



Westminster Round Up | September 2018

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In Brief

Little time was spent in parliament in September, as the parties picked up and moved out for their annual conferences. Our Senior Advocacy Officer, Liam Walpole, gives his analysis of the conferences [here](#).

Media headlines were – once again – dominated by news of Brexit and Theresa May’s dancing, however in parliament, it was questions on the UK’ relationship with Saudi Arabia that dominated the Agenda. Disagreement is widening between those who believe the UK should follow in the footsteps of other European countries who have threatened to suspend arms sales to Saudi Arabia in light of their indiscriminate bombing of civilians in Yemen, and those who believe the only way to influence the politics of the Kingdom is to stay close. We recently released a report with the King’s College Policy institute analysing how much influence the UK actually has on KSA’s decision-making and found that rather than the UK having strategic influence over KSA, it may in fact be the other way round.

September also saw the first deployment of additional British troops to NATO’s mission in Afghanistan. This deployment was designated as a “non-combat” mission and, as a result, will not be exposed to the same scrutiny that combat missions face. However, a Freedom of Information request to the Ministry of Defence, echoed by a parliamentary question by MP Crispin Blunt, shows that the UK government does not have a definition of *combat* or *non-combat*, leaving the classification open to more arbitrary usage. This is especially true at a time of high political risk aversion, where the designation of a deployment as

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either *combat* or *non-combat* can be politically motivated, rather than based on a strategic assessment of what kind of missions will most effectively deliver on the West's political aims in Afghanistan. We write more on the dangers [here](#).

Focus Points

| 04.09.18 | **Alistair Burt defends UK influence over Saudi Arabia**

In the aftermath of a Saudi airstrike on a school bus in Yemen, in which 40 children and 11 adults were killed, Alistair Burt, the UK Minister for the Middle East answered questions on holding those responsible to account. He argued that “the hand of the United Kingdom can be seen in the work that we have done with the coalition (...) to ensure that should things go wrong, there is proper accountability” However, these arguments do not hold up to the findings of our recent report on the [UK's influence on Saudi politics](#).

| 11.09.18 | **MPs question UK complicity in indiscriminate SA attacks on Yemen**

In a lively debate, MPs questioned the degree to which the UK should be held responsible for Saudi Arabia's breaches of International Humanitarian Law. Some, like Stephen Twigg expressed sincere concern for breaches, while others, such as Crispin Blunt, insisted that the UK must continue to support SA against the Houthis.

| 04.09.18 | **100 UK troops arrive in Kabul to bolster NATO mission**

These troops were the first of an additional 440 the Prime Minister has committed to deploy in support of NATO's efforts in Afghanistan. While May has guaranteed that these forces will be non-combat, RWP has [recently](#)

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documented the potential for missions to be declared “non-combat” to avoid scrutiny in a climate of political risk-aversion – especially as the government does not hold a definition of combat. We also analysed the specific difficulty of separating combat from non-combat in Afghanistan.



Source:

https://www.army.mil/article/49311/side_by_side_for_peace_and_prosperity

House of Commons

| 04.09.18 | **Burt rejects proposal to suspend arms sale to Saudi Arabia**

In an oral answer to a question in the HoC, Burt, rejected a proposal to follow in the footsteps of Spain and other members of the EU who have ceased arms exports to Saudi Arabia in face of their indiscriminate use of such weapons in Yemen. He argued that there is no clear risk that UK weapons would be used in such violations of IHL, and instead changed the focus to the transgressions of the Houthis.

Government Announcements

| 02.09.18 | **UK government expressed concern at loss of life in Yemen**

In early September, the UK government expressed its concern at the amount of lives lost in Yemen in August: in the first two weeks of that month alone, 400 Yemenis were killed. They also widely welcomed the Coalition's own investigation into three particularly deadly attacks. However, the institution in charge of investigating human rights abuses in the coalition has been widely accused of corruption.

| 18.09.18 | **MOD emphasises importance of information advantage in new Concept Note**

In the Concept Note, the MOD emphasised the absolute importance of information advantage in defence and warfare. They write: "If used in a timely and coherent manner [information] can generate advantage over an adversary". However, at the same time, RWP has continuously pointed to the MOD's anachronistic "No Comment" approach to many aspects of modern warfare as a severe hindrance to influencing narratives on British participation in conflict.

| 19.09.18 | **UK thanks Turkey for role in tackling crisis in North West Syria**

After Alistair Burt visited Turkey, the government thanked Turkey for the role in responding to the war in Syria. The UK's collaboration with Turkey in Syria stands on shaky grounds as the two countries support internal actors with opposing objectives: our [recent report](#) on the political consequences of remote warfare explores this issue in depth.

About the Author

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