

British Air and Drone Strikes in Iraq and Syria. UK Reaper Drone Ops

By [Chris Cole](#)

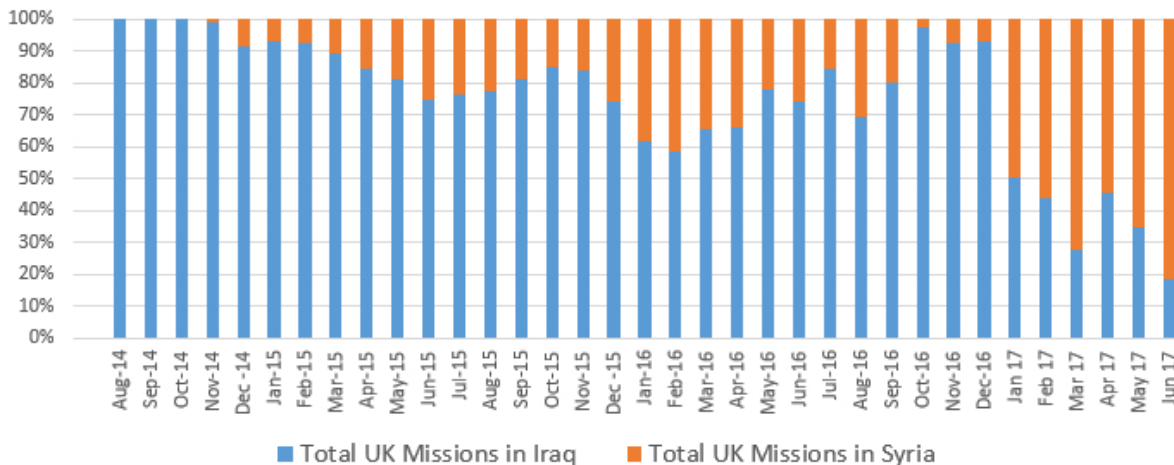
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Theme: [Crimes against Humanity](#),
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In-depth Report: [IRAQ REPORT](#), [SYRIA](#)

New figures released to Drone Wars UK in response to Freedom of Information requests shows a dramatic increase in the number of RAF operations in Syria in the first six months of 2017. According to the [figures](#), UK armed air missions in Syria rose by 480% in the first half of 2017 compared with the previous six months.

However, rather surprisingly in the light of the huge increase in missions in Syria, the vast majority of UK air strikes continues to occur in Iraq, with 81% of UK missile and bombs dropped there in the first half of the year (see table below). Responses to our queries about this appear to indicate that this is due to UK aircraft deployed on missions inside Syria not launching their weapons there, but [in Iraq on their return journey](#). UK weapons fired in Syria did increase by almost 50% from 79 in last six months of 2016 to 118 in first half of 2017.

UK armed air missions in Iraq and Syria

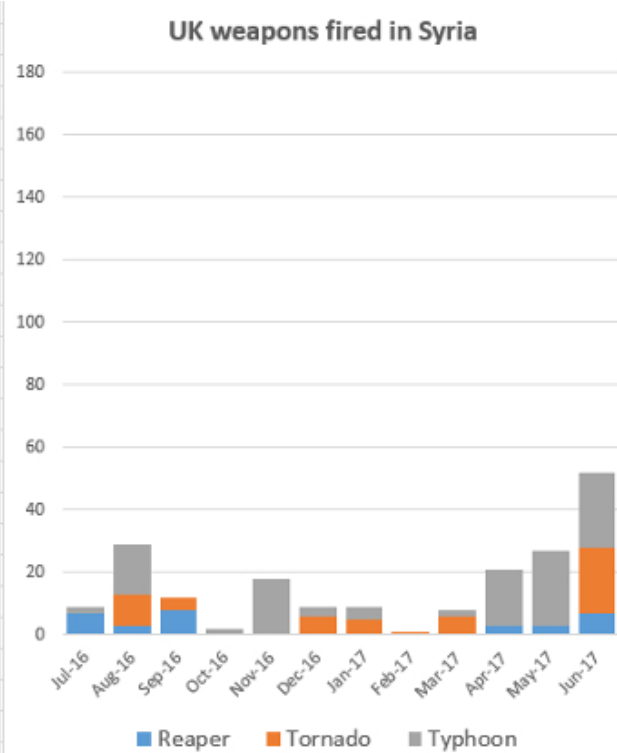
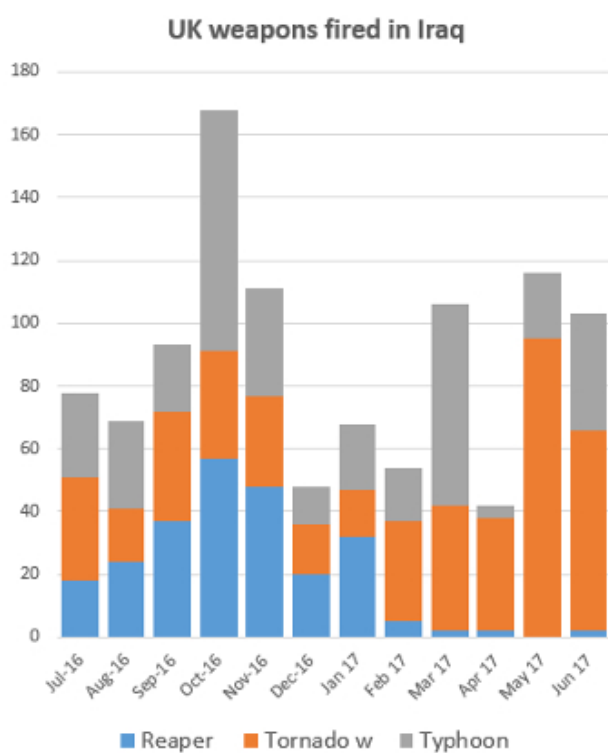


UK armed air missions flown, Operation Shader Jul'16 – Jun17

	Iraq				Syria			
	Reaper	Tornado	Typhoon	Total	Reaper	Tornado	Typhoon	Total
Jul-Dec 2016	226	205	194	625	88	17	19	124
Jan-Jun 2017	84	225	28	337	254	85	254	593

Weapons fired by UK aircraft, Operation Shader Jul' 16 – Jun '17

	Iraq				Syria			
	Reaper	Tornado	Typhoon	Total	Reaper	Tornado	Typhoon	Total
Jul-Dec 2016	204	164	199	567	18	20	41	79
Jan-Jun 2017	43	282	164	489	13	33	72	118



UK armed drones in Iraq and Syria

Figures show that the focus of UK Reaper drone operations also switched from Iraq to Syria in the first six months of 2017. From January to June 2017 there were just 84 Reaper missions in Iraq, a sharp decline from the 226 that had occurred there during the previous six months. Across the border in Syria, RAF Reaper missions rose from 88 in the final six months of 2016 to 254 in the first half of 2017.

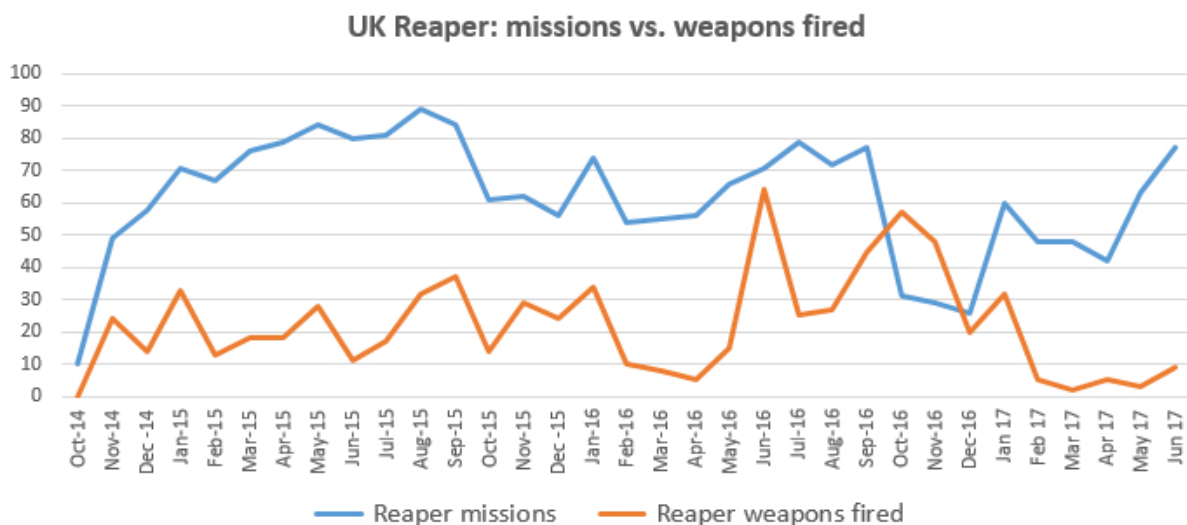
The number of weapons fired from UK drones in Iraq declined alongside the reduction in the number of missions there, with UK drones launching just 43 weapons in first six months of 2017 compared to 204 in the previous six months. In Syria, however, despite a 280%

increase in reaper missions there, the number of weapons launched by UK drones remained roughly the same with 5 Reaper ‘strikes’ (launching 13 weapons) in the first half of 2017 compared to 8 ‘strikes’ (launching 18 weapons) in Syria in the previous 6 months.

It appears that alongside the switch of focus from Iraq to Syria, there has also been a change in the way UK Reapers are being used. We know from previous FoI responses that the vast majority of British strikes are undertaken using dynamic targeting procedures. That is, instead of being sent to undertake a pre-planned strike on a specific target, the vast majority of British armed air missions are to fly to a certain location to undertake surveillance, look for targets of opportunity or in support of Iraqi ground forces.

In the last six months of 2016 for example, UK Reapers flew 226 missions in Iraq during which they launched 204 weapons. From the the MoD’s [Operation Shader updates page](#) we can see that these occur when Reapers, undertaking surveillance mission or in support of ground troops, spot a target and launch a strike.

However in the first six months of 2017, while undertaking more than 250 such missions in Syria, British Reapers only launched 13 weapons. By coincidence, the UK’s Typhoon aircraft have flown exactly the same number of missions in Syria in the same six month time frame and launched more than five times the amount of weapons (although it should be remembered that a Typhoon missions consists of two aircraft while a Reaper missions consists of just one Reaper).



NOTE - UK reporting issues continue

The smaller number of UK Reaper strikes over the past few months enables a much clearer demonstration of the difficulties of tracking UK air strikes. and the need for increased transparency. Alongside FoI statistics detailing air operations in Iraq and Syria, [the MoD publishes regular updates describing UK air operations against ISIS](#). The table below compares figures given for UK Reaper strikes in response to our FoI requests with the MoD’s narrative of UK air operations.

Of the four months from March - June 17 only two months (March and May) give matching data . However in April, FoI figures report two UK Reaper strikes against ISIS, but only one is detailed in the MoD’s narrative. On the other hand, the FoI response reports three UK Reaper strikes against ISIS in June 2017, while the MoD update in fact details five such

strikes.

While both data sets are important sources of information, the fact that such crucial details differ can undermine confidence in the MoD's reporting.

UK Reaper strikes, March - June '17 - FoI response vs. MoD published updates

Date	Description from MoD update	Location	Transparency
March			
1 March '17	A Reaper remotely piloted aircraft assisted Iraqi troops in western Mosul, using a Hellfire missile and a GBU-12 guided bomb to eliminate Daesh fighters, including a sniper, engaged at close quarters with the Iraqis	Wester Mosul, Iraq	<p>1 Reaper strike according to FoI figures.</p> <p>1 Reaper strike detailed in RAF update.</p>
April			
7 April '17	A Reaper remotely piloted aircraft flew overwatch for Iraqi troops in west Mosul. Coalition surveillance aircraft identified 2 Daesh mortar teams: one firing from the doorway of a building, the other from a small courtyard. The Reaper's crew were able to conduct successful attacks with Hellfire missiles which accounted for both teams.	West Mosul, Iraq	<p>2 Reaper strike according to FoI figures.</p> <p>1 Reaper strike detailed in RAF updates.</p>
? April '17	[Note details omitted from MoD update] FoI figures detail Syria Reaper strike in which 3 weapons fired.	Syria	<p>1 Reaper strike detailed in RAF updates.</p>

May		
9 May '17	An RAF Reaper remotely piloted aircraft observed a group of Daesh fighters in Abu Kamal, eastern Syria, mustering a large crowd of civilians in one of the town's main streets. When a van then unloaded 2 shackled prisoners in front of the crowd, it became clear that Daesh were organising a public execution. Given the large number of civilians present, the Reaper's crew could not target directly the Daesh fighters about to carry out the murders. However, 2 armed extremists were stationed as sentries on the roof of a building overlooking the scene. A Hellfire missile was fired immediately, and scored a direct hit which not only killed one of the sentries but also brought the execution to an immediate halt, as the Daesh fighters fled the scene, and the crowd of civilians dispersed.	Abu Kamal, Syria
24 May '17	A Reaper, conducting surveillance south-west of Raqqa, kept watch on a small group of terrorists and was able to conduct a successful attack with a Hellfire missile.	South-west of Raqqa, Syria
25 May '17	In Syria, a Reaper used a Hellfire missile to destroy an armoured personnel carrier near Tabqah, to the west of Raqqa.	Near Tabqah, west of Raqqa, Syria
<p>3 Reaper strikes according to Fol figures.</p> <p>3 Reaper strikes detailed in RAF updates.</p>		
June		
3 June '17	A Reaper, operating south of Al Qaim in western Iraq, observed a group of dismounted terrorists, with an armed truck close by. One Hellfire missile killed several of the terrorists, a second destroyed the vehicle with a direct hit.	Al Qaim, Iraq
7 June '17	A Reaper remotely piloted aircraft flew an armed reconnaissance patrol over northern Raqqa. It observed 2 extremists burying booby traps along routes into the city. Hellfire missiles were deployed, killing both.	Raqqa, Syria
10 June '17	A Reaper intervened in a fire fight in western Raqqa between the SDF and a group of Daesh fighters. The Reaper hit the latter with a very effective Hellfire attack.	Western Raqqa, Syria
15 June '17	Reaper remotely piloted aircraft conducted armed reconnaissance in eastern Syria, some 35 miles north-east of Dayr az Zawr, and used a Hellfire missile to destroy a terrorist truck.	North-east of Dayr az Zawr, Syria
18 June '17	A Reaper patrolled over Raqqa. Its crew successfully spotted a Daesh mortar team and provided targeting assistance to a coalition air strike against them. The Reaper's crew then used Hellfire missiles to destroy a car bomb and a second mortar team who were spotted in the act of firing at the SDF.	Raqqa, Syria
<p>3 Reaper strikes according to Fol figures.</p> <p>5 Reaper strikes detailed in RAF updates.</p>		

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