while Haftar has agreed to accept the results of elections in December, many commentators have remained sceptical about whether this will be the case.[209]

Now, the GNA lacks any “real coalition of political and armed groups backing it besides the moderate elements in Misrata, which have increasing reservations about the government.”[210] It has also been unable to improve Libya’s financial situation which has pushed ordinary Libyans and “its staunchest supporters” to consider renegotiating “the agreement on which the GNA is based.”[211] Now, “[a]lthough the Islamic State (IS) was driven from its main areas of control in Libya last year and oil production has rebounded to a three-year high, Libya is more polarised and fragmented than ever.”[212]

Figure 11: Secretary Kerry participates in a Libya ministerial meeting (Image Source: Wikimedia Commons/ U.S. Department of State).

Conclusion

In an era of low support for British intervention and the continued threat of terrorism, remote warfare may seem like an appealing approach to intervening abroad. Its limited footprint and almost complete lack of British casualties has, for the most part, spared the UK government from intense scrutiny or public protest. However, its limited focus on counter-terrorism and relative opacity also appear to be hindering attempts to reform the British strategic decision-making process post-Chilcot, particularly when it comes to ensuring the diversity of thought and integrated approach that is meant to stop the government from repeating past mistakes.

There is little new in the idea that there is no such thing as a quick fix to complex problems like those facing Iraq, Syria and Libya. This will not come as a surprise to any within government, who have repeatedly identified these issues in their own strategy documents. It is therefore worth asking why there appears to be a current attempt to intervene in these areas on the basis of narrow counter-terrorism objectives, even when the UK is evidently aware that there are far broader issues at stake. This can only be a bad strategy, and it does not build much confidence in new mechanisms like the NSC that are meant to be synchronising efforts across government.

We did not get the sense from conversations with those in and around Whitehall and the NSC that they were unaware of the complexity of the situations they were intervening in, or that some of the negative consequences were unforeseen. Rather, many spoke of the fact that the UK did not have sufficient political mandate or influence over coalition operations to do anything differently. Whatever the truth in this, someone has to be ultimately responsible for making sure that the activities conducted fit the strategy put forward. All others – such as the military, members of the NSC, departments within Whitehall, Parliament, NGOs, civil society – have the responsibility to speak truth to power when this is not the case.

If we do not learn lessons but merely identify them, we cannot and will not move forwards. Instead, a gap between British aspirations and capabilities will persist, the “full-spectrum approach” will be periodically rebranded but never implemented, and British efforts to counter terrorism may end up undermining the stability they seek to create. We look forward to working with others to find ways to break out of this cycle.

Recommendations

This report has shown that a narrow counter-terrorism approach will rarely be successful. However, an integrated approach to conflict requires a shift in Whitehall culture to encourage greater knowledge-sharing between departments, Parliament, and the wider expert community. Some ways to achieve this change could be:

Improving internal debate over UK strategy:

- Operationalising concepts like the Building Stability Overseas Strategy and Fusion Doctrine so that clear tasks, responsibilities, and mechanisms for accountability and learning are set out.
- Empowering civil servants to ask strategic questions before NSC meetings, including outreach to regional and country experts based in embassies or in Whitehall.
- Improving expert consultation at NSC meetings by avoiding set questions and instead aiming for an open-ended consultation for deeper understanding of the regions where the UK is engaged or has prioritised.

The opacity of much of the NSC's operations means that it is a black box to external observers. This restricts meaningful engagement with its processes, depriving the NSC of valuable outside perspectives.

- The current situation could be improved by introducing an external shadow NSC which would periodically convene experts from across civil society, academia, and other external communities to debate NSC priorities in an open forum, with outputs that could then be fed back to government.

Improving external debate over UK strategy:

- As far as possible, governments should communicate the aims of military engagement abroad, even when operations fall short of large-scale combat deployments. This would allow the relevant parliamentary committees and civil society bodies to hold the government to account when there is a gap between stated ambitions and proposed activities.
    - In light of the current opacity that surrounds the activities of the UK's special forces, the government should consider improving mechanisms for external oversight (detailed options are available in a separate policy paper)[213] so that Parliament can provide meaningful scrutiny over all aspects of British military engagement overseas.
    - Given the potential strategic implications of military training and partnering activities, it is important for external parties to be able to access accurate, consistent information about them. MOD annual reports currently only provide a snapshot of select training activities, which change year on year. This should be rectified.

Conducting a strategic review of remote warfare:

Facts on the ground change fast in these complex environments, and being able to adapt activities and plans quickly is essential to ensure that broader UK objectives are met. The government should actively seek to understand the risks and opportunities of remote warfare. This should include:

- Periodic assessments of activities, partnerships, and priorities to assess evolving risks and to learn lessons.
- Regular evaluations of operations and activities to check how they measure against stated aims of delivering a more comprehensive approach to conflict and insecurity.

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