

UK government lies exposed over civilian casualties in Iraq and Syria

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Recent reports expose the absurdity of the British government's claims that it had "no evidence" that UK air strikes had killed a single civilian in Iraq and Syria during the three-year-long bombing campaign.

In the absence of regular Ministry of Defence (MoD) statistics on its air strikes in the region, the website Middle East Eye (MEE) has used data collated by the campaign group Drone Wars about Britain's operations.

Since the start of Operation Shader against IS in 2014 until last September, Royal Air Force (RAF) drones and jets dropped more than 3,400 bombs and missiles on Islamic State (IS) militants in Iraq and Syria. These include 2,089 Paveway IV "precision-guided" bombs and 486 of the more accurate Brimstone missiles from Typhoon and Tornado jets. RAF Reaper drones fired 724 Hellfire missiles at IS targets.

Such estimates are at best conservative, since MoD updates do not always specify the number of bombs or missiles used in a strike. In October, a MoD spokesperson admitted that the RAF had dropped a further 86 bombs and missiles.

Referring to the battle to retake the Iraqi city of Mosul, former defence secretary Sir Michael Fallon stated the RAF had struck more than 750 targets in the city—"second only to the United States."

Airwars, a journalist-led project monitoring reports of civilian casualties from airstrikes, estimated that the number of civilians killed last year by the US-led coalition against IS was between 11,000 and 18,000, mostly in the battles to retake the Iraqi city of Mosul and the Syrian city of Raqqa. Figures released by Associated Press, Amnesty International, Iraq Body Count and the UN put the number of civilian deaths at around 11,000 people, while hundreds more may be buried in the rubble.

Greg Bagwell, a former RAF deputy commander who oversaw air strikes in Iraq, Syria and Libya before retiring in 2016, told Drone Wars UK that it was "almost unbelievable" that the British government had said it had no credible evidence of civilian deaths during the RAF campaign against IS.

He pointed out: "You can't see through rubble." Last July, there were reports that Iraqi soldiers had used bulldozers to hide the bodies of hundreds of civilians killed in the last days of the battle for Mosul.

Britain's air campaign in Iraq and Syria has cost at least £1.75 billion (\$2.5 billion), with almost \$2.1 billion spent on operating the RAF's fleet of Reaper drones and Tornado and Typhoon jets, and \$376.2 million on weaponry. The cost of Brimstone missiles is believed to be at least £100,000 each; heavier Paveway IV bombs £30,000 each, and Hellfire, fired by the Reaper drones, £71,300 each.

These are just the headline costs. The figures, compiled by Drone Wars UK exclude any ground operations or training support either to the Iraqi army or the Syrian forces supported by the US-led coalition. Neither do they include crew time, maintenance and capital costs. Parliament's defence select committee was told that the official cost of Britain's involvement in the NATO-led war to unseat Colonel Muammar Gaddafi in Libya in 2011 was "not a true and realistic calculation of the costs of operations."

Crucially, these estimates—obtained from Freedom of Information requests—confirm that the MoD's figures of £800 million given to Parliament in October were fictitious. They also give the lie to the preposterous claims made in December 2015—some time after the bombing campaign had actually started without Parliament's knowledge—by the then chancellor of the exchequer, George Osborne. He said, in an attempt to

assuage popular opposition to Britain's intervention against a background of austerity and ongoing privatisation of health and education, that the cost of launching British airstrikes against IS in Syria would be in the "low tens of millions of pounds" and would "come out of the special reserve which we established for the purposes of military action like this."

While Osborne and then Prime Minister David Cameron confirmed that the Syrian campaign could well last for several years, the seven-month-long bombing campaign in Libya had cost at least £1.5 billion.

In 2014, after the Obama administration sent US troops back into Iraq and started its bombing campaign in Iraq and Syria—ostensibly to defeat IS but in reality to shore up its position in the Middle East—Britain joined the US-coalition. Along with the US, London supported a war for regime change in Syria, a Russian ally, in an alliance with Islamist militias and Kurdish forces.

This was well before any authorisation to intervene in Syria and in defiance of the 2013 House of Commons vote against military intervention in Syria, which Cameron had promised to honour, much to Washington's fury.

In December 2015, Parliament voted to support an air campaign against Islamic State in Syria but did not authorise the use of ground troops or special forces, but Cameron ignored this distinction.

More than 85,000 Iraqi and 500,000 Syrians, many of them civilians, have been killed in the past seven years. An estimated 11 million Syrians have been displaced, producing the worst refugee crisis since World War II.

Despite declaring victory over IS in Iraq and Syria, government ministers, including Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson, and senior military officers have indicated that they want RAF bombing to continue. Both International Development Secretary Rory Stewart and Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson have called for drones to be used to kill British-born IS members in Iraq and Syria—a kill-on-sight policy that would breach UK and international law.

Just last week, Johnson went further, raising the possibility of a full-scale intervention against Syria that could lead to a wider conflagration with nuclear-armed Russia, when he said that Britain would consider bombing the Syrian government if it was proved to

have used gas on civilians.

None of this would have been possible without Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn's willingness to ditch positions he has held for decades to maintain the unity of the Labour Party and its ability to defend the interests of British imperialism.

On every key issue—war in Syria, NATO's military build-up against Russia and the renewal of Britain's nuclear weapons programme—the former chairperson of the Stop the War Coalition has given way to the militaristic demands of his right-wing critics.

In December 2015, Corbyn authorised a free vote on military action in Syria and allowed Hillary Benn, a supporter of Britain's intervention in Syria, to close the parliamentary debate for Labour, enabling RAF bombers to carry out the first sanctioned attack on Syria.

In 2016, he abandoned his opposition to NATO membership and then gave Labour MPs another free vote on the renewal of Trident—Britain's nuclear arms programme—lining up Britain alongside the US in a potential nuclear war with Russia.

Despite the government's increasingly absurd claims that it has no evidence that RAF strikes have killed civilians, he has initiated no debate in Parliament over this or the continuation of British bombing raids in Syria. Iraq has declared victory over IS and secured its borders—the supposed purpose of Britain's intervention in the first place.



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