Written evidence submitted by Dr Afzal Ashraf and Maj Gen (Rtd) Jonathon Shaw

A Strategy for Defeating Daesh

The House of Commons Defence Select Committee invited Maj Gen (Rtd) Jonathan Shaw and Dr Afzal Ashraf to suggest a strategy, based on their own experience of counterinsurgency campaigns, for dealing with the conflict in Syria and Iraq. As neither the Iraqi or Syrian state forces present a direct threat to the UK or the international community, any military strategy has to be directed against belligerent non-state actors in those countries. Of these, Daesh and Al Qaeda (AQ) and associated groups conduct global terrorism and are the main threat to the region.

Whilst the current regimes in Iraq and Syria are the cause of instability and indirect security threats, these have to be dealt with through political means. These political solutions are also necessary to reduce exploitable grievances by extremists, so that groups like Daesh and AQ cannot re-emerge after they have been defeated in the two countries.

Strategic Approach

This paper discusses an outline strategy for defeating Daesh and Al Qaeda in Iraq and Syria, although it intentionally proposes a looser form of strategic plan than idealists might wish for. The plan involves the critical strategic discipline of execution: keeping aspirations, resources and the reality of the evolving situation in balance. The resultant fluidity is essential to ensure that the UK and the rest of the Internal Community are up to the Keynesian challenge, “when the facts change, I change my view; what do you do?”

Agility and pragmatism are an important success factor in political strategy. In realpolitik, ambitions are moderated by the ways and means available to achieve goals. In military strategy, however, it is important to avoid a strategic mindset which is so flexible that it permits ‘mission creep’ and readily accepts failure. In other words, strategy should be agile in the ‘ways’ and ‘means’ but should avoid making changes to the ‘ends.’

Strategy deployed during the Iraq and Afghanistan wars witnessed an acceptance that the end state aimed for at the outset was unachievable and therefore a different end state was adopted. This approach was recognized as being pragmatic by the relevant coalitions. However, it was seen differently by the extremist revolutionary movements which fought the coalitions. They believed that the Western Coalitions failed to achieve their plan despite having superior capabilities, and the extremists succeeded because of their superior willingness to fight. That belief emboldened them and drives their otherwise irrational behaviour in challenging global powers.

Conventional deterrence is the most important factor in defence capability. It is built on the military’s reputation and reflects a country’s or an alliance’s performance in recent warfare. Adversaries challenge only those countries they believe can be beaten. The Falkland Islands, the first Gulf War, Sierra Leone and Kosovo are conflicts where the UK can claim decisive victories. These performances have been eclipsed by the recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan where the absence of a decisive victory is seen by adversaries as defeat. It is critically important to UK defence policy that this reputation is reversed in any future

---

1. Paul Samuelson, who was awarded the 1970 Nobel Prize in economics, attributed this quote to Lord Keynes in 1978 but no independent record exists of Keynes having actually said it.
conflict. William Temple, the Archbishop of Canterbury, provided a moral imperative for success during WWII, “The worst of all things is to fight and do it ineffectively.”

In maintaining UK defence capability, matching mission to achievement of success comes before matching resources to task. Success is a powerful conventional deterrent against aggression. Therefore, the primary factor in choosing a strategy in Syria and Iraq must be its ability to deliver decisive success within a reasonably short timescale. This may be the language of war rather than of conflict, but the primary adversaries involved in Iraq and Syria do not make a doctrinal distinction between war and conflict. They see military intervention as war and their survival as victory. In that sense, they are more true to Carl von Clausewitz’s definition: “War therefore is an act of violence to compel our opponent to fulfil our will.”

Western military doctrine has made a distinction between war and conflict on the basis that, during conflict, force is used to compel an opponent to accept a political settlement, whereas in war a settlement can be imposed. Ideological movements such as Daesh cannot surrender or accept a settlement to violent conflict any more than they can denounce their faith, as the two are intrinsically linked in their ideology. Their defeat requires the mindset of war rather than conflict. Political policy must shape the conditions for that war to be effective and shape the conditions after the war to prevent a re-emergence of the threat.

**Strategic Rationale**

Legacy of Poor Prioritisation and Slow Approach

Any new strategic rationale must recognize and confront the thinking which has led to the current situation. The strategic challenge has been to address two related and complex questions: Dealing with Daesh (and associated extremists), and the end state for the landmasses currently called Syria and Iraq. At the outset of the conflict the priority of the West was the downfall of the Syrian regime. Evidence suggests that rebel groups were armed by ‘friendly’ Gulf states to achieve that aim. The conditions created by the armed rebellion led to the raise of ISIS, which the US accepted as a necessary cost in defeating Assad.3

Once Daesh became an unacceptable threat to the West, following its rapid invasion of Iraqi territory and the killing of Western hostages, political and military strategy then began to deal with the two questions concurrently. However, the strategy was constructed around a gradual and slow approach that aimed to weaken Daesh while strengthening other rebel groups, without allowing significant gains by the Assad regime. President Obama articulated the progressive approach as a strategy to “Degrade and Destroy” Daesh. Prime Minister Cameron attempted to manage expectations further by labelling the war as a “generational” conflict.4

The “long war” approach works to the advantage of insurgencies because they tend to adapt well over time. It works against the strength of conventional militaries which lies in their ability to rapidly react to a threat. Unsurprisingly, Daesh adapted to the coalition’s formidable airpower and continued to gain ground in Syria contributing significantly to the weakening of the Assad forces and of the Free Syrian Army.

---

2 On War.
3 See Lieutenant General Michael Flynn’s evidence saying the US accepted the rise of ISIS as a cost of the defeat of Assad.
4 Admittedly, this comment may hold true when applied to the ‘ideology’ of Daesh but it has been used in a general sense with implications to the physical conflict.
Russia’s military intervention in Syria last summer was a response to this weakening of Assad’s forces. The intervention forced the Western-backed coalition to consider prioritising the conflict against Daesh over the issues of the Syrian regime and the nature of the Iraqi state. That choice has been considered but not yet clearly made. The legacy of viewing Daesh as a secondary component to the national interests of regional and international players in Syria and Iraq continues to resonate, preventing a strategic focus on eliminating the threat from Daesh.

Why is Daesh the Priority?
Daesh is contra mundum personified. It even stands against its ideological twin, AQ. Daesh is the unifying threat to all: it is a threat to the global and regional state system, an internal security threat to every country with a Muslim population, and it defies UN agreed standards of governance (condoning slavery and rape etc). It is important for the international community and, especially the USA, to recognise that Daesh is different to the Mujahideen in Afghanistan - Islamist extremist violence is not a useful tool, in the long term, to counter Russian influence or to get rid of Russian client states. The stance of the American leadership to regard Russia as the greatest threat to the USA is part of the mindset that is preventing appropriate prioritisation. Whilst Russia has the greatest potential capability against the USA, it is a state and understands the costs associated with threatening other countries.

The international system is designed around states and has mechanisms for managing competing interests. It can use diplomacy to manage conflict and non-violent means such as sanctions to punish infringements of norms or to force compliance with them. Daesh, AQ and their associates are beyond the pale, outlaws to the international system, and unresponsive to political and economic pressure. They have global ambitions which challenge the current world order. The Daesh ‘state’ is the partial fulfillment of that ambition, an ambition which is motivated by success. Consequently, they should be dealt with as a common threat; one which has attacked British subjects across the globe and continues to find new ways of killing citizens and disrupting the British way of life. Exploiting them for other geopolitical purposes sustains the threat they pose.

Limitations of Airpower
It is now becoming generally accepted that airpower alone is incapable of defeating Daesh. Daesh has adapted to airstrikes and only occasionally presents targets that can be safely destroyed. Land forces are the key to exploiting the benefits of airpower and to providing sustainable success. Daesh defined itself a state and a Caliphate only once it captured significant territory in both Iraq and Syria. Territory is central to Daesh’s identity, to its concept of success and to its sources of funding – territory is Daesh’s Centre of Gravity. Sustainable and significant denial of territory to Daesh will lead to its degradation and decline as a global threat.6

5 When asked by the Armed Services Committee during his confirmation hearing about the greatest threat facing the US, General Joseph Dunford replied: “My assessment today is that Russia presents the greatest threat to our national security.”

6 Daesh’s ideology will not be destroyed by this method. Arguably, that ideology will persist indefinitely in some form because other ideologies which once threatened the world order still do. Millions of individuals remain committed Communists and Fascists. As a result of both ideologies failing to deliver their stated aims, a superior socio-economic system based on a classless society and a superior nation based on racial and military dominance, hardly any followers still believe they can succeed in forcefully imposing their worldview. Daesh, AQ and associates are fighting to establish a superior state based on a totalitarian imperial version of Islamist...
Troops - Boots on the Ground
In theory and in reality the Daesh’s physical caliphate can be destroyed relatively easily. The West can supply the technology and the air and strike assets to do this, but the unresolved problem is where the ground troops should come from. Here the challenge and the solution differ between Iraq and Syria. To prosecute different solutions would require securing of the border between the two countries so that the campaign can be fought by different ground forces in different timescales.

In Iraq, the Army and recognised paramilitary forces such as the Peshmerga, can be given the necessary increased support to capture and hold territory. To speed up the process, this support may take the form of short-term military operations by external land forces, in accordance with the strategy outlined below.

In Syria the issue of ground troops is more politically sensitive. The current reliance on the supposedly moderate rebels is problematic for a number of reasons. First, the definition of ‘moderate’ is contested. The vast majority of the 200 or so rebel groups identify themselves as Islamists but with a pragmatic willingness to work with the outside world. However, the Islamist conceptions of the end state is a theocracy like Iran’s or a Caliphate similar to Daesh’s – pragmatism gives way to principles with the acquisition of power. Short-term support for non-state Islamists has in the past led to a long term threat to global security. Most significantly, these alleged 70,000 fighters have failed to demonstrate effectiveness as capable forces despite the benefits of air support and billions of dollars worth of armaments being supplied by Gulf states.

Western ground troops could provide the most militarily effective force to take ground. They would not find it easy to maintain the population’s support for holding it for more than a few days. More importantly, there is little political appetite in the West to deploy troops to the region for direct involvement in conflict. Therefore, Western troops are unlikely to be deployed except as part of short-term enabling operations in support of local land forces.

A coalition of troops from the region and selected Muslim countries such as Pakistan might have been a more politically acceptable alternative. While it remains a possibility, this option has become more politically problematic. Many of the would-be members of that coalition are entangled in the Saudi led conflict in Yemen. There are also reports of a breakdown of confidence and cohesion around the Saudi strategy in Syria. Consequently, this option is going to need a great deal of political investment to generate an effective coalition. It also represents a risk as the region has never produced a lasting coalition, especially when faced with an effective opposition.

Syrian regime forces, bolstered by intelligence, weapons and logistic support may provide the quickest source of ground troops to take and hold ground. The thought of President Assad being given external support for survival will be an anathema to many, hence it will be important to differentiate between the President and the current regime. A condition of this option could be for the President to step aside and for the regime to promise free elections within a specified time. These conditions should be underwritten by guarantees ideology. Once their mythical state is destroyed, their belief in success through violence will also be dealt an irreversible blow.
from Russia and other world powers, building upon the current UN initiates for new governance, a new constitution and elections.

In Syria and possibly also in Iraq, the local ground forces may be supplemented for short-term operations by Western land forces in a specific manner as outlined below.

There are no attractive solutions to the ground troops problem. As time passes these unattractive options become fewer and less attractive. This strategic choice, more than any, will require most political wisdom and courage. Recent gains by the Assad regime could mean that Daesh may be defeated by Syrian effort and Russian help while the Western alliance procrastinates.

Whatever choice is made, it is important to invite all ‘moderate’ rebels to leave the field of conflict with an undertaking that their opposition to the Syrian regime will be through the ballot box and not through armed rebellion. This will require sealing borders with neighbouring countries and a registration and vetting process at selected border crossings so that moderates can be filtered from Daesh and AQ fighters. A disarmament and demobilisation process will need to be in place to facilitate the transition from armed rebellion to peaceful opposition.

**Strategic Objectives and Aim**

The aim of any military strategy should derive from the aim of the political strategy for the two countries. The political objectives in both countries should be based on relevant UNSC Resolutions (e.g. 2254) to:

- Establish or support governments which are representative of the populations concerned, effective in governance and work within the rule of law and international norms
- Stop the outflow of people representing a security, economic and political threat to other countries
- Create a secure environment to enable peaceful resolution of internal conflicts, the removal or mitigation of grievances which fuel extremism and human development
- Reverse, as far as possible, the internal and external displacement of these countries’ nationals

A suggested political aim for both countries, therefore, is:

- The restoring of state control over internal security to an elected government, working within the rule of law, respecting international norms of behaviour

To help achieve this, the military strategic objectives in each country should be:

- Removing the primary threat to state control over security (Daesh, AQ and associates)
- Assisting the two states to create the capability to maintain their security

To achieve this, the military aim should, therefore, be:

- To defeat Daesh and AQ associated groups in Iraq and Syria

**Political Strategy Implementation**

A military strategy proposal cannot easily be achieved in the absence of a political strategy. This is why military objectives and the aim have been based on suggested political objectives and aims based on existing UNSC Resolutions. How those political objectives and aims can be or should be delivered is beyond the scope of this paper but a brief discussion of
possible options is attached as an Annexe. The political courses of action adopted will determine the exact nature of any military strategy. Therefore, the political strategy must be firmed up, the necessary agreements achieved and the relevant commitments of resources made available through diplomatic operations before the military strategy can be completed.

Military Strategy Implementation –Ways and Means

Concept of Operations
In order to take advantage of their superiority over insurgencies in terms of surprise, reach and agility, land force should adopt a manoeuvrist approach. Therefore, land forces in both Iraq and Syria should be deployed using airmobile assets as part of a well thought out land campaign designed to cut the current Daesh controlled territory into smaller dislocated chunks. This would speed up the degradation of Daesh’s command and control capability, sow confusion and reduce morale.

Any Western ground troops required to assist can also be deployed to locations by aircraft capable of landing on desert strips, by helicopters and by parachute. They will be lightly armed but capable of defeating small-scale armoured forces. Their effect and success lies primarily in their ability to deploy quickly, manoeuvre rapidly during combat, seize and secure medium sized objectives such as refineries, airfields, bridges etc., and get out as soon as the job is completed.

Overuse or overstay of Western ground troops could be counterproductive. They must not be seen as boots on the ground but as ‘boots with wings,’ which fleetingly walk the ground to catapult local land forces in Iraq and Syria forward. This would allow them to make a valuable military contribution while avoiding the disadvantages of being ‘bogged down’ that expeditionary land forces of the recent past have suffered.

Sequence of Operations:
The following is a suggested sequence of operations. Most activities can overlap:

- Political strategy agreed and both local and external land forces identified
- Syrian borders secured and ‘moderate’ rebels facilitated to leave
- Moderate rebels disarmed and demobilized and fed into a party political training process
- Land operations in Iraq and Syrian commence with priority given to securing the border between the two countries
- Initial objectives captured by Western forces. Once secure, local land forces moved forward rapidly to hold positions
- Process repeated until all Daesh held centres of population are isolated
- Use tactic of benign siege (humanitarian supplies allowed in and civilians allowed out) and strategic patience against population centres until Daesh support and capability weakens sufficiently for an assault with Western special forces’ help
- Once Daesh ‘state’ destroyed, press for political process to address grievances and confirm national boundaries
Annexe: Political Strategy Considerations

Time and Skills
Developing a clear and effective political strategy is a perplexing challenge. The problem is complex because the relevant elements are interconnected. Any analysis and solution requires a holistic approach which cannot be sequentially thought through. The knowledge for deep analysis, the time for a thoughtful policy and the skills needed for execution are not readily available in the diplomatic and political community. The FCO should, therefore, take time and seek help to reconsider its approach.

Resources for Execution
Weapons and manpower for the military campaign exist although sources of funding will be required. The Gulf countries can afford this conflict, notwithstanding the oil price collapse - once they recognise this is an existential issue for them, they will afford it.

Challenges of a Political End State
The hardest part is agreeing what the end state might look like, and until this is resolved, we will be unable to identify forces and ascertain their incentive for action. The end state dictates the moral component of warfare; e.g., it will determine the effectiveness of any fighting force.

End State Options:
The most acceptable political end-state is likely to be based on pragmatic and principled interpretations of UNSCR resolutions. Once an end state is agreed it may also be advisable to allow a review at the end of military operations to take account of any political developments.

It is important to recognise that regional powers and the international community have considered several alternative political end state options. These include the ‘Ottoman’ extension of Turkey into elements of Syria and Iraq, the creation of a ‘Sunni State’ linking the Western provinces of Iraq with much of the existing rebel territory in Syria and the creation of a greater Kurdistan, linking the existing KRG with Kurdish territory in Syria is a further option.

These options will carve up the region along sectarian and identity lines. While they may reflect much of the reality of power they are likely to cause other political tensions. Reforming Iraq and Syria based on existing state structures with a greater degree of democratic governance and a federal system, to allow for regional variations is another option. This may be the least contentious option as it aims to restore previously recognized entities, but it will not be without its problems. Until the underlying separate national interests are reconciled, the region will remain vulnerable to extremist conflicts and civil war. On balance, therefore, restoring existing state structures with a UN led process to introduce political reforms and consider federal solutions to conflicting identity or sectarian issues, may be the best available end state.

Iran and Saudi Arabia
One major complicating factor is that Saudi Arabia and the regional states of the CT coalition are viewing the conflict in Iraq and Syria through the prism of Iranian influence. The Assad
regime, Hezbollah and the Shia militias in Iraq are seen as conduits for that influence. Daesh is viewed as serving a useful counterbalance for both.

The anti-Iranian sentiments in the Gulf are being supported by Israel, which has an understandable antipathy towards Iran because of Iran’s regular use of threatening rhetoric. Israel is further concerned about Iranian support for Hezbollah and about the assistance that the Assad regime has begun to receive from Hezbollah. The increasing proximity of Hezbollah fighters to the Golan Heights is a strategic threat to Israel. This anti-Iranian stance in the region has produced a private and counterintuitive alliance between Israel and the coalition of Saudi Arabia and Gulf states. This alliance opposes the re-prioritisation of threat from the Assad regime to Daesh and is concerned that Iran will increase its influence in Iraq following its military contribution to the fight against Daesh. Consequently, both Saudi Arabia and Israel will need encouragement to support any new strategy in the region.

Sectarian Politics
Iran and Saudi Arabia’s political rivalry has increasingly manifested itself as a sectarian conflict between Sunnis and Shia. Sectarianism is central to both Sunni and Shia extremist ideology and so this political rivalry is radicalizing more recruits for both sides. Therefore, reducing the tension between these regional rivals is a necessary political shaping operation to enable a successful strategy against Daesh. It is also an important means of reducing radicalisation and preventing the spillover of sectarian tensions into Europe.

Reassuring Saudi Arabia and allied Gulf States about the continued protection from the West against any threat from Iran will be an important component in this. The key to success in this case will be to replace neocons’ calls for a policy to support Saudi Arabia against Iran with a push for co-operation between the two countries.

In return for security guarantees, the UK and the West should demand Saudi commitment to discredit some of the theological drivers behind Daesh’s ideology. There is abundant evidence that intolerant scriptural interpretations of diversity of belief both within and outside Islam arise from the Wahhabi Salafist theological establishments of the Kingdom and Qatar. These states need to be aware that their security and that of the West is intrinsically linked. If they do not address the ideological fallout of the aggressive interpretation of religion that was incubated and spread through their patronage, their destabilising policies of regional dominance and their power projection in places like Yemen, then the West is limited in what it can do to help them survive the challenges of succession.

15 February 2016