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## Mental illness surges among war veterans

Charity warns of rising tide for those who fought in Afghanistan and Iraq

Nick Hopkins

The number of Afghanistan veterans seeking help for mental health problems surged in 2013 and is likely to peak again this year as the British military ends its 12-year conflict in the country, according to new figures published today.

There was a 57% increase in the number of ex-military personnel needing treatment from the charity Combat Stress, which had a record 135 Afghanistan-related referrals last year, compared with 226 in 2012.

The number of Iraq veterans needing help also rose by nearly 20%, even though British troops ended combat operations in the country five years ago, and left altogether in 2011.

Commodore Andrew Cameron, chief executive of Combat Stress, added that he expected the numbers to further increase over the coming years and the UK had to prepare for the escalation. Most mental health issues take time to emerge, and armed forces veterans are often unwilling to admit they need help.

These statistics show that although the Iraq war ended in 2011 and troops are withdrawing from Afghanistan later this year, a significant number of veterans who served in the armed forces continue to suffer the effects of their experience on the frontlines or during their time in the armed forces. Day in, day out, they battle these hidden psychological wounds, often tearing families apart in the process.

Even now, Combat Stress is taking on new cases from veterans who fought in conflicts from an earlier generation, such as the Malayan Emergency, which ended in 1960, and the 1967 Falklands war.

But the vast majority of its current caseload of 5,400 patients comprises veterans from Iraq, Afghanistan and Northern Ireland, with sharp rises in referrals from all three in recent years.

Cameron said that one-fifth of all veterans were likely to need help for some form of mental illness, and that it could take more than a decade before symp-

oms presented themselves. "They have faced unique challenges and require, and deserve, specialist support to help them overcome these challenges. However, with demand for our services at only rising, Combat Stress faces a real challenge. We are planning for services at or above the current level for at least the next five years, and we do not expect to see demand for support tail off in the near future," he added.

Combat Stress compiled the statistics to mark its 95th anniversary. It has worked with veterans of every conflict since the second world war, and has found that, on average, servicemen and women wait 13 years after leaving the military before seeking help. So far it has supported 20,326 veterans, including soldiers, sailors and air crews who fought in Aden, Korea and the Iraq-Iraq war.

More than 85% of those needing treatment have served in the army, and 3% of the total are women.

Military charities are bracing themselves for an increase in referrals now that the Afghanistan conflict is drawing to a close, with conditions ranging from depression to post-traumatic stress disorder.

Combat Stress says it had only one referral in the first year of the conflict in 2003, and two the year after. But with tens of thousands of troops having deployed to the country over the past decade, those numbers have increased sharply, particularly over the past three years.

It estimates that 42,000 UK troops who served in Iraq and Afghanistan may develop a mental health condition over the coming decades.

The charity has treated 1,900 Afghanistan veterans so far and has 662 in its care. It has received 1,058 cases involving Iraq veterans and is treating 806.

General Sir Richard Dannatt, chief of the general staff when British forces were fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan, said: "There is no doubt that combat, whether in Northern

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Manchester City's captain Vincent Kompany celebrates with the Premier League trophy yesterday with a 2-0 victory at home over West Ham United.

## Ministers call for free schools

Rowena Mason  
Political correspondent

Michael Gove has been warned that the budget for free schools must be brought back under control by Lib Dem chief Treasury secretary Danny Alexander and officials at the Treasury, government sources have told the Guardian.

Amid escalating coalition tensions over education spending, the sources said very senior Treasury officials have raised concerns with the Department for Education (DfE) about the cost of free schools, which the Liberal Democrats claim has led to a £90m black hole.

"This isn't just David Laws [a Lib Dem schools minister] and the Liberal Democrats who are very concerned about the

free schools budget spiralling out of control," a senior government source said.

"The Treasury has now made clear to Gove and the Department of Education that they want to sign off rounds of spending on free schools won't do so until the capital free schools is back under control."

The education secretary's policy is now being put under greater scrutiny by Alexander, chief of all government spending.

A separate Treasury source said: "Concerns have been expressed by senior Treasury officials and

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government was facing a national crisis in primary places entirely of its own making. The free schools policy was devised by

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## 'We have won': Iran claims victory over US in Syrian war

Simon Tisdall  
Teheran

Iran and its close ally President Bashar al-Assad have won the war in Syria, and the US-orchestrated campaign in support of the opposition's attempt to topple the Syrian regime has failed, senior Iranian officials have told the Guardian.

In a series of interviews in Teheran, top figures who shape Iranian foreign policy said the west's strategy in Syria had merely encouraged radicals, caused chaos and ultimately backfired, with government forces now on the front foot.

"We have won in Syria," said Abolmehdi Rouhollahi, chairman of the Iranian parliament's national security and foreign policy committee and an influential govern-

ment insider. "The regime will stay. The Americans have lost it."

Terrorism perpetrated by al-Qaeda-linked jihadist groups and individuals armed and funded by Sunni Muslim Arab countries was now the main threat facing the Syrian people, Rouhollahi said. Many foreign fighters who had travelled to Syria from Britain and other European countries could soon return.

**'America wanted to replace Assad. All they have done is encourage radical groups'**

"We are worried about the future security of Europe," he said.

"We won the game in Syria easily," said Amir Mobein, a conservative strategist and government adviser. "The US does not understand Syria. The Americans wanted to replace Assad, but what was the alternative? All they have done is encourage radical groups and made the borders less safe."

"We accept the need for change in Syria - but gradually. Otherwise, there is chaos," Mobein added. Shia Muslim Iran is Assad's main regional backer and has reportedly spent billions of dollars propping up the regime since the first revolt broke out in March 2011. Along with Russia, the regime's principal arms supplier, it has consistently

bolstered Assad in the teeth of attempts to force him to step down.

Western analysts say Iran is engaged in a region-wide power struggle or proxy war, extending beyond Syria, with the Sunni Arab states of the Gulf, principally Saudi Arabia.

Teheran thus has an obvious interest in claiming victory for the Alawite Syrian regime, which is fighting mostly Sunni rebels, they say, Iranian officials and regional experts deny that their motive. Majid Takht-Ravanchi, deputy Iranian foreign minister, said the priority was to accept the rebellion had failed and to restore stability in Syria before next month's presidential elections.

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