



# The UK has Reached a Watershed Moment in Syria

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*High-profile conflicts elsewhere mean that the UK's military presence in Syria has received little attention of late. However, ongoing shifts across the region mean a refresh of the UK's approach may soon be necessary.*

The fight against Islamic State in Syria and Iraq is no longer part of the public consciousness. Nowadays it is not well known that [UK airstrikes against Islamic State](#) took place as recently as last month, or that there are still UK forces [on the ground in Iraq](#). Public interest in the conflict has been low since before the [defeat of the so-called 'caliphate' in Syria](#) in 2019, and has now been [eclipsed by the Ukraine War](#). Even though the West pays proportionately little attention to Syria now, the status quo is quietly shifting and could soon be openly hostile to UK interests.

Syria's re-acceptance into the Arab League is a definitive sign that the tides are turning. President Bashar al-Assad was [removed from the club](#) of Middle Eastern and North African states in 2011 over his brutal crackdown on anti-government protestors. He remained mostly ostracised as the Syrian civil war deepened and [Western sanctions](#) made Syria difficult to do business with. The West has always insisted on humanitarian and democratic reforms as a condition of Syrian reintegration. However, since the February 2023 earthquake, Assad has been on [a diplomatic offensive](#) to bypass these conditions, citing the sheer intensity of the humanitarian crisis he faces and the difficulty of receiving aid under the current sanctions regime. His efforts [appear to have paid off](#). By welcoming Assad back to the Arab League, many states in the Middle East – including several friendly to the UK – have now clearly set out their intention to rehabilitate Syria.

This creates a dangerous trap for the West. Rolling back sanctions despite a lack of progress on human rights risks undermining economic action as an instrument of power; keeping sanctions in place as Syria and other states defy them risks making the West look weak. The UK still [mirrors the EU sanctions regime](#), although having left the EU it is no longer required to follow suit with the bloc on future action. Whatever action the UK takes next must ensure that sanctions remain a viable policy tool. There are [several options available](#): focusing on sanctions against culpable individuals, relaxing rules on humanitarian aid and infrastructure, and keeping political reforms on the table as a route to normalisation. However, against the backdrop of sanctions against Russia, Western governments might find any rehabilitation of an unapologetic dictator too unpalatable to bear.

There is another dimension to UK interests in Syria: Operation *SHADER*. Though [territorial victory over Islamic State](#) had been achieved by 2019, the organisation [had already transitioned](#) towards guerrilla insurgency, the operating model it uses today. Operation *SHADER* continues to use military force alongside capacity building, countering threat finance and limiting the movement of foreign fighters as part of the [Global Coalition against Daesh](#). This activity remains necessary: the [threat from Islamic State](#) persists, and up to 7,000 supporters remain across the Levant with the capability to conduct complex terrorist attacks.

The UK's ability to project military force, particularly air power, into Syria has long been a source of consternation for the Syrian regime. Western airstrikes against Syria in the aftermath of the 2018 chemical weapons attack in Douma were met with particular hostility by Assad, who called them a '[flagrant violation against the Syrian Arab Republic](#)'. However, opposition to Western military operations in Syria dates back much further to the very beginning of the conflict, when the [US backed Syrian opposition forces](#) against Assad's government. The UK, the US and France have been [frozen out](#) of the Syrian regime's peace process since at least 2016, and [the recent Astana talks](#) between Russia, Syria and Turkey have highlighted Assad's vision for a Syria free of Western presence. [Syria has welcomed Russia](#) as a military security guarantor, and Russia has been violating airspace reserved for Western counterterrorism operations [multiple times a day](#) throughout 2023.

In the context of the diplomatic rehabilitation of Assad and increasing animosity towards the Western presence, the future of the Global Coalition against Daesh and Operation *SHADER* is far from assured. As Gulf states [prepare to resume trade](#) with Syria and as Russia transitions to a permanent presence in the country, Assad will likely be emboldened to begin lobbying for a removal of the West from his country altogether. In the aftermath of the [military drawdown in Afghanistan](#) there is little appetite for another high-profile withdrawal. However, a quiet end to the UK presence in Syria is now a distinct possibility.

The US has other interests in Syria, including supporting the partner forces it has invested so much in and increasingly [countering Iranian malign influence](#) in the region. However, the UK's military presence in Syria is firmly a counterterrorism effort, and in this sense, it is unclear how damaging the loss of freedom of action in Syria would be. The [UN has highlighted](#) that the areas of greatest concern for Islamic State terrorism are in Africa, where regional offshoots are gaining footholds in Mozambique, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Somalia and across the Western Sahel. Though an end to Operation *SHADER* would limit counterterrorism efforts in Syria and Iraq, it would allow the reprioritisation of resources to these areas of growing concern. The [recent evacuation of Sudan](#) demonstrated the UK's ability to rapidly deploy and sustain operations in Africa, and as the threat from Islamic State grows in these areas of instability, the requirement for military intervention is likely to grow.

With all eyes on Ukraine, interest in Syria from a defence and security perspective is far lower than it might otherwise be. However, the UK's military activities in Syria are more diplomatically precarious than they have been for a long time. This watershed offers a chance to refresh the UK's approach to both economic sanctions and overseas counterterrorism operations. To realise the opportunities this presents, the UK must first recognise the distinct possibility of an end to Operation *SHADER*.

*The views expressed in this Commentary are the author's, and do not represent those of His Majesty's Government, RUSI or any other institution.*