

BRITISH DRONE OPERATIONS AGAINST ISIS, 2014 - 2016

Operational data,
Continuing issues of concern



Drone WARS UK
www.dronewars.net

Drone Wars UK has been monitoring and analysing the use of armed drones by British forces since 2010. With the despatch of British Reaper drones to the Middle-East from Afghanistan beginning in Oct 2014, we have been gathering data on UK drone operations against ISIS mostly through Freedom of Information (Fol) requests to the Ministry of Defence (MoD). With the latest release of information (Feb 2017) we now have just over two years of full data.

For more information see www.dronewars.net

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1.0 UK Air Operations Against ISIS: Background and Timeline

On 10 June 2014, Iraq declared a national state of emergency after militants from ISIS took over the Iraqi city of Mosul. Six days later, UK Foreign Secretary William Hague made a statement on the situation in the House of Commons, reporting that the UK was taking action to promote political unity, offering assistance where possible and alleviating humanitarian suffering. He went on to state, "We have made it clear this does not involve planning a military intervention by the United Kingdom."¹

In August 2014, US forces began air strikes on ISIS positions in Iraq. RAF aircraft dropped aid to refugees and "pre-positioned" six RAF Tornados in Cyprus.² On 18th August the new Foreign Secretary Phillip Hammond also insisted that there were no plans for UK air strikes:

*"There's no call for us to deliver air strikes at the moment. The US is delivering targeted air strikes, and they're perfectly able to do what needs to be done, so we have no plans at the moment to engage in air strikes"*³

In late August and early September 2014, ISIS released three videos depicting the beheading of western hostages. As many commenters and experts stated at the time, the videos appeared to be aimed at not only causing terror, but also at goading further military response from the West. In response, US forces extended bombing of ISIS into Syria, while in the UK the Prime Minister recalled parliament to vote on military action against ISIS in Iraq.

On 26 September 2014, parliament debated a resolution supporting air strikes against ISIS in Iraq.⁴ The government motion argued that Iraq's request for military assistance gave a clear legal basis for such action in Iraq but not in Syria. Parliament voted overwhelmingly to support the motion and UK armed Tornado sorties began over Iraq the next day, with the first UK airstrike occurring on 30 September.⁵

On October 16 2014, the UK MoD announced that UK Reapers were to be deployed from Afghanistan for operations in Iraq. The first UK Reaper flight in Iraq took place on October 22, with the first Reaper strike occurring on November 9th.⁶

On 21 October 2014 the MoD announced that UK Reapers and Rivet Joint aircraft would begin surveillance flights over Syria. When questioned by the media about legal authorisation for such missions, the Prime Minister's official spokesman said the flights did not amount to military action:

¹ Hansard 16 Jun 2014 : Column 852

http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmhansrd/cm140616/debtext/140616-0001.htm#140616-0001.htm_spm21

² 'COBR meeting on the latest situation in Iraq', Prime Minister's Office press release, 11.08.2014

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/cobr-meeting-on-the-latest-situation-in-iraq>

³ Isabel Hardman, 'Philip Hammond: No plans to engage in airstrikes', The Spectator, 18 August 2014,

<http://blogs.new.spectator.co.uk/2014/08/philip-hammond-no-plans-to-engage-in-airstrikes>

⁴ Hansard 26 Sep 2014: Column 1255

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmhansrd/cm140926/debtext/140926-0001.htm#1409266000001>

⁵ 'RAF conducts first air strikes of Iraq mission', MoD Press Release 30 September 2014

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/raf-conducts-first-air-strikes-of-iraq-mission--2>

⁶ UK deploys Reaper to the Middle East. MoD press release <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-deploys-reaper-to-the-middle-east>. First flight and first Reaper air strike see <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Commons/2014-11-06/213741/>

*"The prime minister and government have made clear that we would return to parliament for a separate decision if we were proposing to take military action. This is about intelligence-gathering."*⁷

As many legal experts and scholars pointed out at the time, without a UN resolution or a request from the Syrian government, any UK military operations within Syria was controversial at best.⁸ However over the ensuing months, Reaper drone operations within Syria gradually increased with almost one third of British drone operations taking place inside Syria prior to the December 2015 parliamentary vote to extend UK military operations against ISIS into Syria. While Ministers stated on several occasions these flights were unarmed, the MoD later confirmed this was not the case with all UK drone flights into Syria being armed.⁹

From summer 2015 UK Ministers began pushing for UK aircraft to undertake strikes within Syria as well as Iraq, with Defence Secretary Michael Fallon arguing that it was "an illegality" not to do so.¹⁰

On September 7 2015, the then British Prime Minister told the House of Commons that a British Reaper had targeted and killed British national Reyaad Khan near Raqqa in Syria on 21 August. Killed alongside Khan was his cousin from Aberdeen, Ruhul Amin, and a Belgian man known only as Abu Ayman al-Belgiki.¹¹ The PM stated that it was "the first time in modern times that a British asset has been used to conduct a strike in a country where we're not involved in a war".¹²

UK Reaper drones also played a direct role alongside US drones in the targeted killing of two other British nationals Junaid Hussain and Mohammed Emwazi (known as 'Jihadi John') inside Syria in summer and autumn of 2015.¹³

Following a November 2015 UN Security Council resolution on ISIS in Iraq and Syria, partly in response to terror attacks in Tunisia (June 2015) and Paris (November 2015), UK MPs voted to extend UK airstrikes against ISIS into Syria in December 2015.¹⁴

⁷ Rowena Mason, UK to fly military drones over Syria, *The Guardian*, 21 October 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2014/oct/21/uk-to-fly-military-drones-over-syria>

⁸ See Jennifer Daskat, Ashley Deeks, Ryan Goodman, *Strikes in Syria: The International Law Framework*, Just Security, 24 September, 2014, <https://www.justsecurity.org/15479/strikes-syria-international-law-framework-daskat-deeks-goodman/> and Louise Arimatsu, Michael Schmitt *The legal basis for the war against Isis remains contentious*, *The Guardian*, 6 October 2014. <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/oct/06/legal-basis-war-isis-syria-islamic-state>

⁹ For MoD confirmation that British Reapers are armed in Syria see Freedom of Information response 21 October 2015 https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/470254/20151021-FOI08237_Reaper_missions_in_Syria-.pdf. For examples of Ministers saying Reapers conducting unarmed surveillance missions see Philip Hammond's response to Alex Salmond Hansard 20 Oct 2015: Column 808 <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2015-10-20/debates/15102042000019/Syria#contribution-15102042000141>

¹⁰ Martha Kearney interview with Michael Fallon MP, BBC Radio Four, 1 July 2015, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p02w1vh3>

¹¹ Nadia Khomami and Alice Ross, Reyaad Khan, Junaid Hussain and Ruhul Amin: profiles of Isis Britons killed in Syria, *The Guardian*, 7 Sept, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/07/reyaad-khan-junaid-hussain-profiles-isis-britons-syria>

¹² Islamic State conflict: Two Britons killed in RAF Syria strike, BBC News, 7 Sept 2015, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-34178998>

¹³ Chris Cole, Truth and consequences: One year on what we know (and what we don't) about the Khan killing, Drone Wars UK, 18 August 2016, <https://dronewars.net/2016/08/18/truth-and-consequences-one-year-on-what-we-know-and-what-we-dont-about-the-khan-killing/>

¹⁴ MPs approve motion on ISIL in Syria, www.parliament.uk, 02 December 2015, <https://www.parliament.uk/business/news/2015/december/mps-debate-motion-on-isil-in-syria/>

2.0 UK Air Operations against ISIS: FoI Data, 2014-2016

2.1 UK Air Operations in Iraq and Syria 2014 - 2016

Reaper

	Reaper Missions Flown Iraq	Reaper Missions Flown Syria	Total Reaper Missions Flown	Reaper 'strikes' Iraq	Reaper 'strikes' Syria	Total Reaper 'strikes'	Reaper Weapons Iraq	Reaper weapons Syria	Total Reaper weapons
2014 (Oct-Dec)	107	10	117	25	0	25	38	0	38
2015	643	247	890	162	1	163	273	1	274
2016	403	287	690	136	24	160	311	47	358
TOTAL Reaper	1,153	544	1,697	323	25	348	622	48	670

Tornado

	Tornado Missions Flown Iraq	Tornado Missions Flown Syria	Total Tornado Missions Flown	Tornado 'strikes' Iraq	Tornado 'strikes' Syria	Total Tornado 'strikes'	Tornado Weapons Iraq	Tornado weapons Syria	Total Tornado weapons
2014 (Oct-Dec)	164	0	164	40	0	40	104	0	104
2015	581	15	596	211	9	220	397	19	416
2016	431	133	564	214	29	243	488	77	565
TOTAL Tornado	1,176	148	1,324	465	38	503	989	96	1,085

Typhoon

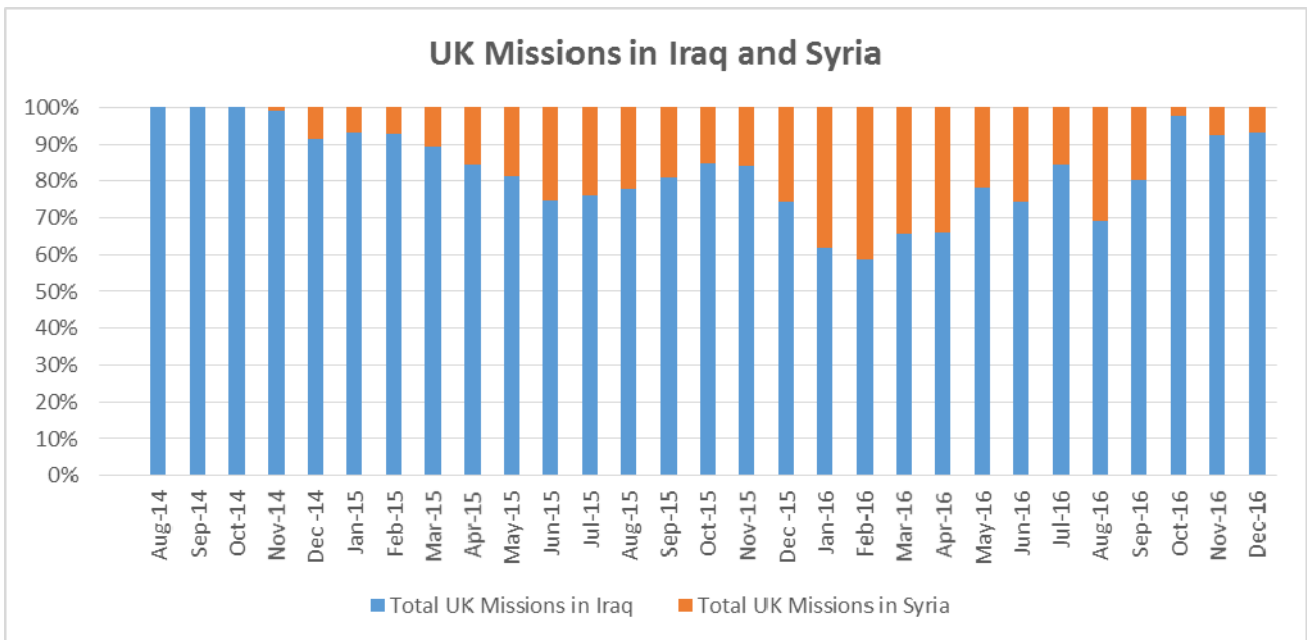
	Typhoon Missions Flown Iraq	Typhoon Missions Flown Syria	Total Typhoon Missions Flown	Typhoon 'strikes' Iraq	Typhoon 'strikes' Syria	Total Typhoon 'strikes'	Typhoon Weapons Iraq	Typhoon weapons Syria	Total Typhoon weapons
2014 (Oct-Dec)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
2015	37	10	47	29	1	30	37	3	40
2016	473	37	510	308	15	323	667	59	726
TOTAL Typhoon	510	47	557	337	16	353	704	62	766

Reaper/Tornado/Typhoo combined

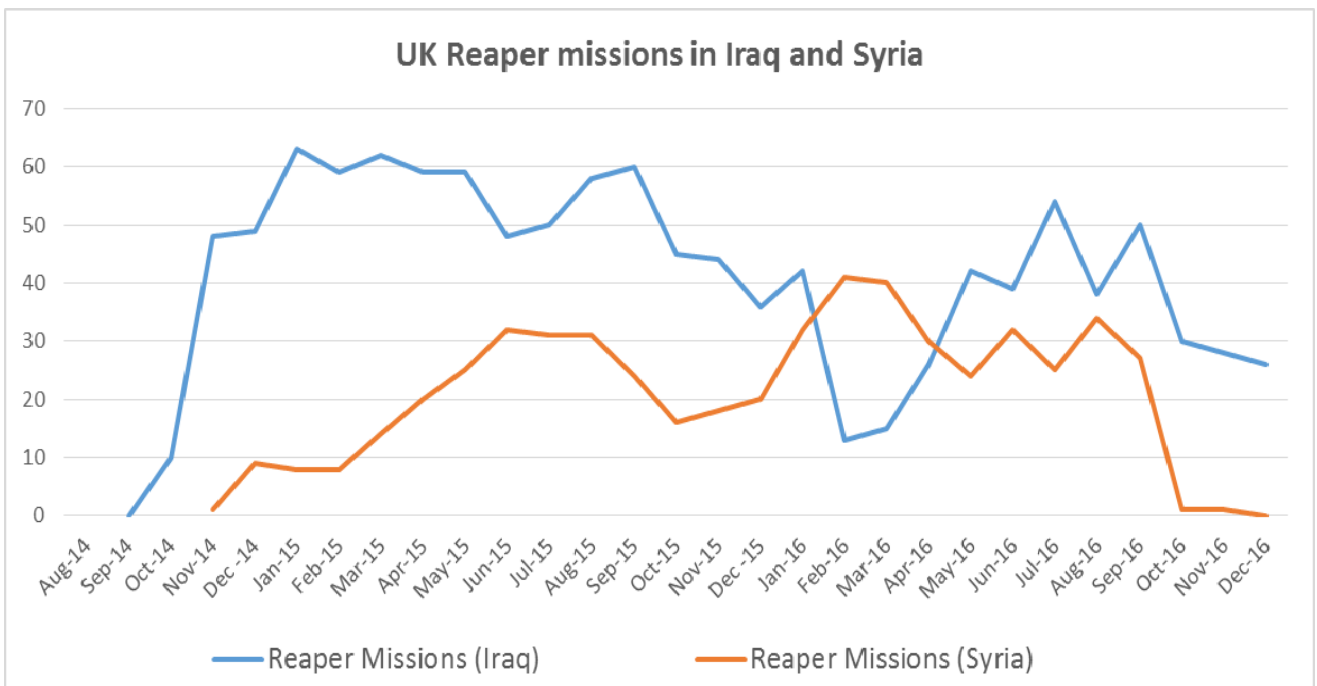
	UK Missions Flown Iraq	UK Missions Flown Syria	Total UK Missions Flown	UK 'strikes' Iraq	UK 'strikes' Syria	Total UK 'strikes'	UK Weapons fired Iraq	UK Weapons fired Syria	Total UK weapons fired
2014 (Oct-Dec)	271	10	281	65	0	65	142	0	142
2015	1,261	272	1,533	402	11	413	707	23	730
2016	1,307	457	1,764	658	68	726	1,466	183	1,649
TOTAL UK	2,839	739	3,578	1,125	79	1,204	2,315	206	2,521

Note: Figures compiled from responses to Freedom of Information requests to Ministry of Defence. MoD state figures given in FoI responses are subject to review. Does not include targeted strike on Reyaad Khan in Aug 2015 as MoD does not include in Operation Shader figures.

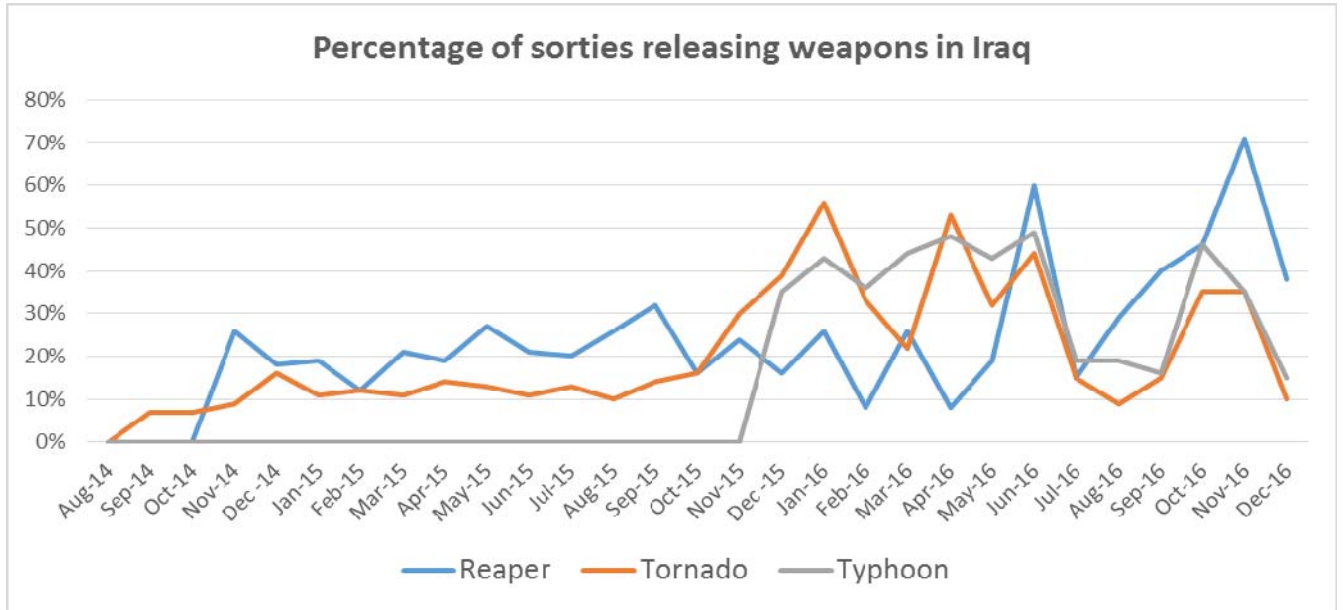
2.2 UK Air Mission Against ISIS: Iraq vs. Syria, 2014 - 2016



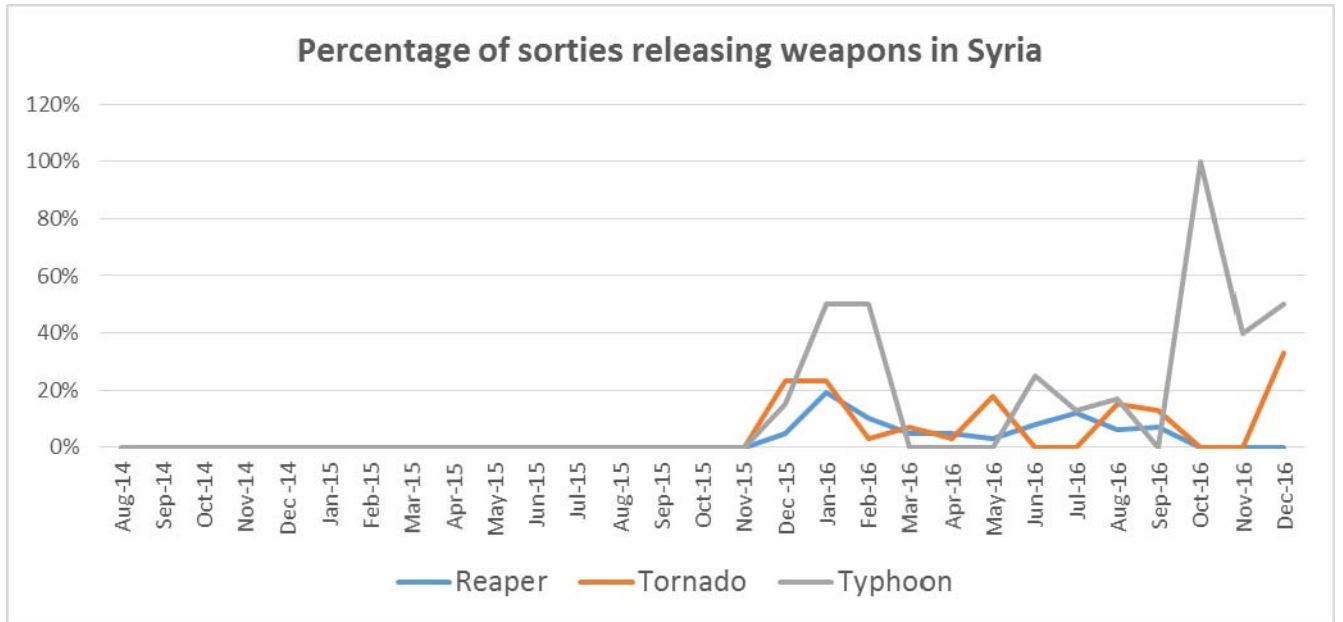
2.3: UK Reaper Missions in Iraq and Syria, 2014 - 2016



2.4 Percentage of UK sorties releasing weapons in Iraq by aircraft, 2014 - 2016*

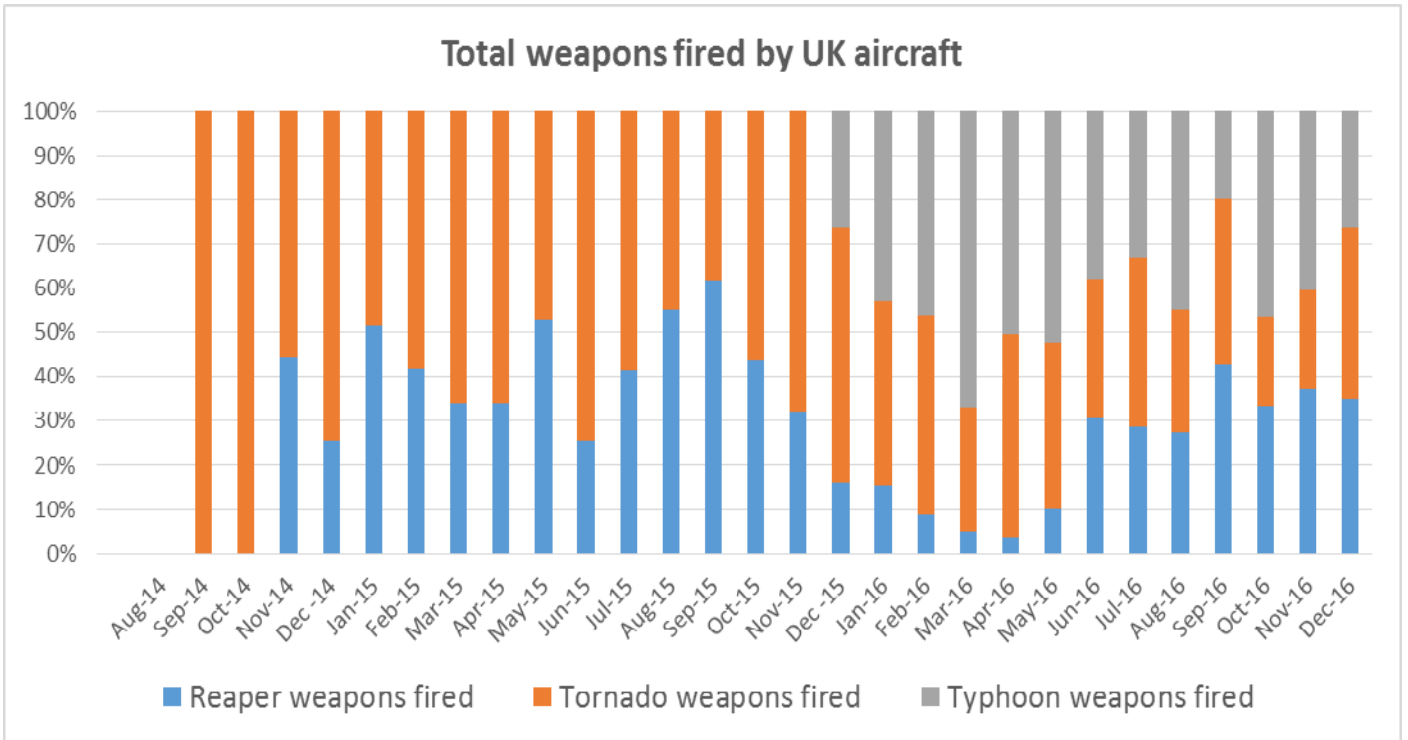


2.5 Percentage of UK sorties releasing weapons in Syria by aircraft, 2014 - 2016*

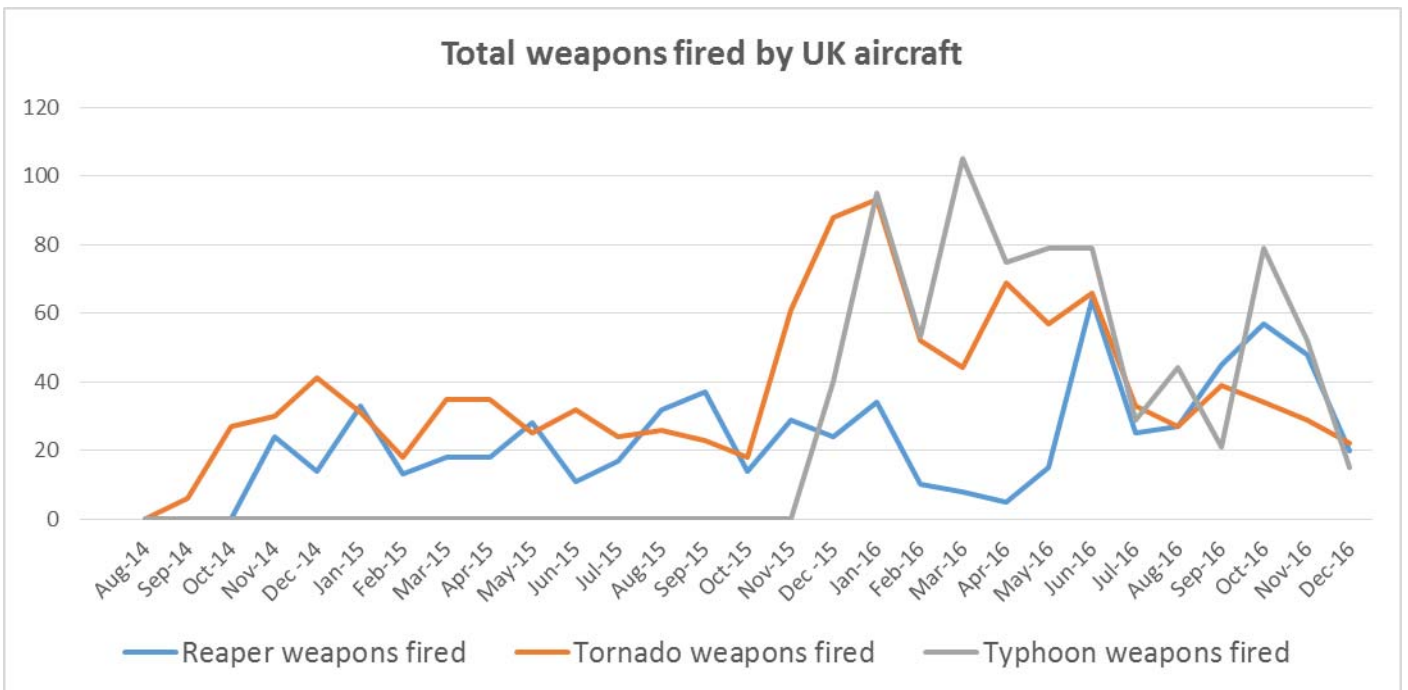


*Note: Reaper missions consists of one aircraft and therefore one sortie per mission. Tornado and Typhoon missions are flown in pairs and hence two sorties per mission.

2.6 Total weapons fired by UK aircraft, 2014 - 2016



2.7 Total weapons fired by UK aircraft, 2014 - 2016



2.8 Number of UK weapons fired in Iraq and Syria, 2014 - 2016



2.9 Total UK missions vs. weapons fired, 2014 – 2016



3.0 Issue of Concern: Armed drones & UK operations in Iraq/Syria

3.1 Lowering the threshold for use of military force

One of the key concerns about the use of armed drones is whether they are lowering the threshold for the use of force. Within six weeks of the September 2014 parliamentary vote authorising UK military action against ISIS strictly within Iraq, British drones were crossing the border into Syria, with intelligence gathered by the British drones used by Coalition forces to undertake strikes in Syria.¹⁵

Officials argued such flights did not amount to military action with Ministers stating that the Reaper missions were unarmed. However the MoD later confirmed that all British Reaper drones crossing into Syria before the 2015 vote to extend UK military action into Syria were in fact armed.¹⁶ While drone advocates often insist that armed drones are no different from manned aircraft, it is difficult to believe that the UK would have sent manned aircraft into Syria in 2014 as the operational and political risk was far too great.

From mid-2015, UK defence officials began arguing that it was 'illogical' that UK forces could not undertake airstrikes against ISIS in Syria as well as Iraq. The fact that British drones were already flying missions in Syria was used in part to leverage support for wider military action in Syria by British forces.

3.2 Expanding targeted killing

Despite repeated denials that the UK would follow the US down the path of drone targeted killing, on 21 August 2015, British drones targeted and killed UK citizen Reyaad Khan near Raqqa in Syria. Alongside Khan, his cousin from Aberdeen, Ruhul Amin, and a Belgian man known only as Abu Ayman al-Belgiki, were also killed. Senior military officers acknowledged that the strike represented the 'crossing of a Rubicon'.¹⁷ Defence Secretary Michael Fallon made it clear that the UK was prepared to carry out such targeted killings again.¹⁸

In its letter to the UN reporting the strike, the UK Ambassador argued the strike was undertaken as part of the collective self-defence of Iraq as well as self-defence of the UK. The MoD insists, however, that the August 2015 strike against Khan was not part of Operation Shader, its name for the UK's military support of Iraq against ISIS.¹⁹

In its inquiry into the use of drones for targeted killing, the parliamentary Joint Human Rights Committee argued that the legal basis offered by the UK government for the drone targeted killing was "confused and confusing". In October 2016, the Committee slammed the Government's response to its report saying the Government had ducked the central questions²⁰

¹⁵ Rowena Mason, UK to fly military drones over Syria, *The Guardian*, 21 October 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2014/oct/21/uk-to-fly-military-drones-over-syria>. See also FCO response to PQ from Andrew Rosindell MP, 23 Feb 2015 <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Commons/2015-02-11/224326/>.

¹⁶ FoI response to Drone Wars UK:

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/470254/20151021-FOI08237_Reaper_missions_in_Syria-.pdf

¹⁷ Peter Foster, RAF remote drone pilots facing real-world combat stress, *The Telegraph*, 9 November 2015

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/defence/11984557/RAF-remote-drone-pilots-facing-real-world-combat-stress.html>

¹⁸ Frances Perraudin et al, UK prepared to carry out more drone strikes against British jihadis, says Fallon, *The Guardian*, 8 September 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/08/uk-would-not-hesitate-to-carry-out-more-strikes-against-british-jihadis>

¹⁹ Letter to Drone Wars UK, https://dronewarsuk.files.wordpress.com/2015/11/20151112-foi2015-08518_mr_cole.pdf

²⁰ Government has ducked central question about lethal drone strike, Joint Human Rights Committee, 19 October 2016, <https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/joint-select/human-rights-committee/news-parliament-2015/drone-report-published-16-17/>

3.2 Civilian Casualties

The MoD continues to insist that there is no evidence that any of the 1,200 strikes, launching more than 2,500 missiles and bombs (up 31 December 2016), have killed or injured any civilians. The US has admitted to just 188 civilian deaths from its airstrikes. Airwars, which monitors reports of civilian casualties from airstrikes in Iraq and Syria estimates that between 1,959 and 2,898 people were likely killed in Coalition airstrikes in 2015 and 2016.²¹

Media organisations are beginning to question the official position however with the BBC for example directly asking in September 2016 'Have RAF air strikes against IS killed no civilians?'²²

The suggestion that 1,200 airstrikes can be carried out without killing or even injuring a single civilian is dangerous. Airwars is leading a growing civil society call on the MoD to commission an independent review of its casualty assessment process:

*"Given the statistical improbability of the UK having killed no civilians in more than 1,000 airstrikes, this suggests the MoD's monitoring capabilities may not at present be fit for purpose. We therefore recommend that the MoD commissions an independent review - which is able to examine the validity of classified civilian casualty assessments. We also call for the key findings of such a review to be made public."*²³

3.3 Transparency and Accountability

While pressure from parliamentarians and campaigners has led to increased transparency from the UK MoD on its operations, there are still key details about the use of British armed drones that remain hidden from public view. In particular questions about precision of airstrikes, number of civilian casualties and number of actual drones deployed gets short shrift.

While the MoD are happy to detail the number of Tornado and Typhoon aircraft deployed on operations against ISIS (as well as the exact location of their base) by contrast the number of UK drones deployed and their location remains a closely guarded secret due, say the MoD, to national security issues.

The government's perspective appears to be that they should be able to operate armed drones outside of public view and without the need for proper public accountability. From a wider international security perspective however, it is crucial, as more and more nations acquire armed drones, that there is a strong expectation and culture of transparency and public oversight of the deployment of these systems. As one of the few countries operating armed drones beyond its own borders, the UK should recognise that it has both the responsibility and also the opportunity to set high standards internationally for such transparency. However if the UK refuses such basic details as the number of armed drones that have been deployed, other nations acquiring such systems are likely to follow this lead.

²¹ Alex Hopkins, Annual assessment 2016: Civilians paid heavy price in Coalition and Russian airstrikes, 17 January 2017. <https://airwars.org/news/civilians-at-far-greater-risk-from-coalition-airstrikes-in-2016/>

²² Jonathan Beale, Have RAF air strikes against IS killed no civilians?, BBC, 12 September 2016, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-37339184>

²³ Limited Accountability: A transparency audit of the Coalition air war against so-called Islamic State. Airwars, December 2016, https://airwars.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Airwars-report_Web-FINAL1.compressed.pdf

Appendix A: UK Drone and Air Operations in Iraq 2014 - 2015

	Reaper Missions flown (Iraq)	Reaper missions with weapons fired (Iraq)	Reaper weapons fired (Iraq)	Reaper strikes - US Meth (Iraq)	Tornado missions flown (Iraq)	Tornado sorties with weapons released (Iraq)	Tornado weapons fired (Iraq)	Tornado strikes - US Meth (Iraq)	Typhoon missions flown (Iraq)	Typhoon sorties with weapons fired (Iraq)	Typhoon weapons fired (Iraq)	Typhoon strikes - US Meth (Iraq)	Total UK missions Flown in Iraq	Total UK weapons fired in Iraq	Total UK strikes - US Meth (Iraq)
Aug-14					6	0	0	0					6	0	0
Sep-14				0	15	2	6	2					15	6	2
Oct-14	10	0	0	0	47	7	27	8					57	27	8
Nov-14	48	12	24	15	49	9	30	13					97	54	28
Dec -14	49	8	14	10	47	15	41	17					96	55	27
Jan-15	63	12	33	14	46	10	31	13					109	64	27
Feb-15	59	7	13	7	42	10	18	12					101	31	19
Mar-15	62	13	18	13	53	12	35	17					115	53	30
Apr-15	59	11	18	13	49	14	35	13					108	53	26
May-15	59	16	28	20	49	13	25	14					108	53	34
Jun-15	48	10	11	10	46	10	32	18					94	43	28
Jul-15	50	10	17	14	49	12	24	12					99	41	26
Aug-15	58	15	32	14	50	10	26	14					108	58	28
Sep-15	60	19	37	21	43	12	23	13					103	60	34
Oct-15	45	10	14	8	45	14	18	10					90	32	18
Nov-15	44	15	29	17	52	31	61	40					96	90	57
Dec -15	36	9	23	11	57	44	69	35	37	26	37	29	130	129	75

Appendix B: UK Drone and Air Operations in Syria 2014 - 2015

	Reaper missions flown (Syria)	Reaper missions with weapons fired (Syria)	Reaper weapons fired (Syria)	Reaper strikes - US Meth (Syria)	Tornado missions flown (Syria)	Tornado sorties with weapons fired (Syria)	Tornado weapons fired (Syria)	Tornado strikes - US Meth (Syria)	Typhoon missions flown (Syria)	Typhoon sorties with weapons fired (Syria)	Typhoon weapons fired (Syria)	Typhoon strikes - US Meth (Syria)	Total UK missions in Syria	Total UK weapons fired in Syria	Total UK strikes - US Meth (Syria)
Aug-14													0		
Sep-14													0		
Oct-14													0		
Nov-14	1												1		
Dec -14	9												9		
Jan-15	8												8		
Feb-15	8												8		
Mar-15	14												14		
Apr-15	20												20		
May-15	25												25		
Jun-15	32												32		
Jul-15	31												31		
Aug-15	31												31		
Sep-15	24												24		
Oct-15	16												16		
Nov-15	18												18		
Dec -15	20	1	1	1	15	7	19	9	10	3	3	1	45	23	11

Appendix C: UK Drone and Air Operations in Iraq 2016

	Reaper Missions flown (Iraq)	Reaper sorties with weapons fired (Iraq)	Reaper weapons fired (Iraq)	Reaper strikes - US Meth (Iraq)	Tornado Missions flown (Iraq)	Tornado sorties with weapons released (Iraq)	Tornado weapons fired (Iraq)	Tornado strikes - US Meth (Iraq)	Typhoon Missions flown (Iraq)	Typhoon sorties with weapons fired (Iraq)	Typhoon weapons fired (Iraq)	Typhoon strikes - US Meth (Iraq)	Total UK missions Flown in Iraq	Total UK weapons fired in Iraq	Total UK strikes - US Meth (Iraq)
Jan-16	42	11	23	5	32	36	55	36	46	40	87	38	120	165	79
Feb-16	13	1	2	1	42	28	49	1	48	35	49	34	103	100	36
Mar-16	15	4	6	2	38	17	36	15	54	48	105	46	107	147	63
Apr-16	26	2	2	2	31	33	68	29	42	41	75	36	99	145	67
May-16	42	8	14	7	41	26	50	29	49	42	79	34	132	143	70
Jun-16	39	25	60	27	42	37	66	23	40	39	73	32	121	199	82
Jul-16	54	8	18	7	50	15	33	17	54	15	27	17	158	78	41
Aug-16	38	11	24	11	38	7	17	9	36	14	28	14	112	69	34
Sep-16	50	20	37	21	44	13	35	14	37	12	21	14	131	93	49
Oct-16	30	23	57	23	26	18	34	18	24	22	77	22	80	168	63
Nov-16	28	20	48	20	27	19	29	19	20	14	34	14	75	111	53
Dec-16	26	10	20	10	20	4	16	4	23	7	12	7	69	48	21

Appendix D: UK Drone and Air Operations in Syria 2016

	Reaper missions flown (Syria)	Reaper missions with weapons fired (Syria)	Reaper weapons fired (Syria)	Reaper strikes - US Meth (Syria)	Tornado missions flown (Syria)	Tornado sorties with weapons fired (Syria)	Tornado weapons fired (Syria)	Tornado strikes - US Meth (Syria)	Typhoon missions flown (Syria)	Typhoon sorties with weapons fired (Syria)	Typhoon weapons fired (Syria)	Typhoon strikes - US Meth (Syria)	Total UK missions in Syria	Total UK weapons fired in Syria	Total UK strikes - US Meth (Syria)
Jan-16	32	6	11	5	40	18	38	12	2	2	8	1	74	57	18
Feb-16	41	4	8	4	31	2	3	2	1	1	4	1	73	15	7
Mar-16	40	2	2	3	15	2	8	1	1	0	0	0	56	10	3
Apr-16	30	2	3	2	15	1	1	1	6	0	0	0	51	4	3
May-16	24	1	1	1	11	4	7	3	2	0	0	0	37	8	4
Jun-16	32	2	4	1	4	0	0	2	6	3	6	2	42	10	6
Jul-16	25	3	7	4	0	0	0	0	4	1	2	1	29	9	5
Aug-16	34	2	3	2	10	3	10	3	6	2	16	2	50	29	7
Sep-16	27	2	8	2	4	1	4	1	1	0	0	0	32	12	3
Oct-16	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	2	2	2	2	2	2
Nov-16	1	0	0	0	0	2	0	2	5	4	18	4	6	18	6
Dec-16	0	0	0	0	3	2	6	2	2	2	3	2	5	9	4