

**Written evidence from  
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- 1) The Government's policy towards Islamic State (IS) has been largely reactive rather than strategic. Islamic State was barely a focus of policy until a few months ago, when Mosul fell and the group subsequently broadcast beheadings of British and American nationals. Prior to that, Syria had been a focus for policymakers, though beyond supporting the opposition and providing aid there has been neither an identifiable strategy for resolving the conflict, nor a clear line on the future of Bashar Assad.
- 2) Meanwhile, Iraq had been de-prioritised in British policy for the past three or four years<sup>1</sup> - probably because it was seen as an area of policy failure by the previous government, with limited opportunities for either diplomatic or business success. Since the withdrawal of UK troops in 2011, other priorities have taken over - the Gulf becoming the key focus for British trade in the region, and the Arab uprisings prompting a focus on the transition countries and Libya and Syria in particular.
- 3) All the underlying factors that led to the Islamic State explosion were already well known<sup>2</sup>: the risk of spillover from Syria exacerbating existing political divisions, the problem of Sunni exclusion, the escalating sectarian tensions, and widespread anger over the role of the US, UK and others in the decade of occupation. The latter is often left out of western analyses, which currently focus on the personal failures of Maliki as a leader and the sectarian aspects of the conflict. While important, this is not the whole picture, and the focus on individual leaders and religious dynamics may obscure the role of western failures in Iraq - including the dismantling of the army, the rushing through of a constitution that lacked legitimacy with much of the Sunni population in a political process that many of them boycotted<sup>3</sup>, as well as the violence and abuses that occurred during the occupation.
- 4) The political response to IS would have been more effective had it come earlier. Instead, to some extent IS has been allowed to set the agenda. In 2012-13, there were demonstrations in Mosul against corruption, the government's failure to provide state services and the government's use of a sweeping terrorism law to arrest tens of thousands of Sunni Iraqis. Demonstrators were arrested and some shot by the police. The world largely ignored this.

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<sup>1</sup> See Jane Kinninmont, Omar Sirri and Claire Spencer, ed., *Iraq Ten Years On*, Chatham House MENA Programme, April 2013. "Today, Iraq is almost neglected by Western policy-makers who are now preoccupied with new dynamics of change – chiefly the Arab uprisings, Syria and Iran. However, this is short-sighted. Iraq remains a geostrategically central country in the Arab world... a deepening of Iraq's current political crisis will have negative reverberations beyond its borders."

[http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/public/Research/Middle%20East/0513pr\\_iraqtenyearson.pdf](http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/public/Research/Middle%20East/0513pr_iraqtenyearson.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> See Jane Kinninmont, Omar Sirri and Gareth Stansfield, *Iraq On The International Stage: Foreign Policy And National Identity In Transition*, Chatham House MENA Programme, July 2013. "Key Western governments, notably those of the United States and the United Kingdom, today demonstrate an 'Iraq fatigue' that has much to do with their domestic politics... But it is essential that Western governments do remain engaged, above all to help protect the country's borders and territorial integrity against the threat of overspill from Syria... As well as encouraging the Iraqi government to focus on domestic reconciliation and address the real grievances that underlie domestic 'Sunni protests', the United States, United Kingdom and key European governments should strive to discourage their Gulf allies from instrumentalizing anti-Shia sectarianism as part of their efforts to mobilize Arab public opinion against Syria and Iran."

<sup>3</sup> An excellent, detailed account by a firsthand observer of the process can be found in Zaid Al Ali, *The Struggle for Iraq's Future: How Corruption, Incompetence and Sectarianism Have Undermined Democracy*, Yale University Press, 2014.

- 5) By contrast, the extreme violence of IS has prompted both the local government and international allies of Iraq to take Mosul's grievances more seriously. Indeed, IS can argue it is they who precipitated the fall of Maliki this year. This tendency to respond urgently to extreme violence, rather than sustained peaceful protest, creates perverse incentives. Iraq should be a reminder of the need for a more strategic approach to the region - one with more of a focus on preventing future conflicts.
- 6) The current UK and US strategy is essentially to contain and degrade IS through: direct military action; support for local forces (the Iraqi Army and peshmerga) in Iraq; restrictions on the group's financing; ideological de-legitimisation; and political efforts to address root causes of violent dissent, working with an international coalition. It has been relatively straightforward to put together a coalition of states against IS, as the group's desire for a caliphate directly threatens the existing states in the region while its discourse on fighting the crusader West, and its success in recruiting foreign fighters, directly threatens European states.
- 7) However, it will remain difficult to unify the coalition around a broader strategy towards stabilising Iraq and Syria. This is because the members have very different views on what the key threats and priorities are, particularly when it comes to the need to overthrow Bashar Assad (still a priority for Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar in particular) and perceptions of the threat posed by Iran, relative to the risks posed by the various opposition groups, particularly jihadi and Kurdish groups. Iran itself is sending mixed messages about whether it wants to participate in the anti-IS coalition. Iran is a party to the conflict in Syria and there is an argument that its policy has helped foster the rise of IS. However, it is not the only country that has contributed to the problem, and IS's virulently sectarian rhetoric threatens Iran too; indeed, IS, like Al Qaeda in Iraq and the Islamic Maghreb under Zarqawi, prioritises the sectarian struggle even more than the anti-Western struggle. The recent shooting of Shia worshippers in a mosque in eastern Saudi Arabia on the Shia holy day of Ashura, attributed to Saudi followers of IS who had fought in Iraq and Syria, illustrates the risks to Shia communities.
- 8) Meanwhile, President Obama has emphasised importance of Sunni states participating, but their involvement is not necessarily popular with their own populations. No public opinion data is yet available on this, but it is noteworthy that even as the US announced Jordanian participation in the airstrikes on IS in Syria, the Jordanian prime minister roundly denied that his country was involved in any way - no doubt reflecting concerns about domestic opinion. There appears to be some backlash in the region as many citizens ask why there is such a coordinated international effort to address IS in Iraq, compared with a perceived lack of efforts to solve the conflict in Syria or prevent massacres there. There is also a widespread view that the West only acted when religious minorities and Westerners were threatened.
- 9) There is also a risk of inflating IS through the sheer extent of the international response to it. The broad international participation in the coalition is largely symbolic – a show of international unity, including some of the regional governments. The asymmetry of forces often means that the smaller faction can look "successful" simply by withstanding an attack from what are seemingly much larger forces. IS is likely to claim that it is succeeding against heavy odds, simply by surviving. It has dug deep into Mosul and is unlikely to be pushed out of the city by airstrikes.

- 10) IS is seeking to be a state, but it is still engaged in asymmetric warfare – a key tenet of which is to use one's opponent's strength against it. For this group, being condemned in the strongest terms by Western leaders is a sign of success; through filming the beheading of a US journalist, they were able to get the most powerful man in the world to speak to them directly. The attention has helped them compete with other jihadi movements and appear "effective". For this reason it may be counterproductive for world leaders, including the British prime minister, to pay them too much attention and to brand them with dramatic language (as he did in September, for instance, following the murder of David Haines, when he referred to the organisation as the "embodiment of pure evil").
- 11) Meanwhile, it is unclear if there is any UK strategy for Syria - though the UK is hardly alone here. The countries that called for Assad to go in 2011 are still largely undecided about how to react to the fact he is still in power. While the UK recognises and supports the Syrian National Council, in practice key decision makers are sceptical about its authority. There is a public debate over whether it is a valid option to talk to the regime directly. Doubts are openly expressed in the UK, the US and Europe about what the alternative is and whether it would be worse. These debates are being monitored closely by the Syrian regime, which is drawing some confidence from them. Meanwhile, in practice there has been international acceptance of Assad's involvement in the Geneva talks and his role in chemical weapons disarmament, even as key UK allies Turkey, Saudi and Qatar are pushing for his removal and see him as being at the core of the problem.
- 12) It is not clear to what extent the Syrian regime can restore authority even if the international community does decide to mend fences with Assad. Here, there are some information problems: the UK knows much more about the dynamics and divisions within the opposition than it does about the dynamics and divisions within the regime.
- 13) Islamic State cannot be tackled through a strategy that focuses only on Iraq. There may now be an opportunity to build on the concerns of many regional states about the risk of IS expansion to reinvigorate a UN-led peace process for Syria. This would need to include all the relevant parties, including Russia, the US, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey, Qatar and others. The conflict has become so regionalised and internationalised that it a combination of local, regional and international efforts is required. Yet at present there is not even a nominal peace process underway (although some European countries are supporting track two dialogues between Syrians, and Britain could encourage second-track dialogue between Iran and the Gulf states over Syria). As the former UN envoy Lakhdar Brahimi has noted, all the parties to the conflict say there needs to be a political solution rather than a military one. But they all continue to prepare for a military one.
- 14) Meanwhile, the growing refugee population requires more international focus and support. DFID's focus on providing education for refugee children is important and commendable. At the same time, the World Food Programme is having to cut rations for refugees in neighbouring states. The UK has taken very few Syrian refugees, in contrast to Sweden than others; this is symbolically important and makes it harder for the UK to advise the overstretched regional host countries about their own responsibilities.

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