HOUSE OF COMMONS

Defence Committee

Oral evidence: UK Military operations in Mosul and Raqqa, HC 999

Tuesday 15 May 2018

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Watch the meeting

Members present: Dr Julian Lewis (Chair); Leo Docherty; Mr Mark Francois; Graham P. Jones; Mrs Madeleine Moon; Gavin Robinson; Ruth Smeeth; John Spellar; Phil Wilson.

Questions 1-63

Witnesses

I: Major-General Jones, Assistant Chief of the General Staff, Ministry of Defence, and former Deputy Commander (Strategy and Support) of the Combined Joint Task Force, - Operation INHERENT RESOLVE; Air Vice-Marshal Johnny Stringer, Chief of Staff Joint Forces Command, Minister of Defence, and former UK Air Component Commander in the Middle East.

Written evidence from witnesses:

Ministry of Defence

Ministry of Defence (2nd Evidence)

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Major-General Jones, Assistant Chief of the General Staff, Ministry of Defence, and former Deputy Commander (Strategy and Support) of the Combined Joint Task Force, Operation INHERENT RESOLVE; Air Vice-Marshal Johnny Stringer, Chief of Staff Joint Forces Command, Minister of Defence, and former UK Air Component Commander in the Middle East.

Q1 **Chair:** Good morning and welcome to this session of the Defence Select Committee's examination of UK military operations in Mosul and Raqqa in particular, and in Iraq and Syria in general. We have two very involved and highly qualified witnesses to help us in our inquiry today and I would be grateful if each of you introduced yourselves and said a little bit about the role that you have been fulfilling in respect of this inquiry.

Major-General Jones: Good morning, Chairman. I am Major-General Rupert Jones. From August 2016 until September 2017, I was the coalition deputy commander—the official title was Deputy Commander, Strategy and Support—of the combined joint task force charged with the military defeat of Daesh in Iraq and Syria. I was the senior, non-US member of the military coalition.

Air Vice-Marshal Stringer: Good morning. I am Air Vice-Marshal Johnny Stringer. From October 2016 to October 2017, I was the UK air component commander responsible for all our operations in the Middle East region, but most obviously through Operation Shader, our operations over Iraq and Syria.

Chair: We think this is a splendid opportunity to get information from the horse's mouth, as it were, and the first to ask a question will be Gavin.

Q2 **Gavin Robinson:** Good morning, gentlemen. Can you outline just how we as a country contributed to the coalition's mission in Iraq and Syria?

Major-General Jones: Perhaps if I lead off and then hand over to Air Vice-Marshal Stringer. I think I can say without contradiction that the UK was the second biggest contributor from a military perspective in the campaign. I say that from a coalition perspective, rather than from a British perspective.

One of the responsibilities I had was for the coalition line of operation, as it was called. If you add up all the things that various nations were doing—not that it is in any way a competition—it is quite clear that the United Kingdom was the second biggest contributor. I will leave Johnny to comment on what the air element of that was. In the land and the broader perspectives, that involved some very senior leadership positions: my own deputy position and other deputy positions at key headquarters around the coalition. On the ground, in Iraq, about 600 troops were involved in what we call building partner capacity—training the Iraqi security forces—and

this was an absolutely fundamental part of the mission, which I am sure we will come back to.

Critically, I think one of the reasons the UK plays such an important role is its leadership role. Other nations look to the UK, as is often the case, to follow our lead to some degree. Critically, the United Kingdom had a very powerful set of broader permissions. It is not just about the number of airstrikes, the number of troops; it is about the permissions we were able to operate within the mission.

Air Vice-Marshal Stringer: Thanks, Rupert. From the air component perspective, three things mark out our contribution. The first is its breadth. It was very much a balanced contribution: it had everything from strike and multi-role aircraft—Tornado and Typhoon—through drones and all our intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance aircraft, to air transport and air refuellers. The second is its quality. People always default to equipment, but I stress at the outset the quality of our people—not just those in flying roles and those supporting them, but those in key embedded coalition roles, whether that was in the air component headquarters in Al Udeid or elsewhere. The third thing that probably marks it out is the tempo at which we operated. We are now coming up to four years' support to Operation Shader. I would say that the Air Force, relative to its size, has not operated at this tempo or scale since 1945. It has been a big commitment, and that has taken a standing figure of around 800 to 900 airmen and airwomen in the region, from the eastern Mediterranean down to the southern end of the Gulf, all in the air component command.

Q3 **Gavin Robinson:** You say we are the second largest contributor. Could you give us a percentage or a proportion of personnel and tell us how closely that aligns with the largest contributor and perhaps the third and fourth largest? Are we talking a large chunk, or are we really second fiddle?

Major-General Jones: We should be honest with ourselves and, indeed, grateful that the United States has taken the lion's share of the burden of this campaign. As I say, we should be extremely grateful that that is the case, but if you take the non-US element just as a vignette—you will recognise that I am a little bit out of date—in September last year there were about 4,300 non-United States service personnel in Iraq, of whom about 600 were British. But as I say, it is not about numbers—as Johnny says, it is really about quality. On the land side, as with the air component, arguably any number of nations could train the Iraqi security forces in infantry skills or whatever it might be. What the UK is able to bring is the quality of its personnel. We are clearly global leaders in some fields, such as counter-improvised explosive device work. That is an area where we are recognised as global leaders, but we are also global leaders in areas such as infantry training, which on the face of it any nation could do. You will have come across British soldiers enough to know that they do that to a very high standard. The British Army is very proud of having a very fine war-fighting reputation, and that gives them a very strong basis on which to help other militaries.

Q4 **Gavin Robinson:** The point that the contribution is greater than just the numbers is a fair one. That feeds in to the value of our overall contribution. Could you help the Committee understand how closely aligned the coalition strategy is with UK policy aims, how we as a country shape the overall aims of the coalition and what strength we have to do that?

Major-General Jones: I was in quite a privileged position: one of my roles was to be the military link into the global coalition. I think I went to 10 global coalition meetings during the 13 months, so I saw quite a lot of that element. I would observe that the coalition was very powerful—this was arguably one of the most powerful coalitions we have ever seen. It had 74 members, 30 of which contributed to the military campaign in Iraq and Syria. Devising a strategy for all those nations is a complex process. Because of its significant military contribution to the campaign, the United Kingdom has a privileged position when it comes to contributing to the overall strategy. I often use the phrase, "You've got to pay to play." If you want Washington and the senior leadership of the global coalition to listen to your advice—be that from politicians or from the military—you have to be doing the hard yards. The United Kingdom patently is doing the hard yards and, as a result, the UK voice, at both the political level and the military level, is listened to very carefully.

Q5 **Gavin Robinson:** Could you give an example of how UK policy has shaped the coalition's mission and aims, and perhaps of how we have acquiesced to the collective will of the coalition and compromised on UK policy aims?

Major-General Jones: Let me answer that from a military perspective. I will not make a broader political observation, but if I take, for example, the humanitarian and stabilisation efforts in both Iraq and Syria—I hope we might discuss that a little later, because it is really important to what has happened—it is not unreasonable to say that British advice and British officers fundamentally shaped how that approach was conducted. So, recognising that you could not just liberate the city of Mosul without concern for the 1,750,000 people in the city at the start of the battle, you cannot just fight a war in a bubble and ignore those people. You the military and the Iraqi military must play a fundamental part in that work. That was heavily shaped by British advice into the coalition, both by background and by conscience, but also by position.

The same could be said of the Syria humanitarian and stabilisation effort where again it was British officers who, from a military perspective, really drove the inter-agency conversation into the wider coalition to make sure that there was a joined-up plan for what followed the liberation of Raqqa.

Q6 **Graham P. Jones:** Good morning to you both. Major-General Jones, how are operations controlled through the coalition?

Major-General Jones: I might invite Air Vice-Marshal Stringer to follow up in a moment, because a really important part of that is clearly the control of the air element, but it is worth saying that the air element was fighting in support of the wider combined joint taskforce commanded by

General Townsend, my direct boss. So there is a day to day control element in terms of how we provided support to our partners, which Johnny will talk to. It is slightly multi-faceted, because you have layers of activity going on. You have the long-term work in terms of taking the Iraqi security forces, and indeed our partners in Syria, but if we stick with Iraq for a moment, it was an army that was all but defeated in late 2014. Defending the gates of Baghdad, taking that military, allowing it to get its mojo back, transforming it, and getting it back into the fight such that it could liberate Iraqi towns and cities was clearly a long-term deliberate activity, and that really came to a crescendo with the battle of Mosul. That sort of activity goes at a slow tempo.

In terms of how the overall campaign is controlled, the first thing to say is that—you will recognise this, I hope—this was very much about our partners. So the campaign design comes from our partners: in the case of Iraq, from Prime Minister Abadi and the sovereign Government through his military chain of command. In Syria it is subtly different, but we worked with the leadership of the Syrian Democratic Forces. It was they who dictated, "Where do we go next? What's the tempo? How are we going to conduct the operations?" Our role was to provide advice into that. That is about advice at all levels, so it would be General Townsend working with Prime Minister Abadi all the way down through to the lowest levels of giving tactical advice on the ground.

One of the things that has been a real hallmark of this mission is that it has not been foreign militaries telling indigenous forces what to do. It really hasn't. The more the Iraqis have got back into their stride, it really has been them dictating the pace and the design. We have given wise counsel and options, but we have in no way sought to dictate to Prime Minister Abadi, or indeed his generals, how they might conduct the fight. The phrase I always liked to use was, "It's more about listening than it is about talking." It is about giving them a platform through which they can play around with ideas and talk about ideas, and then giving them some wise advice as to how they might optimise their own thoughts.

Air Vice-Marshal Stringer: To give you a perspective from the air component, the overall coalition air component is commanded by a three-star United States Air Force general from the air operations centre in Qatar. UK air assets support his mission and he, as General Rupert was saying, is absolutely working to the coalition. What I would say is there is a temptation—just to pick up on one of the earlier questions—to do the counting of things. That is obviously important to an extent, but one of the things that I would offer that the UK really has been able to apply is a different approach—some alternative and lateral thinking.

I will give just one vignette from the end of 2016 when Iraqi forces were finding the going very hard in Mosul due to vehicle-born improvised explosive devices—VBIEDs—which Daesh were fielding daily in large numbers. One of the approaches could have been, "We'll try to find all the VBIEDs and take them out," and there was an element of that, but what we were also able to discover, due to some excellent work by a number of

UK folk, military and inter-agency, was the importance of Daesh's use of commercial drones to allow them to co-ordinate and apply command and control.

What we actually did was effectively go into that network and find out what it constituted, both at the frontline and where it was being supported, and then offer a proposal back into the coalition of how we would go about going after it, which we then very successfully did in the early part of 2017, directly supporting Iraqi security forces on the ground and fully integrated with the coalition land component and the coalition taskforce HQ.

Q7 **Graham P. Jones:** You mentioned working with 30 other nations involved militarily, General Jones. How difficult was it to work with those 30 nations? Some would have been involved on the ground; some may have been involved in the air. I wonder if you could say a bit about that.

Major-General Jones: Yes. I will not paraphrase Churchill's quote about alliances and not alliances, but of course there are challenges in drawing together 30 militaries that very rightly come together with 30 sets of national policy that have to be woven together into a coalition. But I would turn that challenge into a strength.

We would all recognise that Daesh poses a global threat, and therefore you have to take a global approach to it. We all felt that the greatest strength we had was our strength in numbers, both from a global coalition perspective and from a military coalition perspective. It helped to prevent any sense, and to mitigate any accusations, of foreign powers coming in and imposing themselves.

Are there challenges? Yes, of course there are, but those are entirely manageable. One of the powers of a coalition is to ensure that you are as inclusive as you can be. Every nation has security classifications. Every nation has things it wishes to do and does not wish to do, in the same way that the United Kingdom Government would have its particular aspirations for this mission—same with all the other nations. It is surprisingly easy to weave it together, however, because fundamentally, we have all signed up to be part of the military coalition.

Again, I refer back to my earlier comments about the United States leadership. Our headquarters, in the absence of—this particular mission was not a NATO mission, and no other alliance was providing it, so the higher-level military command came out of US Central Command in Tampa, which the coalition nations all signed up to. There was a pretty mature network to bind the coalition together at a military and political level.

I mentioned that I used to go to the global coalition meetings, which is a really important mechanism by which you work with the nations to ensure that you have a common narrative and a common perspective. You allow nations to air their particular observations, concerns and aspirations, and that is a healthy thing, because that holds everybody to account. I would

observe that the weaving in of the 30 nations as it pertained to the military coalition was a huge strength.

Q8 **Graham P. Jones:** There are differences in rules of engagement if we are talking about air strikes. How did you manage to bring the coalition together in terms of air strikes and rules of engagement?

Major-General Jones: It was extraordinarily straightforward, because all nations come with a policy wrap. As a nation comes in, you understand exactly what they can and cannot do, and then you weave that into the overall total mission. You would not invite a nation that did not have permissions to operate in Syria to conduct an air strike over Syria, for the sake of argument. You would not invite a training team to go somewhere within Iraq if it was quite clear its nation has not given it the policy permissions to do that. You just accept it and you weave around it. In no way did I feel, as the officer responsible for the overall coalition line of operation, that it was a constraint.

Q9 **Graham P. Jones:** Air Vice-Marshal Stringer, you were talking about intelligence sharing, and about drones and information on the air operation. How did we share intelligence? Was it shared in a way that was successful? How would you judge that, particularly on the drone issue? Can you say some more? You did say commercial drones, as opposed to consumer drones.

Air Vice-Marshal Stringer: Yes, perhaps I can clarify that to start. That is Daesh fielding commercially bought drones—700-quid drones bought off the internet on a pretty industrial scale. On our intelligence support, I guess there are two big headlines and then I will get to your point. The first is that we were able to put everything we had into it, whether that was the E-3 aircraft to support our awareness of what was going on in the air environment, and to aid deconfliction, as well as the flow of sorties. There is a whole raft of imagery and signals intelligence aircraft, whether those are manned like our Rivet Joint, or unmanned like our Reaper drones and unmanned air systems.

The really important bit is that while it is great if we collect a whole load of information, it is about what we do with it. One of the key UK contributions has been the quality and number of our intelligence analysts who we put into this, and our ability to reach across various agencies in the UK. This is more than just a bit of video or a snippet of the transcript; it is about how we fuse all that together. In terms of the coalition sharing, it is a matter of record that there is a Five Eyes community. The most important bit is that everybody in the coalition, even if they weren't in that Five Eyes community—there are obviously levels of classification of intelligence that is shared—got what was required for the mission, even when it forced us to go into some quite novel places of not necessarily revealing sources or saying how we got the information. We were able to get that information out so that people were able to employ it.

A telling statistic is that our Sentinel stand-off radar provided about 25% to 30% of the overall coalition contribution—an absolutely key capability.

That tells us what is happening on the ground, and allows us to put out aircraft to have a look at it. That is fine, but it comes back to what we do with it. The product that our men and women produced became the exemplar for the coalition in that field. Why does that matter? Because it is not just knowing what is going on, but, to pick up what Rupert was saying, it also allows for the best decisions to be made in the coalition. We are actively informing decision-making and decision support. Again, to come back to where this adds value or shows UK influence, I would say that just that one small vignette—one aircraft with few people supporting it—had an utterly disproportionate impact on what it provided for the coalition.

Q10 **Graham P. Jones:** Finally, on that intelligence in the Raqqa campaign, obviously you would have had issues deconflicting the airspace with Russia. How did you manage that?

Air Vice-Marshal Stringer: At the outset, I should say that I have been involved in frontline duties for about 25 years and this is the most complex airspace and overall battle space, including all the environment, any of us can remember. It is a very challenging environment to operate in. You will know that there is a deconfliction hotline with the Russians in the air operations centre, and at the height of my time there, when it was the busiest airspace in the region, at times that line was being used 15 or so times a day to deconflict missions. It was professional; it was a little emotional at times, but it was a professional means of deconflicting the activity.

Again, coming back to judgment and how dynamic the environment is—I realise that I might sound like a bit of a sub-Tom Clancy novel—we are talking about speeds where people are closing at 1,000 mph, and we are covering a mile between aircraft in three seconds. The decision space for dynamic environment requires people to make really timely, crunchy calls and get them consistently right. We should probably reflect on the fact that people were getting it consistently right day after day, in a very challenging environment.

Major-General Jones: If I may, it is perhaps worth observing that there was also a ground deconfliction channel as well. As our partner forces in Syria, with our coalition advisers, started to close towards the Euphrates river, where regime forces, with Russian partners and others, were operating, we put in place a separate deconfliction channel with the Russians to ensure that ground deconfliction. In the same way as Johnny describes aircraft closing in on each other at great speed, if you put that in a land environment, you have partner forces staring across, in some instances, a hillside at regime forces backed by the Russians. Sometimes, they were firmly within small-arms range of each other. Again, we needed deconfliction to ensure everyone's safety.

Q11 **Chair:** Before we move on, I would like to pick up a couple of points that came up previously. General Jones, you said earlier that the UK had broader permissions than other countries. Can you elaborate on what that means?

Major-General Jones: Yes. I don't want to go too far into that, but in terms of some of the capabilities the United Kingdom can operate, we are a high-intensity, high-end, war-fighting military with some extremely sophisticated capabilities, ensuring that we can use those effectively. In this forum, I wouldn't wish to go too much further in that regard.

This has a slightly more prosaic element to it as well. We talked a bit about building partner capacity. The platform for the Iraqi success was taking the Iraqi brigades, putting them back to training, re-equipping them—largely funded by the United States—and then sending them back to the battlefield. That was significantly conducted in training locations behind the wire, a long way from the battlefield. Increasingly, as the Iraqis advanced north towards Mosul and elsewhere, they did not want to come all the way back to the schoolhouse. They wanted the training to come to them. The United Kingdom was one of the nations that was absolutely at the forefront of answering the call and of moving training teams further forward to provide that assistance.

Air Vice-Marshal Stringer: I can try to help a little bit on the air environment. As Rupert said, there are some very obvious operational security sensitivities around rules of engagement, but if I could just try to flesh out one example where we can talk to permissions. That would be where—it is a standing rule of engagement anyway—you would always seek to delegate to the lowest practical level. Why? Because on most occasions, those nearest the fight can often have the highest level of what we call SA—situational awareness. If I think of our Tornado and our Typhoon crews, but also our Reaper crews, they are getting not just a very high-quality visual feed off targeting pods that they have, but they have very high situational awareness from other intelligence feeds about where they are operating, and we have the confidence in the crews, because they have been doing this for years, whether it be in Libya, Iraq, Afghanistan or elsewhere, and we have very proven processes for it. It is that level of permission, where you have the confidence, the training, the professionalism and the overall wrapper of technology and procedure that allows you to. There will be other air forces that, for some reason, may not be able to operate in that same way, so that puts us at a level that is of greater utility.

Q12 **Chair:** Can I ask you a little more about the political interaction that you had in each of the two countries? You said that in Iraq you were closely engaged with the Government. In Syria, that obviously did not apply, but you said that you would work in close co-operation with the leadership of the Syrian Democratic Forces. Were there any other major actors in Syria with whom you co-operated in that way or was it primarily the Syrian Democratic Forces?

Major-General Jones: In terms of the defeat of Daesh in Syria, it took a little time to identify partners that we could have confidence in, that had suitable objectives and the capability to do what was needed. The Syrian Democratic Forces were clearly the dominant element of that, and I will come back to that in a moment, but there were some other smaller partner forces that we worked with down in southern Syria. I say "we"—I

mean the coalition as opposed to the United Kingdom specifically. The coalition was working with some partner forces down in southern Syria—the MaT and the Shuq. I can give you the full names later; they are long and pretty unpronounceable. We were working with them down in southern Syria. Up in the area east of the Euphrates, the ground that people tend to focus on and the ground that led you to Raqqa, Mayadin, Deir ez-Zor and elsewhere, clearly the Syrian Democratic Forces were the prime force.

So who were we dealing with in Syria? We were dealing on a military level with an individual called General Mazloum. He is the commander of the Syrian Democratic Forces. He is a Kurd by background. You will, I am sure, know that the Syrian Democratic Forces are made up of two components: the Kurdish-dominated element of the force, called the YPG, and he is YPG by background, and the Syrian-Arab coalition. What General Mazloum was able to do was act as kingmaker between those groups.

As we went deeper in towards Raqqa, into what is traditionally an increasingly Arab area, clearly the fighters had to be more and more Arab. If you are going to liberate an Arab village, it needs to be coming from Arab fighters. By the time we went into Raqqa with the Syrian Democratic Forces, about 80% of the fighters were Syrian-Arab coalition as opposed to the Kurdish force.

So, we were dealing very closely with General Mazloum and his subordinates as the fighting force. We were also dealing extensively with the local councils in the absence of a sovereign Government, in particular the Raqqa Civil Council, which was formed up in readiness for the liberation of the province, to provide initial governance.

Q13 **Chair:** So, at its height, when we were operating in Syria with airstrikes, up to March of this year, we had 333 airstrikes in Syria. Would you say that the overwhelming majority of those were in support of the Syrian Democratic Forces?

Major-General Jones: That is a good British question. I defer to my British colleague.

Air Vice-Marshal Stringer: Absolutely. I will talk to October '17, if I may, chairman, because that was my cut-off point. Yes, absolutely. Our airstrikes in Syria were in support of the SDF on the ground.

Q14 **Leo Docherty:** Air Vice-Marshal, can you describe how you controlled airstrikes and ensured targets were legitimate?

Air Vice-Marshal Stringer: Yes, thank you. From the UK angle, there are three broad pillars that our approach to targeting and execution of strikes rests on.

The first, and I will go into a little bit more detail in a moment, is the sophistication in our targeting enterprise, and I will unpack that in a moment. The second is, frankly, the professionalism and judgment of everybody who is involved in that, whether that is from our imagery

analysts identifying targets and plotting co-ordinates right through to the crews who are actually flying the missions.

The third point is the level of scrutiny and the standards to which we held ourselves, and I don't say that idly. I think I probably referred three to four airstrikes a month back to the UK, because on post-strike analysis we would look at something and go, "Do you know what, did we actually see that at the time of the strike? May there have been some figures that appeared at the top of a frame on the targeting pod that were not apparent at the time? Let's understand what happened on the ground." We would go back and do that.

Equally, you will note—we may come back to this—we have been utterly transparent with Airwars and with others on what we have done with our strikes, to the extent that we would, in consultation with the permanent joint headquarters staff back in the UK, assess every CENTCOM report that would come through to check and test whether there was UK involvement. If there was any possibility that there was, we would absolutely look into the investigation and try to work out if we were there.

Let me come back to my first point about the sophistication of the enterprise, because this is important. I'm not sure we have ever built anything as sophisticated as what we have had to use in Iraq and Syria. If I could put you into the air operation centre around the UK desk, you would find a team of largely young men and women—imagery analysts, intelligence, targeting support, legal advice and policy advice—all overseen by a relatively senior individual. They are taking a whole number of feeds that are coming in to assess, first order, is it a valid military target? Is it part of Daesh or the target set that we are going after? Does it satisfy the rules of engagement? Does it satisfy UK policy? Is there clear military advantage? All those levels are effectively a check and balance on what we are doing.

Q15 **Leo Docherty:** Do you have someone on the ground giving you intelligence? Do you have forward air controllers, as it were?

Air Vice-Marshal Stringer: The coalition had, in American-speak, a J-TAC—a joint tactical air controller—so, a team forward. They are providing targeting information but they are one of numerous feeds that are coming in. They may be the pre-eminent one, depending on the nature of the fight that we are in. We would take that. That would come through a strike cell at one of two or three locations in the theatre. Then the team on the desk, as I have just described, would be having that discussion with the strike cell to work out exactly what the target is, its validity, its compliance with UK rules of engagement and so on. So it is a very in-depth process, but done at pace, because you cannot hang around.

To give you a sense of where those checks and balances are, in a six-month period for one of our red card holders at the back end of 2016, of around 1,000 requests that came in, he approved around 400 or so and we actually struck about 280. So over 50% fail a test. By the way, part of that may well be because the situation on the ground has changed. Things

do change. Mosul was a highly dynamic fight, an incredibly congested urban area, a lot going on, and making sure we were getting the calls right was the guiding principle for UK targeting. Hopefully, that's enough.

Q16 **Mrs Moon:** Did the UK always have the capability and the flexibility to cover the range of missions that we asked to undertake or were there times when we had to pass them on to someone else?

Air Vice-Marshal Stringer: No. I come back to the fact of us being able to field a balanced capability. Did I have the assets, the aircraft and the weapons? Yes, in an unlimited world, you would ask for more, and people always do. In terms of the fight we were in and what we needed to employ against it in very broad handfuls, yes.

In terms of ability to carry out the job, I would almost turn it on its head, if I may, and say that we brought capabilities into the fight that some people did not have, whether that was augmenting stuff that may be solely American, because of where it is, or an approach that was almost uniquely British that we could play in which was a combination of aircraft and, as I was saying, with the understanding and some of that inter-agency fusing of intelligence that allowed us to provide some particular insights that would allow the campaign to be prosecuted.

Q17 **Mrs Moon:** Were there particular targets that we were focused on or were we targeting across the board? Was there a speciality that we were able to provide?

Air Vice-Marshal Stringer: I will just give a UK perspective, because I think that is appropriate. We absolutely went across the breadth of Daesh's organisation, whether that be fighters who were pinning down Iraqi security forces in Mosul, whether it be vehicle-borne IEDs being constructed in rural areas, whether it be understanding, even if we were not going after it kinetically, which is an important point, using our intelligence to build out what Daesh themselves proclaimed a proto-state: "Okay, let's have a look at you, let's look at your finances, at how you're doing your frankly propaganda in command and control and recruiting. Let's see how we can go after and undermine all those elements of you." So bringing in an array of the obvious kinetic stuff but some of the more sophisticated non-kinetics, which might not be so apparent. Sorry, I think I was talking about the coalition, but that was the UK side.

Major-General Jones: No, I'll deal with that.

Q18 **Mrs Moon:** We tend to think of combat operations as always being kinetic. How many of our missions were non-combat? Was it 50%, 30%, have you any idea?

Air Vice-Marshal Stringer: I would have to get back to you the exact split of sorties. If I can give you a flavour within each sortie time. Just because a pair of strike aircraft or a Reaper was on a mission carrying weapons did not mean it was going to be dropping weapons on that mission. Of the, I think, now approaching 4,000 weapons of all different types delivered from the air environment, if you divided those by the

number of sorties you would probably get a 0.x reading rather than a 1.x or whatever.

On the intelligence and surveillance side of it, we provided a couple of Reapers on call every day to look in Iraq and Syria, tasked for the coalition, and our wide-bodied intelligence aircraft absolutely flowing into other coalition assets. It always comes back to UK influence and how we support the wider coalition. Regarding our tanker aircraft, the Voyager, depending on where you take the chop on this, between 30% and 50% of its gas, meaning its fuel, every day was being given to coalition—non-UK—aircraft. That is actually a really helpful contribution when other people do not have tanker aircraft and are really hurting for fuel. Being able to bring a lot of fuel into the fight every day for ourselves and our allies was really important.

Major-General Jones: There is an interesting element to that as well. We talked earlier about the numbers of troops in Iraq—600 British. Johnny has touched on the balance between offensive and supporting missions, but in terms of the amount of British service personnel supporting the counter-Daesh fight in the round in the region, that is 1,400, so the figure sky-rockets. I do not know how many of them were pilots, but it begins to give you a sense of the ratios. It is not all about the kinetic element; it is about all the supporting functions that go on.

Q19 **Mrs Moon:** Do you feel that you had sufficient resources to sustain operations at the tempo that was required, particularly without impacting on harmony guidelines?

Major-General Jones: Can I start on that from a coalition perspective, and then Johnny can talk about it from a Royal Air Force perspective? He touched on this a moment ago. As a military commander, you are always going to want more. Mass has a power all its own, and the ground commander's job is to make his case to the higher level of command, and then he will, perfectly correctly, hit the political level and you will be allocated resources. We in the military will always want more. We are not going to want to go into an attack with any less than we can avoid.

Did my boss feel he had everything he needed? Yes. Did he and his Air Force colleague always make the case for more? Yes, because the more you have, the faster tempo at which you can go. I touched earlier on the fact that the operational design was the design of our partners, therefore the pace of the campaign was, again, being dictated by our partners. We did not want to be the drag anchor on Prime Minister Abadi. We did not want to be the drag anchor going into Raqqa.

General Townsend was very good at breaking things down into simple ways of visualising things. He would make the point that he could support three and a half fights at a time across Iraq and Syria. Mosul was certainly one fight. Raqqa was a fight. Sometimes they were a fight and a half because they got so intense. When he was looking at, "What else can I do? Prime Minister Abadi wants to do X—can I resource it?" he would always come back to, "I've got about enough resource in the air

component, and in his enablers and advisers, to do about three and a half different things at a time." There are always resource constraints to some degree. The Iraqis, of course, were themselves limited.

Air Vice-Marshal Stringer: Let me try to set the UK's air contribution to Shader against the wider context of everything else that the Government ask us to do and our other commitments around the world. We were right-sized for the contribution to Shader, pretty much. Some of our areas undoubtedly running hot—there are no two ways about it. We ask a lot of our intelligence and surveillance forces, and we do not have a large number of assets.

That was always designed into the buy of things. For example, I mentioned the Rivet Joint. The third one of three arrived during my time in tenure. We got to the place where Reaper was sustainable at the lines we wanted to do. There is always a tension, by the way, in every campaign to frontload everything at the start and then repent at leisure because you have put it all out of, in my case, the hangar. We were able to sustain our fast jet contribution while also doing our southern air policing, and our UK air defence and other responsibilities.

Could we have done any more? Something would have had to give if we would have liked to put more into Shader because, coming back to your specific question on harmony, we ask a lot of folk. We have Tornado engineers on Cyprus, some of whom, at their three-year point of the operation, had already done over a year there, servicing aircraft come rain or shine in support of the fight. In fact, we made sure that the GR4 force was, and is, able to sustain its commitment right up to the end of the operation, but that meant a focus on the operation to ensure that it could be given what it deserved.

I should also mention, just briefly, that your question indirectly highlights the importance of having aircraft that you can flex from one mission to another. So a Reaper can be doing intelligence and surveillance and then it can go and do a strike—and, by the way, that would be the same for a Tornado. With a Typhoon, as happened on a few occasions, we put it up to do effectively a strike-type mission if required but then we actually folded it into providing air defence support, if I can call it that. I think the longest mission in my time was eight and a half hours for a Typhoon that went up to do mission A, did mission A and then got asked to do the air defence mission straight after it as well. Those are the sorts of investments and choices that were made in the past, and it was great to be able to exploit that. Again, coming back to value to coalition, aircraft or platforms that can do more than one thing are genuinely useful to commanders.

Q20 **Mrs Moon:** Thank you for mentioning the important role of ground crew. We are very conscious of that and it is nice to see it able to be impacted and going into the evidence that this Committee will take. Thank you for that.

One thing that everyone always focuses on is how often you are pulled back from carrying out missions because of civilian presence. There is a

major focus on civilian casualties where we have undertaken strikes, but there is also the issue of where we have pulled back and actually we shouldn't have. So how often is the analysis also looking at where our rules of engagement—or perhaps not ours but an ally's—have prevented action and if we had actually acted we would have been more effective and perhaps have saved more lives in the longer term? Is that part of the equation we are looking at? I am worried that too often the focus is on "was there a mistake made there in terms of civilian casualties?", rather than on "was there a mistake made there and we could have done a more effective mission that would have had a better outcome in the longer term, for people on the ground?"

Major-General Jones: Shall I start and then perhaps Johnny can follow up?

Q21 **Chair:** Before you do, may I just mention that we will be going into this in more detail in the next question as well, so please keep this as a very brief overview. The next question will enable you to drill down further.

Major-General Jones: Okay. Why don't I hold my fire then for the moment? Johnny, do you want do a specific?

Air Vice-Marshal Stringer: Yes. It is difficult in a way. It is almost counter-factual, because you do not know what would have happened after the event, if that makes sense. An airstrike will set a number of other events into train after it. On the specific of whether I would have liked greater freedoms and permissions, let me give the right arc, perhaps, for where that takes you. It takes you to what the Russians have been doing in places like Aleppo, where they are not beholden to the same, quite right, strictures as we are, where 90% of their weapons are unguided, and where dropping from medium level they frankly miss by hundreds of feet because that is the accuracy from medium level. I think I would speak for everybody who served in my group by saying that we were, at the end of the day, always wanting to be able to look ourselves in the mirror and be happy with what we saw about how we had gone about our business. I think we can say that.

Q22 **Phil Wilson:** I want to go back to something you said earlier, Air Vice-Marshall, about the finances of ISIS, about how you went after those as well. Can you give an example of what that means?

Air Vice-Marshal Stringer: Rupert could probably give you the numbers in detail, but let me start it off and then I'll hand off. This is understanding where Daesh's financial flows are coming from. Daesh was not run on the equivalent of five quid a day. It was everything from effectively remittances through to theft, through to bank robberies and whatever you like—oil is a classic one. Talking finance, you see a nexus of a whole number of areas of considerable overlap. It was understanding where those flows were—in this case financial flows—and what was contributing to them, and then identifying how you would go after them. Some of it may be how you go after it in the financial sector—nothing to do with a weapon here. Some of the intelligence that people are providing will provide start points for that. It is then through to elements of their oil and

gas—particularly oil—that we may want to target because it is directly funding military operations. That is the sort of slice I was looking at. There were other elements as well.

Major-General Jones: In macro terms, it is worth just stepping back from the military coalition, which of course was a component of what I described as the global coalition. There is some real genius in the global coalition, because it recognised that Daesh was much more than just a military force holding a caliphate. It was about an ideology. It had networks. It was seeking inspiration and it was seeking recruits from Europe, the Middle East and elsewhere. What the global coalition was seeking to do was to take a global approach, but also to attack the enemy across their fronts. That meant that there was a foreign fighter element to the global coalition, a counter-finance element, a stabilisation element and a global communications element.

It is worth touching on that last one first before I come back to finances. The global communications cell was sponsored by the United Kingdom and run out of the Foreign Office. It was an international body sponsored and hosted by the United Kingdom. For me, it was one of the most powerful bits of the coalition, because it recognised that Daesh was fundamentally about an idea—it was an ideology. As you know, back in 2014 and 2015 Daesh was very clever with its use of social media. They portrayed themselves as somehow being a glamorous organisation. Their rallying call struck a chord with people all over the world.

What the global communications cell was able to do over time was first to physically take down Daesh's propaganda. From the military perspective, we supported that. Their propaganda has now been reduced by more than 80% from its all-time high. In a way, the cleverer bit was about helping people to recognise, particularly in the region, that Daesh was not glamorous—that what they were doing was calling you to your death and that it was a brutal, evil organisation. What it allowed was the voice of toleration and moderation to have its say and begin to drown out the voice of hatred. It is really important to set the military fight in a broader context.

What did that mean in terms of the finance work? Some of it sits way outside the military coalition in terms of Governments working with finances, and I am not best placed to comment on that. What the US element of the coalition in particular did very hard was to target finance sources in-country, particularly in Syria. One of the biggest cash cows for Daesh was its oil flow. Cutting off its access to oil was fundamental to undermining its finances.

Q23 **Phil Wilson:** I want to move on to estimates on civilian casualties and so on. How did you seek to prevent civilian casualties or collateral damage from airstrikes?

Major-General Jones: If I start from a broad perspective, Johnny can tell you what it feels like for the team delivering the attacks. It plays into the earlier question. The first thing, as Johnny alluded to, is that we want to

be constrained. We are a democratic force. We want to be governed by the law of armed conflict. That is our overriding legal framework. Do we therefore want a situation where we have greater freedoms to prosecute the enemy even more ruthlessly? We would still be constrained by the law of armed conflict. When Johnny and I look at ourselves in the mirror at night, that is what we have to judge ourselves against. That must be our metric. If we do not do that, frankly we are no better than the Russians—as Johnny has already indicated, they took a different approach—and we are no better, if we are not careful, than the enemy we are seeking to defeat. That is the first thing to say.

The second is to say that our partners in Iraq and Syria care deeply about civilian casualties—they are their people. If you ever wanted to see a general who cared about this, you only had to go and spend time with Lieutenant General Abdul-Amir, who was Prime Minister al-Abadi's ground commander who fought the battle of Mosul. He has fought all the other battles, too, but he is the one who fought the battle of Mosul. He literally carried the city of Mosul on his shoulders—1.75 million people for nine months. He cared passionately about those people. He would have loved the city to be empty, because he could then have prosecuted it and his only concern would have been about damage to buildings, but it wasn't empty; it was full of people. Day in, day out, he had to put his own troops at greater risk to minimise the risk of civilian casualties. Even if we weren't in that place, the conscience coming out of General Abdul-Amir and Prime Minister Abadi was very strong.

I would say the same about Syria. General Mazloum, whom I touched on, was very mindful as he went towards Raqqa that it was predominantly an Arab city. That made him even more cautious. Were he an Arab, he might have felt freer to say, "I'm an Arab; it's an Arab city. It's my city, so I can be a bit more aggressive." That is not the stance he took; he did quite the reverse. He said, "It is an Arab city; I am a Kurd. I therefore must be even more careful in my approach." Our partners took a hugely enlightened approach to this.

The last thing I would say before I hand over to Johnny is that we need to be careful. War is brutal, and if you want to fight in cities, everything is more extreme. Everything is heightened in a city—the number of troops you need, the amount of munitions you drop and the amount of suffering. The idea that you can liberate a city like Mosul or Raqqa without—tragically—civilian casualties is a fool's errand. That the civilian casualties have been so low, not least by the United Kingdom, is testament to the extraordinary professionalism of the entire endeavour. Ultimately, every time a civilian is killed, he or she is the indirect victim of Daesh.

Air Vice-Marshal Stringer: I spoke a bit about Mosul, and I want to flesh that out. It is about the size of Nottingham—1.2 million people before the start of the op to liberate. Its density is like some of the inner-London boroughs. Some parts of it look like the Shambles in York—that sort of age, density and confusion.

To pick up Rupert's point, you can be as precise as you like, but at the end of the day war is a nasty, brutal business. Our entry point for our strikes

was zero civilian casualties. We would hone every element of intelligence we could find to give us the best possible understanding before we went after a strike. There are times when we would have to act fast. I spoke about Iraqi security forces pin-down. I think the closest weapon we put into Iraqi security forces against Daesh was around 30 feet. In cities with high explosive, that is operating incredibly close to friendly forces, and we did it successfully.

We are human and we are not perfect. With the best will in the world, and with the best level of intelligence, which went into all the strikes that we could take, we can't rule out the possibility that there will be some civilian casualties due to UK strikes that we are not aware of at the moment, or that there is that possibility in the future.

We deal in facts, rather than conjecture. We absolutely took every bit of evidence we got and drilled into it to see whether there is any evidence of UK involvement. There are also a number of countries' air forces employing weapons in relatively close areas. If you look at some of the graphics for Mosul, you will understand that. To be fair, sometimes getting that level of detail is hard, but that hasn't stopped us doing it.

I spoke about professionalism, and I won't repeat myself. I will just say that we held ourselves to a very high standard. Might we have fallen short at times? We will find out, and we will deeply regret that, but we have achieved a hell of a lot in support of the Iraqi people and in support of the SDF and others in Syria, and we have done it with the utmost professionalism.

Q24 **Phil Wilson:** Did you find that the procedures you followed for these airstrikes enabled you to respond effectively to rapidly evolving situations?

Air Vice-Marshal Stringer: Yes, I think we could. I think back to when we engaged a Daesh sniper, who was put there to shoot members of the civilian population if they wanted to try to get away from the public execution of about April or May last year. The period from working out what was going on, to getting approval, to getting the weapon on the target, was very short—very few minutes. Why? Because we had built up our understanding over the preceding 90 minutes or so, which allowed us to operate fast at the time.

Did we have the finest intelligence at all times? No, because you never will. Nobody has an all-seeing eye. We were absolutely focused on prioritising the intelligence effort and making sure that we could always layer different intelligence feeds to give us the best understanding.

Q25 **Phil Wilson:** How many airstrikes have you aborted? You thought there was an increase.

Air Vice-Marshal Stringer: There are two levels to that. There is aborted when you have a weapon in flight, and there are those that we do not take because, although we have cleared them, we then realise that something

has changed. For actually aborting a weapon in flight, between Iraq and Syria it is just below 1%.

Q26 **Phil Wilson:** When you say in flight, is that still on the jet?

Air Vice-Marshal Stringer: No. The weapon has left the aircraft or the platform and is guiding towards a target. With some of our weapons we are able to slew the weapon away into a safe area if we notice that the conditions change on the target. We did that on a few occasions, but we were looking at the target right up to the point of impact, to make those judgment calls.

At the other end of the spectrum is almost what I spoke about in terms of strike requests coming in and the UK team looking at it and testing it for validity, situation on the ground, legality and UK position. At times, that was done in the CAOC—I gave you the figure earlier. At times, it was in the cockpit, where people would be looking at stuff and going, "I hear you, but I am looking at something different at the moment. I am looking at 20 civilians who have just come in", and we would say, "Right, okay. Just abort the strike."

Q27 **Phil Wilson:** What proportion of airstrikes went wrong, where there might have been a weapon that malfunctioned, for example?

Air Vice-Marshal Stringer: I want to reassure by saying very, very low numbers. Whenever we realised that a weapon had not gone where intended—it was not that often—we would put a significant amount of work in to try to work out what happened and where that weapon might have guided to. I would not like to give the figures because they are operationally sensitive, but it is very, very low.

Q28 **Graham P. Jones:** We hear a lot about the civilian casualties as a result of human shields, and the difficult operational decisions that you have to make. Could you tell us something about the way that Daesh operated by using human shields or people to defend themselves, and the challenges you faced in trying to deal with those situations?

Major-General Jones: Let me take that from a high level. It is recognised that Daesh is an extraordinarily brutal enemy. We as a coalition often would downplay that. Why? Because otherwise we are just echoing what Daesh wants us to do. It wants to be known as a brutal organisation, so the more we trumpet just how brutal it is and the diabolical things it has done, to some degree—perverse though it may sound—you are doing Daesh's job for them. We used to downplay that quite significantly, but people should be under no illusion about what they were doing in Ramadi, Fallujah and all the places they held, and in this case, in Mosul. They enslaved entire populations, who went through living hell.

What does that look like in reality? You're in the grip of fear. People are being murdered constantly for doing the smallest thing wrong. Once the battle was joined, they were being actively starved to death. There was no food. The food was all going to the fighters; none of it was going to the

population. I kid you not, people were being thrown into vats of burning oil. You think of the most brutal, middle-ages-type-activity; that is what the Daesh was doing to the local population all the way through.

The population then faces the diabolical choice: do they try to cross the frontline and hope they get across, and know that in doing so they may well be mown down with their families—they were mown down in very large numbers by Daesh as they sought to cross the front line. Or, do they try to live it out? If they live it out, they are living in these absolutely diabolical conditions.

Daesh went beyond human shields. It weaponised the entire population. We touched earlier on the degree to which Daesh might use our own limitation on taking life—our moral western values—against us. What that meant in instances was, for example, we had plenty of evidence of them shepherding large numbers of people into buildings—very high numbers in some instances—and then sealing the building, sometimes welding people inside the building.

In that building were not only women and children; they had wired the building with explosives. They would then place a single sniper on top of that building, knowing that we would look at that as a valid target—"Can't see any pattern of life; there's clearly no civilians there"—and then strike it. Of course, we would strike it with a clever munition that would not destroy the entire building; it would kill the sniper and perhaps the first floor. But if you put an explosive in there—I am no weaponeer; I am getting into Johnny's territory—the sympathetic detonation of all the explosives in the building will bring down the building and kill everybody inside it. There was clear evidence of them doing it.

Of course, we learnt from that and adjusted, and we worked very hard to ensure we did not fall into those sorts of traps. But this is an enemy using a population in a way that I can only liken to the Middle Ages—the dark ages.

Q29 **John Spellar:** You have described a lot with regard to Mosul and how you resolve these various conflicts. What was the extent of UK military involvement? How does the Mosul operation compare to previous UK operations?

Major-General Jones: The UK is the second most significant contributor to the campaign. Johnny will give you the numbers of aircraft and the air effect. But what did that mean on the ground—what was our contribution? It was about senior leadership—people like me—and well-trusted and valued British staff from all three services in all the key headquarters designing how the coalition would support our partners. Then, inside Iraq, it was about conducting the base layer of the campaign, which was building partner capacity. So 600 troops were inside Iraq, the bulk of whom were involved in building partner capacity. That is about taking Iraqi forces at a low level up to the brigade level and training them, giving them the skills they needed to go back into the battle. That is everything from generalist training—infantry skills—through more specialist training

such as medical training and engineering training, and then counter-improvised explosive device training. That is at the heart of the support we have provided. I will allow Johnny to comment from an air perspective.

Air Vice-Marshal Stringer: To reinforce a couple of points from earlier, I think we would all think that Mosul and Raqqa are probably the most challenging environments to conduct weaponeering and airstrikes in and operate over for decades. I cannot actually think of a more challenging urban area, to be honest, especially set against that framework of permissions and ROE we have spoken about. But we had to be clever and imaginative about some of the things we were doing.

The Brimstone is a very clever weapon. We procured it as an anti-armour weapon, but we ended up using it to take out sniper teams of two people by putting the missile through the roof of a corner of a three-storey building in the middle of an incredibly densely packed urban area. We had the confidence to do it because of the crews and the targeting and because of the weapon itself. But you cannot do that unless you are a top-tier air force and you are practising it and you have confidence in your people as well as your equipment.

I could give other examples of where we did some very clever work with fusing on larger weapons so that effectively we mitigated the effect of them. We used buildings, or parts of buildings, to contain the blast. Why? Because your words have to match your deeds, and if you have a narrative that, quite rightly, talks about the importance of human life and the avoidance of civilian casualties and then actually you go and prosecute a war in a different way, your credibility runs out pretty quickly, and quite rightly so as well.

Having to operate with that level of sophistication and judgment day after day is quite tiring for folk, and I think they did an exceptionally sound job—in fact, better than a sound job; they did an excellent job—in being able to stay with that.

One of the things that it is quite useful to reflect on is that I do not think any of us would have thought in 2013, "Right, we're going to be in an operation for almost four years, conducting strikes in a whole raft of areas—desert areas, which we're kind of used to, right through to incredibly challenging urban areas." We had to make sure that all the various forces were up to the challenge, that our training was appropriate and—to pick up an earlier point—that it was sustainable. One of the points I would make there is that you have to make sure that you are being sensible in husbanding things, too. Again, with the best will in the world, even the US at times do not have everything that they want at hand, so being sensible about how you employ weapons and your judgment of that is all part of that tapestry of getting it right. I think all the militaries who have been involved in this fight have learned an incredibly large amount from it, which we are already applying.

Major-General Jones: Forgive me, I didn't really answer the second part of your question, which was about the Mosul operation itself. I don't think

any military in living memory has encountered a battle of this nature. I have said regularly—I stand ready to challenge—that I cannot think of a more significant urban battle since the Second World War. This is uncharted territory for any military, and you are going back to battles like Stalingrad and the battle of Berlin to find some of your reference points. We as a coalition, in all the environments, were learning a vast amount. So were our partners. I have to say, having spent a lot of time with them, that the Iraqi security forces deserve extraordinary credit for sustaining what was an absolutely brutal battle. The mind boggles. Fighting a single urban battle for nine months, with a short pause of under a month between the battles of east and west Mosul—it beggars belief. We all have a vast amount to learn from it, and I can absolutely reassure you that the militaries are picking over the bones of the battle to make sure we all learn for the future.

Chair: This is all excellent stuff. The only slight problem we have is that, as you know, we have to finish in about three quarters of an hour and we are only just about at the halfway stage. We are not far adrift, but we are a little adrift, so we all need to speed up just a touch.

Q30 **Ruth Smeeth:** Good afternoon, gentlemen. Given that we are now talking directly about Mosul, how successful were our airstrikes, Air Vice-Marshal?

Air Vice-Marshal Stringer: In terms of contributing to the coalition campaign to liberate the city, exceptionally effective.

Q31 **Ruth Smeeth:** By what measure?

Air Vice-Marshal Stringer: In the sense of: were we aiding Iraqi security forces' movement on the ground? Yes. Were we also making sure that they weren't cornered and killed at times? Yes, we absolutely were. Were we going against vehicle-borne IEDs? Yes, so we were assisting with Iraqi security forces' movement. Were we also operating elsewhere, beyond the obvious places, to prevent unfettered flow of more fighters, explosive material and so in into the city? Yes, we were doing that as well. Were we also providing key elements of the intelligence that directed the targeting that allowed better command decisions to be made? We were doing that as well. At the same time, we were helping out our coalition allies in the intelligence space and, as I said, even refuelling some of their aircraft.

It is a really good point, though. Militaries have always struggled with measures of effectiveness, and at times they are more apparent in the rear-view mirror than where you were. Did Mosul operate at a seamless steady tempo from east to west? No, it didn't. Was it a more jagged line with pauses and the occasional very slight reversal? Yes, and that's warfare. But in terms of what we were able to support and provide, we were absolutely giving the Iraqi security forces what was required for the fight, so I think our men and women did a fantastic job and provided what was required.

Q32 **Ruth Smeeth:** Major-General, in terms of other operations, how successful do you believe our land forces and intelligence gathering to

have been in supporting—

Major-General Jones: The wider British contribution?

Ruth Smeeth: Absolutely.

Major-General Jones: Hugely successful. We have not really talked that much about it, but the absolute platform for this Iraqi success was retraining their forces. That was something that the British stepped up to right at the front end of the campaign. As I touched on, arguably you could say that any military could do that, but we pride ourselves in Britain that our military is a world-leading military. There is no doubt that the Iraqis wanted to be trained by British forces. The proof is in the pudding. What we were trying to do was get the Iraqi brigades good enough to liberate their country. The UK was fundamental in that. The British were involved in the training of about 72,000 members of the Iraqi security forces, which is a very significant percentage of the 127,000 total that we trained as a coalition. Of course, a number of nations would help to train a single lad as he went through bits of the training. That has been hugely successful. That is not to say that the job is done. You know that Prime Minister Abadi has declared that Daesh no longer hold any territory in Iraq, but from a military perspective, subject to the desires of the Iraqi Government, there is clearly more to do. What we did was prepare the Iraqis to do the fight. What we want to do, and what Prime Minister Abadi would aspire to, is make sure there is a situation where his security forces would not fail in the future. That is about putting them on a more sustainable footing in future.

Q33 **Mrs Moon:** One of the things that this evidence session has been able to do is give not just the Committee but the wider public an understanding of the amazing work the British armed forces have undertaken and the depth of expertise and professionalism that you have brought to bear, as well as the skills base that we are all deeply proud of. However, there is a group that we do not acknowledge, and they get no air time, in a sense. We are aware of the death of Matt Tonroe, for example, of special forces. I know we do not generally refer to special forces, but are you able to say anything about how critical their role was in ground operations and intelligence gathering? We are aware that they must have been pretty important.

Major-General Jones: In a way, you answered your own question. You will recognise what the British position is on that: we do not comment on special forces. What I can tell you in coalition terms, and the Americans take a slightly different approach to how they communicate what they do with their special forces, is that special forces have been absolutely fundamental to the success of this mission. That absolutely goes without saying. They have not been the be all and end all—there are a great deal of United States conventional troops in Syria, for example—but special forces, or special operations forces, as most nations would call them, have played a fundamental role. That is a coalition observation, I would absolutely stress.

Air Vice-Marshal Stringer: With that helpful level of abstraction on it, clearly the nexus between special operations forces and coalition air has been extensive and highly profitable.

Q34 **Graham P. Jones:** Major-General, you said earlier that the Abadi Government led the coalition efforts in Iraq, and in Syria, the Raqqa Civil Council, among others, were involved with the coalition. I want to ask about NGOs. How were military efforts co-ordinated with the non-governmental organisations, as well as the Government organisations?

Major-General Jones: It is an area where I spent a vast amount of my personal effort in Iraq and Syria, but I think your question is primarily focused on Iraq in this instance. How were they co-ordinated? If we are honest, in some of the earlier battles it proved challenging. I do not say that critically, but it is kind of hard, when you have tens of thousands of people on the move.

Graham P. Jones: Is that in Fallujah?

Major-General Jones: Ramadi and Fallujah. It was challenging. It was challenging for the Government of Iraq and it was challenging for the United Nations. There was a great effort in the run-up to the Mosul battle to ensure that the very best plan was put in place. It was personally led by Prime Minister Abadi. He absolutely recognised the centrality of it to the operation. It is not fashionable, is it, but I would really praise the United Nations. They did an extraordinary job. The Deputy Special Representative to the Secretary-General, Lise Grande, a Texan lady, is the unsung hero of the Mosul operation. She has huge experience, and many of the Iraqis involved in this didn't have this sort of experience of how you run a humanitarian operation on this scale. She did, and she was able to leverage all the agencies who had that experience. And she, through force of personality and professionalism, was able to advise and help the Iraqis with this.

It is, frankly, extraordinary that just shy of a million IDPs came out of Mosul, yet there was never a humanitarian catastrophe. When we were doing the humanitarian planning back in August and September 2016, those were our worst-case scenarios—a million people—and we couldn't quite see a way through how we could manage that many people. And yet it happened.

She—Lise, who I worked very closely with—put the humanitarian success down to three things; these are her observations, not mine. The first is the level of preparation by everybody, in readiness for this deluge of people that just kept coming all the way through the nine months. The second was the strength of civil-military co-operation, and that wasn't just between civil agencies and the Iraqi security agencies; it was between civil agencies and the coalition. And thirdly, she would say it was because Prime Minister Abadi and his generals placed the protection of civilians at the absolute centrepiece of the plan. That is not to say it was perfect; it was pretty hairy at times. But it was pretty extraordinary.

The other thing I would do, if I may, is just to touch on this: we tend to focus just on the battle and not what goes on afterwards. Again, the UNDP has done extraordinary work to help people in the aftermath of the battle. I think the latest figure is something like 3.7 million people who have returned to their homes; about 3.7 million internally displaced persons, or IDPs, have returned to their homes in Iraq since the start of the campaign. There are about 2 million still to go.

Humanitarians will tell you that 3.7 million is an unprecedented return rate and that is due to great work by the Government of Iraq, but also to the UNDP bringing their skill-set, in terms of immediate stabilisation—making sure the things are there that will attract people back from a camp. That's about water—it's the basics of life. It's sanitation and schools. If you open schools, people will come back. If you look at the experience of Ramadi, people started coming back in very, very large numbers. Why? Because the schools were there and that is a huge draw.

Q35 **Graham P. Jones:** Just briefly, will you comment on the Peshmerga, because obviously that is an issue within Iraq, and how you dealt with the Peshmerga, who are obviously a Government organisation but some distance from Baghdad?

Major-General Jones: There are two levels to that. The first thing is that we would absolutely always defer to Prime Minister Abadi. Prime Minister Abadi would recognise the position of the governance structure in Erbil, but he would always expect you to defer to Baghdad in the first instance, and we were his partner, so we would absolutely take his lead.

However, with the full blessing of Prime Minister Abadi, we would work very closely with the regional Government in Erbil, to manage the humanitarian operation and manage all the other elements of the operation. As I say, that was absolutely in concert with Prime Minister Abadi. Indeed, Kurdish Ministers would come down to the planning in Baghdad, and recognising the challenges of the referendum, Kurds and Iraqis would say they have never seen such good co-operation between Erbil and Baghdad as they saw during the Mosul battle.

Then, as it pertained to the military element of the Peshmerga, we trained the Peshmerga in exactly the same way as we trained the rest of the Iraqi security forces, and the British played an important role in that.

Q36 **Graham P. Jones:** How did you factor humanitarian considerations into military operations?

Major-General Jones: Again, you are taking the lead from your Iraqi partner. Having got protection of civilians as the centrepiece of their plan, you've then got to help them with that. I have talked already about Lieutenant-General Abdul-Amir. He was the ground commander of the operation. He had an opposite number, Lieutenant-General Basim, who was the humanitarian commander. So a three-star general commanded the battle and he had a humanitarian oppo, and at every meeting I went to the two of them would be there together. That's gold standard; that's really, really impressive. So what do we then do? We then lock into that

structure at every level, from Abadi down through his generals all the way down.

Now, of course, we're not humanitarians. We didn't have the mass to conduct a humanitarian operation. What I used to like to say to the UN and others is that we—the combined joint taskforce—needed to be part of the conversation; we needed to be part of the conscience; we needed to be part of the advice. That was because, as I touched on earlier, Lieutenant-General Abdul-Amir would have loved to have seen Mosul empty. It would have been so much easier. He would have suffered far fewer casualties had there been no civilians—but there were civilians there and, as I said, he vexed over that enormously. We would then help him as to how he managed that to the best degree he could.

I talked about the fact that civilians were starving inside Mosul, with malnutrition and disease. We were very lucky that there weren't significant outbreaks. Again, we worked very closely with Abdul-Amir and the United Nations to see how we could minimise the suffering of the local population.

Q37 **Graham P. Jones:** Part of the planning of those military operations would be, in the flow of IDPs into the camps, Daesh fighters who were absconding turning up in the camps. You all saw part of that humanitarian consideration regarding the Yazidi population in some of those IDP camps with Daesh among them. How did you manage to work with the humanitarian agencies where a military component or element had to be taken into consideration?

Major-General Jones: Again, that was designed in from the outset. I am talking about Iraq, but there was a parallel process in Syria. This was to help the Iraqis understand that the first thing you had to do when an IDP hit the frontline was to get them back across the frontline safely, with some limited screening at that stage—to satisfy yourself that they hadn't got weapons, explosives or anything else, which is just a protection-of-life element. Then you move them back from the frontline, bussing them to secure areas, where they begin to come into the humanitarian community and where further screening would go on to satisfy yourself that they did not pose a threat to the security forces, the humanitarians or indeed other civilians. There is risk in that process—of course there is—and I think it is reasonable to assume that some members of Daesh did skulk away through the IDP network. We would be naive to think otherwise. But a pretty robust screening mechanism was in place, and again similar but different for the Syrian Democratic Forces, as IDPs came out of Raqqa.

Q38 **Graham P. Jones:** Obviously, after the battle, they left behind, mostly, improvised explosive devices. I wondered what the British, including UK military personnel, are doing to help rebuild the city and to make it safe?

Major-General Jones: I touched earlier on the fact that the British military are seen as global leaders when it comes to counter-improvised explosive device experience, which is to a significant degree born out of our Northern Ireland campaign, then Iraq and Afghanistan. It is just an area we are particularly competent at. We are therefore playing a very

significant role in training Iraqi forces in those skills, as part of this campaign.

As you say, these cities are left riddled. It goes back to the brutality of Daesh. You go into a house, you pick up a pillow and the pillow is a device; you open your fridge, your fridge is a device. These are everywhere in both Iraq and Syria, so it is a massive challenge, which just reminds us of the lack of humanity of our enemy. There are no quick ways to clear a city the size of Ramadi, Fallujah, Raqqa or Mosul; you have got to do it deliberately. It comes down to a capacity issue.

The British Government and other Governments have put a lot of money into the removal of explosive remnants of war. Very significant programmes by UNDP and others are running in Iraq, and a similar programme is running in Syria, but we cannot kid ourselves: this takes a lot of time.

If I may, one other slightly ghoulish element is really important. Under the rubble, of course, are bodies. Bodies pose a massive health hazard when you are trying to encourage people back into the city. To get the sanitation and the water going, you have to clear rubble, so you have to put in a huge effort in both Syria and Iraq into resourcing rubble removal. That in itself is a hugely dangerous activity, because in the rubble can be explosives. That is a very challenging activity.

My advice—I dealt extensively with the Raqqa Civil Council, a very impressive group of people, Arabs and Kurds—if they are slightly looking for guidance, given the enormous challenge they face, is that you have to be honest with them and say, "Look, this is a generational challenge. You don't rebuild these cities quickly." We can create the early yards, but this will take a considerable amount of time.

Q39 **Phil Wilson:** When we were in Baghdad at the beginning of 2016, before the attack on Mosul took place, one of the big issues that was continually raised with us was the dam at Mosul and what would happen with that—if it did break, it would have been catastrophic for the whole of Iraq. How did you secure it? Was it an issue that you had to pay a lot of attention to?

Major-General Jones: You know what we military like—we like to contingency plan. Nothing goes un-contingency-planned. There was significant threat to the dam. You know that; it is on the public record. The Government of Iraq are doing very considerable work, not least with the Italians. An Italian company is coming in to strengthen the dam—I'm going to drift into engineering territory that I don't understand—to make sure that it does not collapse. There are times in the year when it is more prone to, or at greater risk of, collapse than others. So, that is the long-term plan: prop it up so that it doesn't collapse. But in the meantime, we clearly needed a contingency, as to the Government of Iraq, should it collapse. Of course, we had done all the modelling in terms of what water flows would be, and it is pretty catastrophic. So we had plans in terms of how we would support the Government of Iraq with the continuing battle

against Daesh during a post-dam collapse flood. Simplistically, General Townsend was going to lead that and then we were going to break away and I was going to run a humanitarian assistance mission in support of the Government of Iraq. We were mindful that you could find yourself faced with mass flooding. You have probably seen the modelling; it is pretty scary what could have happened.

Q40 **Phil Wilson:** But militarily you were able to secure the dam.

Major-General Jones: Yes, the dam is very heavily fortified by our Italian colleagues. It is an Italian company doing the work on the dam, and, as part of the package, they agreed that they would protect the dam to make sure it was not vulnerable to attack.

Q41 **Mr Francois:** General, you have described the battle of Mosul as the largest urban battle since the Second World War. Now that the dust has settled on that to some extent, what would you regard as the major lessons learned from that campaign?

Major-General Jones: There are two elements to that. The first is the global coalition. Governments decided, with military advice, that there might be a different way of doing things after the experiences of Iraq and Afghanistan. That led us to this partner approach. There are a huge amount of lessons that we need to pick up in the cold light of day as to the relative merits of partner operations. I would conclude that, in the right circumstances, they are very appealing, but what I would not want anyone to come away with is thinking that they are the panacea—the template answer in all circumstances. They quite patently aren't. We need to analyse the circumstances in which we think they are most pertinent, so that, next time, we draw the right lessons. I think there are conclusions about what you need for a partner-led operation. You clearly need a partner with the intent and capability to do the job; he has got to have broadly similar objectives to you. So there are a number of conclusions that you can draw.

What I am clear about is, if the circumstances are right and a partner-style operation is relevant, it is a potentially very successful way of going to war, for reasons I think you would recognise, because you have got indigenous forces liberating their own people. No nation likes to have foreign forces on their soil, but if it is indigenous forces liberating, you are giving the indigenous Government huge legitimacy. You are giving their security forces huge legitimacy, and they probably need that because they were probably on the back foot—otherwise there wouldn't be something happening in the first place. Because of that, you are creating a much stronger platform from which to transition into some kind of more positive, longer-term solution. And, of course, we shouldn't kid ourselves that, from our perspective, it reduces our collective exposure as well, in terms of political, military and casualty risk. There is a package of lessons on what that tells us about partner operations, which we need to analyse, and we absolutely are analysing.

The second one is around urban warfare, where our American colleagues led a very extensive piece of work called the Mosul study. The British military were closely involved in that work as well, and it has been shared among ourselves. That is an excellent document that analyses what Mosul tells us about the force for the future. A similar bit of analysis has been conducted on the Raqqa battle. What does it tell us? It's a tome, and it tells us lots of things. One of the things it reminds us—and I touched on this—is just how challenging urban warfare is. We need to recognise that potential adversaries may well pull us into cities, whether we like it or not. So we had better be prepared for it. There is a scale that comes with urban warfare. On D-day of the battle for Mosul, Prime Minister al-Abadi had 94,000 troops in assembly areas—it's just massive. You learn strategic lessons all the way through to sub-tactical lessons about weaponeering, which is firmly into Johnny's sphere. Just to absolutely reassure you, the British military, working very closely with our allies, is doing that work.

Air Vice-Marshal Stringer: Can I just offer something else, because we tend to lose it if we are not careful? I would put the boot on the other foot and go, "And study your opponent too." Those drones were £700 each, allied to a radio or mobile phone and a 40 mph up-armoured car. You have got a precision weapon that goes off with the force of a 2,000 lb weapon in the middle of an urban area, and you have done it incredibly cheaply if you are Daesh. You have got free-to-use computer applications that effectively give you targeting-level information, and you have got your command and control and your propaganda done for the price of a second-hand laptop and an internet connection. So somewhere in here, we have allowed technology to be now a very low bar of entry to allow some quite sophisticated responses. Being enemy-focused, as Rupert was touching on as well, is one of the things we really focused on on the back of this, as well as the environment in which we fought.

Q42 **Mr Francois:** Are the conclusions of the Mosul study being fed into the Modernising Defence Programme? Presumably, they are.

Major-General Jones: Without going too far into the MDP process—it's a big process that is taking a huge amount of feeds—and as the single services feed into that, we are absolutely taking into account the experiences of this campaign, but also a multitude of other campaigns as well.

Q43 **Mr Francois:** Okay. Can we turn to Raqqa? You talked a lot about the challenges of military operations in Mosul. What were the challenges of military operations in Raqqa?

Major-General Jones: Let me start, and Johnny will give you the difference from the air perspective. First, Raqqa is a very different city. It's much smaller, with about 250,000 people, but that is still a big urban area. The layout of the city is very different. It's significantly a high-rise city; there are some big, tall buildings. That poses some very significant challenges to ground forces manoeuvring. You have the challenges and differences around the fact that you didn't have a sovereign Government.

We have touched on that, and that was problematic. In terms of our linkages into the Syrian Democratic Forces commander General Mazloum and the Raqqa Civil Council, some people had some concerns about their authority. So there are some governance challenges, if you like.

There are lines of communication challenges. You have got to get your stuff to the battle and, in Iraq, that was relatively easy because you are working in a relatively secure environment. Going deep into Syria, across the border from Iraq, where the border crossing would often be closed—very challenging. Of course, we had to get the equipment to our partners. A huge amount of materiel was needed, and we had to get that in. There were some pretty extraordinary feats in terms of how we did that.

Then it is the difference of partner. As I said, there were 94,000 members of the Iraqi security forces. Well, the Syrian Democratic Forces didn't have that, and they are not a sovereign state military with tanks and artillery and all the things militaries have. They are a light militia force, in relatively light numbers and relatively lightly trained, and, therefore, the manner in which we had to support them in the fight was different. The way they fought on the battlefield was different, and we had to optimise the way we supported them to the way they could operate on a battlefield.

Air Vice-Marshal Stringer: The only thing I would add, as Rupert said, is it is much more of a vertical, built-up city, relatively—five or six-floor high-rise. But that is a hell of a defensive position, and there's a whole host of them as well. So we would quite routinely find re-infiltration happening, which we would then have to go and deal with. As we touched on earlier, no environment exists by itself. A complex land environment is a complex air environment within which to operate to make sense of what is going on down there. Equally, for coalition forces calling in strikes in support of the SDF, understanding the complexities above them was important as well. That said, in campaign-length terms, Raqqa went slightly quicker, but, then, we had done a fair amount of preparation for the operation before the decisive ops.

The last point I would offer is that, in some areas, they probably had a little bit longer to do their defensive preparations as well. Working through those was, in some areas, a little bit more of a challenge than Mosul, but Mosul presented different challenges as well, such as the canalising of forces and the use of IEDs. They were both difficult fights in urban areas.

Q44 **Mr Francois:** Briefly, what was the extent of the UK military involvement in Raqqa?

Major-General Jones: Johnny can talk to the air element. In terms of coalition support, you know—and the Secretary of State laid this before the House—that in about February 2017 British coalition members were going into Syria to enable key members of the coalition, such as myself, to do my job. I could not be a highly effective deputy if I could not even go into one of the countries involved in the operational area. I and a number of British subordinates within the coalition played a significant role in terms of the humanitarian and stabilisation work. For example, the

military link with the Raqqa Civil Council was me. All of that work was led by British officers working closely with the present special envoy, Brett McGurk.

Air Vice-Marshal Stringer: For the air component, while we were doing work in support and liberation of Mosul, we were also doing operations over Raqqa, with the same array of equipment or platforms in both areas. The art at coalition level was flexing what you had to—in an ideal world—seize opportunity and reinforce success, or to augment where required because Daesh were fighting some level of tactical action in another part of the fight. It shows the flexibility that was required both at coalition level and at the component levels to be able to prosecute two large fights at the same time and get the prioritisation right between them.

Mr Francois: Thank you, gentlemen.

Q45 **Chair:** I would like to spend most of the remaining time talking about the concept of partner operations. There is one more question from Ruth. In the case of these two countries, we have two very different situations. It is clear that you have a great deal of admiration for the Government in Iraq. It is fairly clear from what has been said that, in terms of the overall military effort, we have been mounting a much more weighty campaign in Iraq than in Syria. Would you agree with those two propositions?

Major-General Jones: Yes, I think I would. I do have great respect for the achievements of the Government of Iraq and their sovereign forces. We should all have done extraordinary things over recent years. Was it more of an industrial—that may or may not have been the word used—approach in Iraq than in Syria? Undoubtedly. Until relatively recently—I am talking, I guess, about the early part of 2017—the coalition footprint in Syria was very light. It was a bijou little operation with special operation forces enabling coalition strikes, as they cleared places like Manbij. Once the preparations for the operation for Raqqa started, it was a six-month approach march to Raqqa, clearing the ground. As that started to build up, it was clear to us—the coalition—that you needed to bring in industrial might. The Syrian Democratic Forces are not a heavy force, and they were clearly going to need quite a lot of coalition might to get them through these Daesh positions.

Q46 **Chair:** Is it true to say that, effective though airstrikes can be—for example, in degrading the finances and resources of an adversary like Daesh—in the end, if they are going to help you win a campaign, they have to be in support of forces of the ground who are going to reap the benefits of those airstrikes?

Air Vice-Marshal Stringer: We of course were doing all of those things, and they are all part of the story. Just to give some insight, after Mosul was liberated, we all thought Tal Afar in northern Iraq was probably going to involve six to eight weeks of hard fighting. It had all the potential to be so. It went in about 10 days. One of the reasons why it went was that the morale of Daesh fighters had just been stripped away over the preceding

months. Whether it was the fact that the coalition was after them, could find them and could ultimately take them out if required; whether it was the fact that they weren't getting paid; whether it was the fact that they weren't getting food through; or whether it was the fact that they felt, "Oh well, the game's up, isn't it? We've been rumbled, and we're being defeated," all those things are important.

Without sounding like an air power zealot, you have to do a number of things to contribute to the campaign but—to your point—in Raqqa you then need your guys on the ground, who you are supporting, to step in and use the opportunity you are providing to take and hold ground.

Q47 **Chair:** We have a problem, don't we, when we are trying to do partnership operations in Syria, compared with Iraq? In Iraq, we know who we want to win. We know who we want to lose in both countries—it is Daesh—but in Iraq, we know we want the Iraqi Government to be successful, and we have a close relationship with them. In Syria, our position was that we did not want the Syrian Government to be successful, so we were very limited in our choice of partners, weren't we? I think you said that the vast majority of airstrikes in Syria were in support of the SDF, and a much smaller number were in support of a much smaller group in the south of the country.

Major-General Jones: To suggest we were limited with our partners does our partners a disservice. We went through a pretty discerning process to identify who the coalition did and did not want to back. As you well know, there are a great many malign actors operating in Syria, and the global coalition would not wish to work alongside them. Certainly, by the late stages—mid-2016—we had alighted on partners we were confident had the intent, the capability and the background to do the job at hand.

Q48 **Chair:** Sorry, but because we are under time pressure, I have to intervene a bit and move it on. What I am trying to get at is this: the Syrian Democratic Forces—you have referenced them on many occasions during the past couple of hours—and a small group in the south were pretty much it, as far as Syria was concerned.

Major-General Jones: There were other moderate Syrian opposition groups further west of Raqqa, which the coalition was working with at various times.

Q49 **Chair:** Did they conquer any territory?

Major-General Jones: Yes, absolutely. You may be familiar with the operation that Turkey conducted down towards al-Bab. Turkey did that with opposition forces.

Q50 **Chair:** I don't ask you to stray beyond the military, but it is widely reported that the majority of opposition forces in Syria, other than the Kurds, are Islamist in orientation. Is that a factor you had to take into account in deciding with whom to co-operate militarily?

Major-General Jones: I don't fully recognise that characterisation. You are absolutely right that one has to be very careful in picking your

partners. There were certainly Islamist groups out there with which we would not wish to partner, and we didn't. It wasn't only the Kurds. As you went into Arab territory, it was, to a significant degree, Arab fighters doing the liberating. They were not Islamists.

Q51 **Chair:** Yes, those were Arab fighters who were part of the Syrian Democratic Forces umbrella, which was led by the Kurds. What observations do you have about the situation now? Those very forces who appear to have been our principal allies on the ground in Syria now appear to be locked in conflict with Turkey.

Major-General Jones: I think the message we would all wish to send as a coalition, both to our partner—the SDF—and to Turkey, is: let's try to retain unity, and let's keep our focus on the defeat of Daesh. I think it is the position of the British Government—it is for others to comment—that Turkey has some legitimate interest in their border areas. As it relates to the fight against Daesh, we would wish everyone to keep their eyes on the prize. The prize is the defeat of Daesh. I should just confirm that the Syrian Democratic Forces are firmly back on the offensive in the middle Euphrates river valley, as of the beginning of this month.

Q52 **Chair:** As of this moment, the Turks and the Syrian Democratic Forces are absolutely in a full-scale confrontation, aren't they?

Major-General Jones: I am not going to get drawn into a conversation about what is happening in Afrin; it is not part of the fight for which I was responsible. It plays to the complexity point that Johnny talked about; we know that the Turks have very considerable difficulty with the YPG as a group and its alleged connections to the PKK. Clearly, the PKK is a terrorist group who poses significant threat to Turkey. The YPG has declared its independence from the PKK. It says they have no connections anymore. We as a coalition were satisfied with that. We recognise that Turkey, as a member of the coalition, had a different perspective on that. We continued to discuss that closely with Turkey throughout, in a very collaborative manner.

Q53 **Chair:** I am going to come to Air Vice-Marshal Stringer in a moment, to talk about airstrikes per se. Looking strategically at Syria, as opposed to looking strategically at Iraq where it was quite clear to us that if we got rid of Daesh, you would have the Iraqi Government in control, was it ever in your mind that if Daesh were defeated in Syria, given the presence of Russia, Assad would not be a substantial beneficiary of the defeat of Daesh in Syria? Who did you think was going to win in Syria, overall?

Major-General Jones: You know that was not my job. My job was to worry who was going to win against Daesh. I was absolutely clear who was going to win, and when they almost have. The counter-Daesh fight in Syria has to sit within something broader. I will not comment on the broader complexity. All I would observe is that if there were an easy answer to this, politicians around the world would have found the solution by now. As a military guy, I have quite a degree of sympathy with the political classes as they look at this challenge. Our job was to liberate

those areas of Syria held by Daesh and allow that to connect to a broader political process.

Q54 **Chair:** At its height, what percentage of Syria would you say was under the control of Daesh—at its maximum?

Major-General Jones: I am trying to visualise a map, so forgive me. I am thinking 30% of land mass—something of that order. I cannot remember the exact percentage.

Chair: Now, that has been reduced to a very small percentage.

Major-General Jones: A tiny fraction.

Q55 **Chair:** In the reduction from 30% to a tiny fraction, how would you allocate the credit to the different forces that were battling Daesh? Just roughly, what percentage of that 30% is to the credit of the Syrian Democratic Forces for having retaken it? What percentage is to the group in the south? What to other groups and what to Syrian Government?

Major-General Jones: I am not going to give you a statistic, but the overwhelming successes came from the Syrian Democratic Forces. It is true to say that regime forces backed by Russia and others as they broke out of the western spine, have cleared some of the territory in the desert west of the Euphrates. That is certainly true.

Q56 **Chair:** Air Vice-Marshal, do you have the list that we have distributed of the airstrikes? It is based on the statistics that have been given to us. As you can see, from the beginning of the period when we started airstrikes in Syria, which is December 2015, we had a grand total of 333 airstrikes in Syria. That hides the fact that there could have been quite a few aircraft on any one of those individual strike operations, I appreciate that.

If you look at the graph, you can see that for the majority of the time between the beginning of those airstrikes and December 2015 right up to March 2018, the number of airstrikes in Syria per month was in single figures, and often in low single figures. If you look at the months from June to October 2017 inclusive, which is the period covered by the battle of Raqqa, there were no fewer than 160 airstrikes in Syria, which is approximately half of the total. Isn't it quite clear that the opportunities that we had to strike in Syria in support of forces on the ground were, for the most part, very limited until we got to the battle of Raqqa?

Air Vice-Marshal Stringer: Yes, I would say that is fair. I would put a couple of other points in which I think are important. First, when you put your aircraft in, if you are going to be a good coalition partner you put them in as, effectively, a campaign asset. You put your aircraft where they can make the optimum contribution to the campaign at that stage.

At the times you are looking at, there was clearly a significant amount of work that needed to be done in the campaign in Iraq, where UK assets were well configured to do that. That is exactly what we did. You are absolutely right: as Mosul is drawing down—we have liberated the east and the west gets to a smaller and smaller area by the river—it allows a

proportionately greater focus on operations in Syria. That is why you see the uptick there.

Q57 **Chair:** I know that General Jones has to go in five minutes exactly, so I will keep this very brief. I know Ruth wants to come in as well. Can I just check something with you? The other big spike, as you can see from the graph, is that no fewer than 45 of the airstrikes in Syria were in the months of January and February 2018. Can you explain what that particular burst of activity was about?

Air Vice-Marshal Stringer: That is actually outside my time of being the air component commander. We can get back to you on it, but my suspicion—underline, suspicion—is that that is probably as the operational focus moves to the middle Euphrates river valley, but we can check that for you.

Q58 **Chair:** In sum, therefore, roughly two thirds of the airstrikes in Syria were in support of pretty much set piece battles, and during the rest of the period we were having to do very limited numbers on very specific operations.

Air Vice-Marshal Stringer: Well—

Chair: It is not a criticism. I am just trying to get to the facts.

Air Vice-Marshal Stringer: No, I am actually trying to give you the best possible answer. Raqqa would have been the main focus. There were strikes around Tabqa as well. There were isolated strikes outside of there, but given the nature of the particular fight, and the way—we didn't mention this earlier—that Raqqa was the main effort in Syria, and the campaign axis for the SDF, it was entirely appropriate that we would have been supporting around there, and against where Daesh were in numbers. In that stage, it was around Raqqa.

Q59 **Chair:** Just one last point. These airstrikes appear to have been very carefully documented. Is it true, therefore, that for each of these airstrikes there would be a record saying exactly where it was and exactly who it was in support of?

Air Vice-Marshal Stringer: Thank you for that. For every single weapon dropped—every single weapon, not just strike—a targeting pack is compiled, obviously pre-strike. Post-strike, we put the weapons video from targeting pods, or whatever other sensors we have that were looking at it. Those records are then archived for many years, so we can go back if necessary in the light of future evidence, or to pull lessons from them, or to inform future force development.

Q60 **Chair:** The reason I ask this is because we have asked the Ministry of Defence over and over again to say in support of which groups on the ground in Syria particular airstrikes were mounted, and they always say that they do not keep the information. The reason I ask that question is that we know that there were substantial forces that we could support in terms of the Syrian Democratic Forces—Kurdish-led, but wider than the Kurdish group we have heard so much about today. I was just curious to

know whether either of you had seen in the course of your campaigning any sign of the 70,000 moderate forces of opposition that we were led to believe were also operating in Syria.

Major-General Jones: I am not going to comment on 70,000 or otherwise. What I will tell you is this: were there suitable partner forces with whom we could operate in Syria to complete the defeat of Daesh? The answer to that is yes.

Q61 **Chair:** Judging by the analysis of the airstrikes, those forces were overwhelmingly the Syrian Democratic Forces.

Major-General Jones: Yes, the hard yards against Daesh in Syria were conducted by the Syrian Democratic Forces.

Ruth Smeeth: You have a minute to answer this question.

Major-General Jones: I didn't realise I was in quite that much of a hurry, but that's okay.

Q62 **Ruth Smeeth:** We are back in Iraq. We went back to Iraq because, arguably, we had not finished the job before. What do we need to do to make sure that this mission is actually fully completed, and are we at risk of leaving again too soon?

Major-General Jones: I touched earlier on the fact that everyone can have a judgment on why Daesh rose. I am not going to pass comment on that, but if we are going to do the job properly, from a military perspective, we do not just want to teach the Iraqi security forces how to retake their towns and cities. We want to give them a strong institutional backbone for the future. Subject to ongoing political discussions, I think that is the intention. I know that a great many nations would wish to remain engaged on that basis, at the invitation of the Government of Iraq—but that must be at the invitation of the Government of Iraq.

Q63 **Ruth Smeeth:** It is straightforward for the Government of Iraq. What about Syria?

Major-General Jones: In Syria, yes, it is a different context. I touched earlier on the fact that at some point you transition, don't you? Transitions can be long, or they can be short. There will be a debate about how long the transition is in the Daesh-liberated parts of Syria. From a military perspective, my interest is only that there is a transition. Otherwise, the hard yards that everyone has put in do not lead to anything. How that transition works is clearly for others to judge.

Chair: It is exactly 1.30 pm, as we promised. Thank you both very much for your extremely detailed and interesting insights, and thank you for your service in these difficult theatres.