

British RAF carry out airstrikes in Mosul, Iraq

Robert Stevens
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Royal Air Force (RAF) Tornado warplanes stepped up their bombing operations in Iraq on Monday by striking what the Ministry of Defence (MOD) said was a training centre for the Islamic State (ISIS-Daesh).

The RAF has been taking part in air strikes against ISIS in Iraq since 2014, and against Syria since last December, as part of US-led operations.

In a statement, the MOD said, “Tornados participated in a major coalition air strike on Saddam’s former palace in Mosul, used by Daesh as a headquarters and training establishment for foreign terrorists, while Typhoons destroyed a network of fortified positions on the outskirts of Manbij.”

According to the *Independent*, Britain was one of seven countries involved in the raid. News sources reported that the Tornados used two of their largest 2000 lb. Paveway laser-guided bombs to destroy hardened and deeply buried targets.

The bombings mark an escalation of Britain’s participation in imperialist military operations in the Middle East. Although RAF planes were not reported to be involved in this week’s US airstrikes on the Libyan coast city of Sirte, they are understood to have been involved in reconnaissance missions ahead of the bombings. British Special Forces are also operating in Libya, alongside those from France and Italy.

The latest strikes came just three weeks after Theresa May replaced David Cameron as Conservative Prime Minister.

Within five days of entering Downing Street, May signalled that under her premiership Britain’s military would step up its global operations. On July 18, she authorised a debate in parliament on the renewal of the UK Trident nuclear defence system. May set the tone of the debate, in which three quarters of the Labour Party backed the renewal of Trident. The prime minister replied with an unequivocal “Yes” to an MP who asked if she

would be “personally prepared to authorise a nuclear strike that can kill a hundred thousand innocent men, women and children.”

May stated that her “Government will continue to meet our NATO obligation to spend 2 percent of our GDP on defence. We will maintain the most significant security and military capability in Europe, and we will continue to invest in all the capabilities set out in the strategic defence and security review last year.”

She named seven countries/regions of the world where Britain’s military would continue to intervene, stating, “We will meet the growing terrorist threat coming from Daesh in Syria and Iraq, from Boko Haram in Nigeria, from al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, from al-Shabaab in east Africa, and from other terrorist groups planning attacks in Pakistan and Afghanistan.”

UK armed forces are already deployed in more than 80 countries across the world. Well over a decade after the invasions and occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq, 450 UK soldiers remain in Afghanistan and more than 275 military training personnel operate in Iraq. An additional 50 troops are to be deployed to Afghanistan due to the worsening security situation in the country and in line with the slowing and reversal of the US troop drawdown.

During a visit to the RAF’s base in Akrotiri, Cyprus on Tuesday, UK Defence Minister Michael Fallon stated that additional British troops would be deployed to Iraq this month to support ongoing military campaigns. In a move first announced last month, an additional 250 troops will bring the total number of British military forces to more than 500.

Emphasising Britain’s commitment to the US-led NATO alliance, Fallon said, “The uplift underlines that Britain is stepping up, not stepping back from our international commitments,” following the June 23 referendum vote for the UK to leave the European Union (EU).

Last month, speaking of Syria at a Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) conference on airpower, Fallon said, “The RAF has not operated at this sustained operational tempo in a single theatre of conflict for a quarter of a century.”

The opposition Labour Party, as befitting its historic role in support of the predatory interests of British imperialism, was the critical factor in overturning an August 2013 vote against Syrian operations, due to widespread public opposition, combined with divisions within the political and military elite over their efficacy. The vote severely damaged British imperialism’s standing in Washington and helped force the Obama administration to retreat from open warfare aimed at deposing Bashar al Assad and installing a client regime.

In September 2014, parliament voted by a massive majority in favour of “the use of UK air strikes to support Iraqi, including Kurdish, security forces’ efforts against ISIL in Iraq.” Just 24 of 257 Labour MPs voted against, as then party leader Ed Miliband lauded military action. Air strikes by British warplanes in Iraq took place in the hours immediately following the vote.

Under new, nominally “left”, leader Jeremy Corbyn, Labour then played a critical role in allowing British bombing in Syria.

After Cameron called a vote in parliament last December for Britain to intervene militarily in Syria on the pretext of fighting ISIS, Corbyn authorised a free vote by Labour MPs on the issue. This meant they would not be censured or disciplined for supporting war. Corbyn did this knowing that a large contingent of Labour MPs would line up behind the Tory war resolution. In the event, 66 Labourites backed military action, giving the Tories their politically required majority.

In January, Fallon provided an update on the escalation of Britain’s operation in Iraq and cited the vital importance of the Syria vote. “After the vote in parliament we have doubled the number of strike aircraft and we have tripled the number of strikes—by day and night—that we are carrying out six days a week,” he said.

Addressing RUSI, Fallon noted, “Two years on from Parliament’s vote to authorise airstrikes in Iraq, seven months since the extension of that authorisation to Syria, we now have over 600 air and ground crews in RAF Akrotiri.” He boasted, “Our aircrew have flown more than 2,800 missions in Iraq and Syria. They’ve conducted 865 airstrikes in Iraq and, since December, 50 in Syria—more than any other nation except the United States.”

Fallon’s speech was a declaration of the global ambitions of British imperialism. “Last year”, crowed the Defence Secretary, “our pilots and aircrew deployed to more than 60 countries.”

Delivering his speech just days after the June 23 referendum vote on leaving the European Union, Fallon said, “The result of the referendum will not change our global outlook. Nor the shared threats we face.”

“To counter those international challenges ... we must work even harder with our allies and partners, becoming, in the words of our SDSR [Strategic Defence and Security Review], international-by-design. And while we’ve opted out of one particular union, we take our global responsibilities seriously, as members of NATO, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the Northern Group of European nations, the Five Power Defence Arrangements in the Far East and permanent members of the UN Security Council.”

While nominally directed against ISIS militias, the aim of Britain’s military interventions is to secure a good portion of the spoils from the ongoing imperialist carve-up of the region. Moreover, these operations, which are being promoted in the bellicose language of May and Fallon, are in readiness for war against Russia and China, in alliance with the United States and NATO.

Fallon stressed that the RAF was operating in “Eastern Europe for the third year running ... protecting our NATO allies against Russian aggression.” He added that the RAF’s capital investment program was being increased to more than £6 billion as “Our competitors are striving to close the capability gap” with Russia “exploiting forward-swept wing technology” and with “North Korea ‘miniaturising’ nuclear weapons.”



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