



Westminster Round Up | December 2018

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In Brief

In the 12 days of December that parliament sat, the long-awaited release of the Modernising Defence Programme could and should have been the big news. Instead it was released two days before the Christmas recess began and it was deemed underwhelming by MPs and analysts alike – including RWP Senior Advocacy Office Liam Walpole who wrote about the [inconclusive conclusions](#) of the MDP.

The other big story of the month was the apparent disagreement between members of the Coalition against Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (IS) about whether or not the target has been defeated. This was initiated with Trump's [surprise Twitter Announcement](#) (apparently as surprising to his own senior staff as it was to the rest of the world) that the enemy has been defeated and, as a result, American troops can look forward to being sent home. In response, the Foreign Office [clarified](#) that while great progress has been made, much work remains, especially as IS looks to refocus their strategy and engage increasingly in guerrilla warfare. This reveals a troubling lack of coordination among allies.

Focus Point

| [18.12.18 | Underwhelming Modernising Defence Programme announced](#)

After a year of grand promises and missed deadlines, the MDP was announced two days before Christmas recess. Unfortunately, as the Shadow Secretary for Defence said; “it is staggering that the end result is so underwhelming.” She

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was joined by other MPs in calls for further clarification on plans to address the imminent and severe lack of funds that appears to be in the MoD's path.

However, RWP welcome the MoD's announcement that it will look to provide an external panel of experts to feed into Defence strategy and policy-making through what it has described as a 'Defence Policy Board'. RWP's Senior Advocacy Officer Liam Walpole offers his analysis of the MDP [here](#).



| 19.12.18 | UK responds to Trump's declaration of victory over IS in Syria

The UK Government responded by drawing attention to the continued need to fight IS, offering assurances that they will continue to do so as part of a coalition. While IS have lost the majority of their territory in Syria and Iraq, they

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still have strongholds and the majority of experts warn IS may be changing tactics to become increasingly focused on guerrilla warfare.

House of Commons

| 04.12.18 | MPs mount pressure and continue to question influence gained by UK-Saudi relationship

Echoing the recent report by King's College Policy Institute – commissioned by RWP – several MPs raised objections to the suggestion that the UK's close relationship with Saudi Arabia allows the UK to influence Saudi politics at a session of Foreign Office oral questions. They argued that continued killings of Yemeni children in airstrikes as well as the murder of Jamal Khashoggi suggested otherwise. In response, the Foreign Secretary, Jeremy Hunt, suggested that the UK has played a vital role in facilitating the ongoing peace talks between officials from the Saudi-backed Hadi government and the Houthi rebels.

| 19.12.18 | Foreign Secretary gives update on IS

Four days after President Trump announced that IS has been defeated in Syria and that American troops would consequently return to the US, Jeremy Hunt gave an update to the House of Commons in which he emphasised that the group has lost their territory, but remains a threat. He warned especially that the group has transitioned into a clandestine network, presenting new challenges. The UK has been contributing to the coalition with airstrikes and other support for partner forces on the ground.



| 19.12.18 | MPs rehearse old arguments on Yemen but praise progress made in Stockholm

In a debate on the progress of the Yemen peace-talks taking place outside of Stockholm, Jeremy Hunt continued to insist that it is the UK's close ties with Saudi leadership that means the UK can influence policy. Stephen Gethins MP pointed out that other influential countries have seized arms sales to the Kingdom, to which Hunt replied that the UN resolution which is currently being drafted emphasises adherence to International Humanitarian Law. However, RWP's research on the legal implications of the remote warfare approach suggests that international law **remains murky** when it comes to providing assistance to partners

House of Lords

| 05.12.18 | Peers examine aid bound for Syria

In a long series of questions, Peers examined the aid going to Syria, notably to areas not held by the al-Asaad government. Baroness Cox asked for additional transparency over the recipients of aid, in light of recent accusations that some funds have gone to jihadist organisations. Lord Bates refuted the accusations. RWP has [previously written](#) about the obscurity of aid, especially from funds such as the CSSF.

| 18.12.18 | Peers express criticism and confusion at newly published MDP

In a debate echoing the one in the House of Commons, peers expressed confusion and a profound sense of being underwhelmed by the conclusions of the MDP which they argued “could easily have been made at any time in the course of its nine months of gestation.” As the MPs had done earlier in the day, Peers pushed for more clarity regarding the significant financial gap facing the MOD, which many had hoped the MDP would address.

| 19.12.18 | Peers debate progress in the Yemen peace-talks outside Stockholm

Peers were largely positive and hopeful of the results coming out of the peace-talks, with many of them emphasising the role of British diplomats, notably Martin Griffiths, the Secretary General’s Special Envoy to Yemen. Many continued to ask about the humanitarian suffering in Yemen, pressing for the UK to do more.

Government Announcements

| 20.12.18 | RAF airstrikes against IS in Syria

In their monthly update, the Royal Air Force gave oversight of their continued bombardment of “key Daesh [IS] targets in Syria, helping the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and coalition allies through Hajin...” Hajin is IS’ last significant stronghold in Syria. This announcement was made only a few days after President Trump announced that – from his perspective – IS in Syria had been defeated.

| 21.12.18 | UK Political Coordinator at the UN promises more engagement in the Sahel region

Stephen Hickey confirmed at a Security Council briefing that the UK will contribute more to the Sahel by extending its diplomatic, defence, and development work in the region. The Sahel region has seen an increase in remote warfare by Western actors. RWP analysed possible legal complexities of this in a [recent blog post](#), and in a [report](#) we launched in the summer.

Committee news

| 04.12.18 | Chief of Defence Staff questioned about his role

In a Defence Committee hearing on the December 4, General Sir Nicholas Carter answered a long series of questions about his role. He maintained that releasing the MDP was his priority. He also emphasised his belief that the UK must plan its actions on a more long-term basis and look beyond immediate fights.

Watch the video

About the Author

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