

Following ISIL's attacks on Paris last Friday, Prime Minister David Cameron is now indicating he wants to revisit the debate on the extension of UK counter-ISIL air strikes to Syria. This would be not least as an important demonstration of solidarity with France, argues a new RUSI report. (Access at <https://www.rusi.org/UK-SyriaAirsStrikes>)

We invite readers to join in the debate on the political and military implications - the utility of force, war aims etc. "Stop the war" is a perfectly valid point of view but will be moderated out for these purposes.

The RUSI report cautions against overstating the benefits of air strikes on their own. It makes clear that operations could end without decisive strategic effect, and that the UK's military campaign 'will need to be calibrated on the assumption that it may have to be sustained over a period of several years.' While the UK's involvement would provide some additional specialist capabilities which the US does not possess, its relative size means that its effort will not be strategically transformative by itself.

Nevertheless, the paper argues, current US and French airstrikes in Syria already contribute to 'important second-order objectives.' These include the protection of Kurdish-majority areas in northern Syria, where 'if MPs accept that the US was right to use force to protect Kobani (with UK non-lethal support), it is hard to see how they can then justify a refusal in principle to authorise UK participation in future comparable operations.'

Current air strikes in Syria also 'allow the coalition to attack ISIL's headquarters in Raqqa, the 6th largest Syrian population which had a population of around quarter of a million, ensuring that it has no safe haven from which to provide logistical and financial support to its operations in Iraq.'

The report highlights three substantial military consequences of its analysis:

1. A higher level of air-power commitment, well above that currently deployed, could not be sustained for long without seriously eroding the UK's ability to respond to other demands that may arise in the medium term, be that in the Baltic states, Western Balkans, West Africa or Afghanistan.
2. The UK will need the capability to escalate its military effort in Iraq and Syria at relatively short notice, for short periods and, if necessary, without another parliamentary approval, as and when new opportunities present themselves.
3. If diplomatic efforts to resolve the Syrian war begin to bear fruit, the UK should be prepared to pledge forces in support of a UN-authorised peace-enforcement effort.

Ultimately, the report concludes that 'As long as the involvements of UK forces in Iraq - and, separately, Syria - continue to do some good, they should be continued. While the UK should not rule out the possibility of deepening its involvement in Syria in certain scenarios, however, it may also have to be prepared to walk away from military operations if necessary.' If from a strategic point of view you disagree, we'd be interested to know why.