

Summary information on Syria

ISIL Activity in UK

ISIL is a direct threat to the UK. 7 attack plots have been intercepted. The Intelligence Services know that ISIL operate from Syria and plan their attacks on UK subjects from Syria. The Director General of MI5 confirms that ISIL has ambitions for mass casualty attacks - all of which makes their threat even greater.

UK's Foreign Affairs Strategy for Syria

The Government is proposing to extend the terms of the UK's existing military operation against ISIL in Iraq and apply the same terms across the border in to Syria where ISIL also operates. ISIL do not recognise separate country borders and the Government wishes to engage them on the same terms. Our forces tell of having to turn away at the border from Iraq and transferring over to the US Air Force with ISIL having moved into Syria. Due to the delay in the US scrambling to reach these positions, our forces were able to identify ISIL fighters destroying the Syrian Free Army positions.

The Government is clear that getting a new and peaceful regime to govern Syria will only occur via a political solution. This political process has commenced following a commitment which was entered into by 19 countries (including Russia and Iran) in Vienna. The Vienna accord envisages a process that will deliver a ceasefire to Syria (assuming that ISIL, who will not engage in a ceasefire, are removed via separate military action). The UK will not involve itself in a military solution to removing President Assad. There is an expectation that all members of the Vienna accord (and this includes Russia) will exercise all political pressure at their disposal to deliver a new governing regime in Syria.

However, with ISIL there can only be a military solution. As has been seen via the manner in which ISIL behave, these people will not negotiate. As such, there are two twin strategies: eliminating ISIL via targeted air strikes with our partners in this mission; and pursuing the political process towards a post-Assad Syria. It is important that constituents reflect that these paths are separate and will not cross.

Syrian Refugee Position

Syrians have been displaced by four years of horrific civil warfare. ISIL is brutalising the Syrian people. The refugees have largely left the areas in Syria where the UK will target ISIL. These Syrians have left, or have been killed, because of ISIL. The UK would not be bombing areas where there are large civilian numbers on the ground - they have largely left.

The Government believe that it is essential to stop ISIL securing more ground in other parts of Syria where civilians remain and have not all left for refugee camps.

In Iraq, the precision bombing is leading to a position whereby coalition forces are winning the fight in the air and this is now starting to translate to success on the ground against ISIL. The Government argues that this strategy has not needed our troops on the ground in Iraq and that, without it, Baghdad could have fallen in to ISIL hands. The aim is to replicate what has been recently delivered in Iraq.

The Government has already committed over £1bl of aid to Syrian refugees. 50% of our aid effort is delivered inside Syria - there is already an aid infrastructure in existence which we would scale up in a peaceful Syria. The World Bank believes rebuilding Syria, following regime-change from President Assad, could cost the world £150bl. The money is not the only challenge: reconciling the Syrian people will be a long-term challenge which the UK stands ready to deliver on.

Analysis of Military Capability

The Government views the Syrian situation as complex and believes that military action on its own will not resolve the Syrian regime issues. The Government seeks to ensure that we cannot allow ISIS to have a safe haven in Syria whilst they plot attacks on UK. If ISIL feel more secure in Syria than Iraq then the Government wishes to take its existing operations to Syria to counter this security. Military action is already being carried out by the US, France and other coalition countries. Russia is also now engaged against ISIL. The Government believes that we cannot contract out this responsibility to other countries.

The Government believes that there is more which our armed forces can do and more which our allies want us to do. Our military partners want us to deliver our sophisticated strike equipment to the attack on ISIS which we have the skill to provide. There are specific targets which could be destroyed by our Tornados, Phantoms and Reaper Drones (of which we hold a quarter of all capability). Our missile capability is based on precision and our strategy is to avoid civilian casualties. One of our weapons, the Brimstone missile, is renowned for its ability to deliver precision attacks. Unique to the UK, this missile allows precision bombing on moving targets rather than relying on more conventional and less targeted missiles. The motion on Syria places great store on minimising civilian casualties.

Note: Whilst I was given examples of where the UK would hold back for risk of civilian casualties, I cannot repeat these for obvious reasons.