

# Why Britain Should Expand Airstrikes to Syria

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Lt Col John R. Barnett, an officer in the Air Force Office of Special Investigations (AFOSI) and also an Air Force Regional Affairs Strategist (RAS), was a 2015-16 visiting military fellow at The Washington Institute.



Brief Analysis

**A yes vote is important not just for the expected increase in tactical effectiveness it would bring on the Syrian battlefield, but also for signaling that the strategic alliance within the EU and between Europe and the United States is seamless.**

On December 2, the British Parliament is expected to vote on whether to broaden combat operations against the self-proclaimed Islamic State/ISIS by extending airstrikes from Iraq into Syria. From the coalition's perspective, enlisting British military support in Syria is important for both tangible, capabilities-based reasons and less tangible solidarity-based motives.

British forces have successfully executed air sorties from Cyprus against ISIS targets in Iraq since September 2014 - over the subsequent fourteen months of "Operation Shader," Britain was just above France and the Netherlands and second only to the United States in total number of airstrikes against enemy targets. British press reports indicate that if Parliament approves the expansion, the Defense Ministry will double its manned combat aircraft numbers (Tornado and Typhoon fighter jets) to around sixteen and employ them against targets in both Syria and Iraq.

Although this is not a game-changing quantity of aircraft, it would bolster the coalition's tactical effects. Equipped with precision munitions such as the Paveway variants, these jets would augment response time and eventually widen the ISIS target set. In addition, their inclusion could slightly ease the logistics and maintenance burden on American aircraft at a time when U.S. Central Command plans to increase combat sorties and bombs on target in Syria. The *New York Times* noted that the U.S. Air Force and Navy have conducted approximately 95 percent of all combat sorties over Syria to date. As the tempo increases, adding even a small number of very capable British forces would lend a visible boost, particularly given the current lack of a U.S. aircraft carrier in the Persian Gulf (the French

carrier currently deployed to support operations in the area is very capable, but it contains roughly half the attack aircraft of a U.S. carrier).

Specifically, the combat effect would include an increased capacity to identify timely ISIS targets via British Reaper-model drones, which have already been used successfully in Iraq and Syria. The information-sharing requirements between coalition members will grow as the pace of operations increases, and British intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets -- possibly including the RC-135 Rivet Joint surveillance plane -- would increase the actionable intelligence available to coalition planners. This will prove especially important as ISIS targets are dislodged and become more mobile. Much like the U.S. military, the Royal Air Force also has capabilities that allow it to operate autonomously in combat zones for extended periods, including a robust air refueling capacity via the Voyager KC2 and an effective fleet of cargo aircraft such as the C-130.

In addition to the potential tactical benefits it could bring, the Parliament's decision will also send a powerful message -- one way or another -- to allies and adversaries. For example, how would partners such as France and Germany view a "no" vote and the clear difference in policy it would signal? In the wake of the recent terrorist attacks in Paris, both of those countries are strongly committed to the anti-ISIS campaign in Syria, so Britain's vote will do much in the way of setting the tone. Likewise, persistent space between London and Washington on the ISIS fight could strengthen the narrative that the United States and Europe are moving further apart -- a development that Moscow would aim to exploit. Indeed, a no vote would bolster Bashar al-Assad and his protectors in Russia and Iran, likely signaling that coalition operations are legitimate in Iraq but not in Syria. The latest parliamentary debate is therefore an important opportunity for Britain's elected leadership to consider all the risks of standing pat, of which there are many.

*Lt Col John Barnett (USAF), a National Defense Fellow at The Washington Institute, has completed command tours in Turkey and South Asia. The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the U.S. Air Force, U.S. Department of Defense, or U.S. government.* ♦

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