

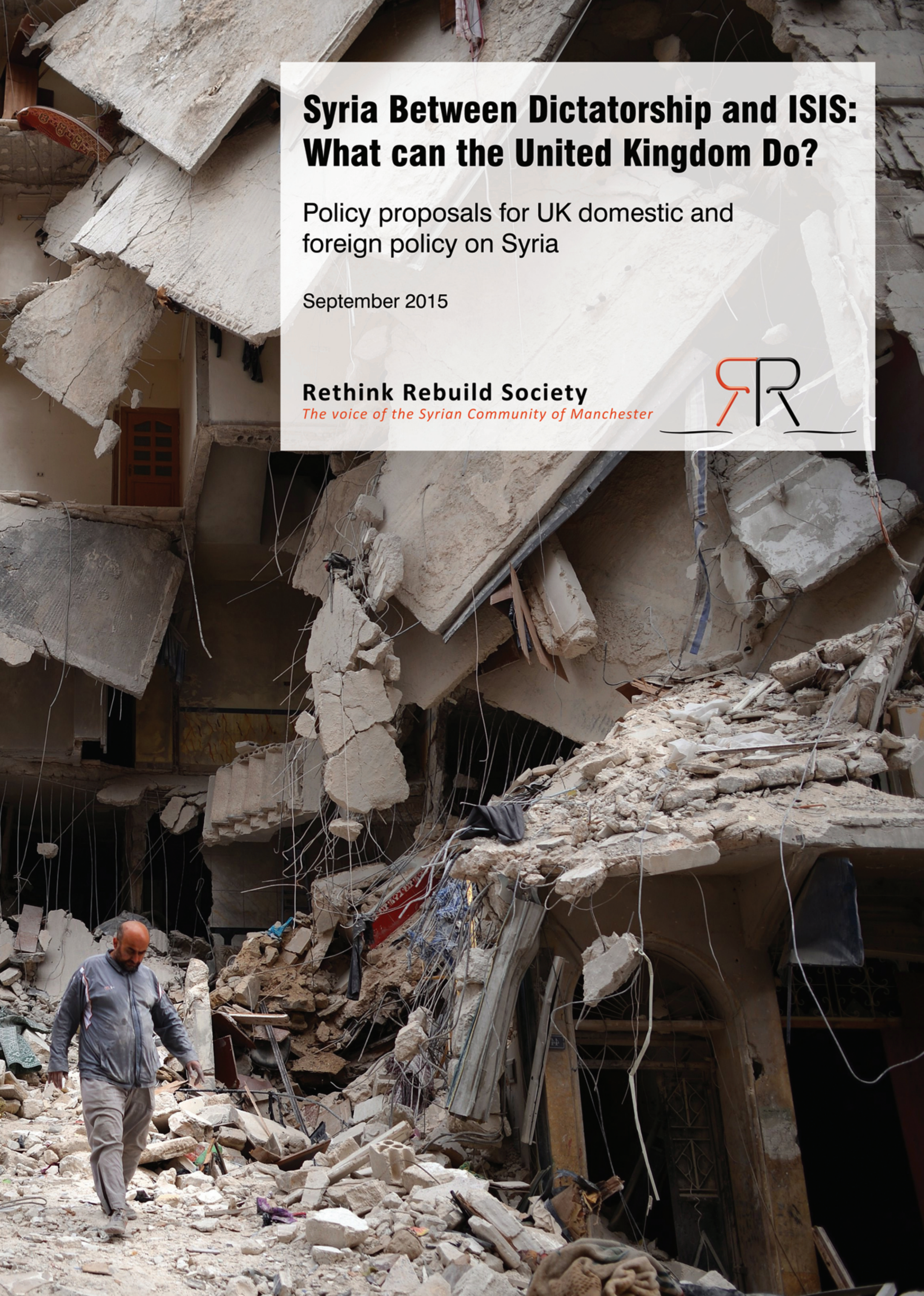
Syria Between Dictatorship and ISIS: What can the United Kingdom Do?

Policy proposals for UK domestic and
foreign policy on Syria

September 2015

Rethink Rebuild Society

The voice of the Syrian Community of Manchester



About Rethink Rebuild Society

Rethink Rebuild Society is a Manchester-based non-profit organisation established in 2011 to campaign for Syrian issues within the British landscape. We have established ourselves as the leading Syrian advocacy group within the UK, working with policy makers and the media to affect Syria-related decision-making at all levels of government and to shape the Syrian narrative as it is understood by the wider British public.

We maintain strong stances against both the Assad regime as well as terrorist groups operating within Syria such as the so-called Islamic State (ISIS).¹ We have called for the removal of the former and have consistently campaigned to expose its atrocities and to mobilise the UK Government and general public to take action to put an end to the violence that it continues to perpetuate. With respect to the latter, we issued a statement as early as March 2014 advising British nationals not to travel to Syria to fight (with any group).² We have since maintained a consistent position that terrorist groups such as ISIS pose a threat upon Syrian civilians in a similar manner to the regime and must therefore have no place in a post-Assad Syria.

Rethink Rebuild Society works with policy makers at the local and national levels to address pertinent issues facing British Syrians. For example, we approached the UK and European Parliaments to establish accountability for HSBC bank for its arbitrary closure of Syrians' bank accounts.³ We also worked with local authorities to address police visits to Syrians' homes as well as airport stops of Syrian UK-residents upon their return to the country.⁴ We have also called for speedier processing times for asylum applications of Syrian nationals. On a more general policy level, we have issued Parliamentary briefings on key issues pertaining to Syria, including on the UK's potential involvement in the US-led coalition against ISIS.

We are also at the forefront in shaping media narratives on the Syrian conflict. We serve as a critical source of information on Syria for journalists and reporters. We also issue press releases that are regularly picked up by media outlets, thereby shaping the news agenda on Syria.⁵ We have been hosted on both television and radio programmes and have been quoted in local, national, and international press.⁶

Rethink Rebuild Society is at the forefront in ensuring that the British Syrian community is represented, respected, and catered for within British society.



'Your Silence is Killing Us': a demonstration organised by RR on 04.03.2013 at Manchester Piccadilly Gardens

This policy endorsed by:



SYRIAN ASSOCIATION OF YORKSHIRE
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Kurds House



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Executive Summary

What began in Syria as a series of nonviolent demonstrations demanding freedom and dignity has, in the words of UN Special Envoy to Syria Stafan de Mistura, morphed into the worst humanitarian disaster since World War II.⁷ This dismal situation is a testament to the international community's failed policy towards the conflict, specifically in adopting measures to protect civilians and to establish accountability for gross human rights violations. In light of the failed international reaction, this document offers UK policy makers a guide to understand, devise, and implement effective policy towards Syria. Included within the document are seven core policy proposals advanced by Rethink Rebuild Society and endorsed by Syrian groups across the UK. We are seeking the support of UK policy makers, political parties, and the Government to endorse these proposals and to adopt them as official UK policy.

1. To establish a no-fly zone over the entirety of Syria which will create safe havens for civilians and protect them from regime brutality. Once this has been done, expand UK involvement within the US-led coalition against ISIS to include Syria as well as Iraq.
2. To strengthen the Syrian National Coalition (SNC-political opposition) and the Free Syrian Army (FSA-military opposition) which will enable a smooth transition to a post-conflict Syria, and to actively encourage the emergence of a united and democratic Assad-free Syria that adheres to international human rights standards.
3. To enable humanitarian aid work through providing clear guidelines for the collection and distribution of humanitarian aid to Syria, and through advocating for the full implementation of UN Security Council Resolutions 2165 and 2191 which authorise humanitarian aid distribution within Syria across borders and conflict lines without regime consent.
4. To provide comprehensive support for Syrian refugees which will allow them to live a dignified and productive life in the UK;
5. To rehabilitate and educate (rather than prosecute) foreign fighters and people holding violent extremist views who have not committed any crimes.
6. To require banks to provide and maintain services to Syrian individuals and entities unless there is clear evidence of a violation of the law.
7. To cease the routine airport stops of Syrian residents within the UK upon their return to the country.

Given that the UK has vested interests within the Syrian conflict and the wider regional dynamics, this document takes into account UK national interests in the policy proposals advanced. Such interests include alleviating economic pressure upon the UK (as a donor country) for the provision of humanitarian aid, stemming the tide of refugees, protecting the UK from blowback, removing the incentives of British nationals from going to Syria to fight, reducing global terrorism, and reinforcing the UK's image abroad as a champion of human rights. Additionally, and perhaps most critically, the UK's solidarity with the Syrian people and their desire for freedom and dignity will translate into greater opportunities for the UK to help shape and to benefit from Syria's post-conflict political and economic environments.

Introduction

The Syrian conflict has been ongoing since March 2011. In over four years, it has progressed as follows:

1. Nonviolent protests by civilians demanding freedom and dignity, met with a brutal government response.
2. Defections from the Syrian army to form the Free Syrian Army.
3. Escalation of the conflict as the Syrian regime engaged in artillery shelling, barrel bombing, and the employment of chemical weapons. As a result, some rebel opposition groups became increasingly militarised and committed some breaches of international humanitarian law.
4. Emergence of terrorist groups (as designated by the UK, EU, and UN) that took advantage of the chaotic situation within Syria to advance their own agendas. Many of these groups were supported by foreign fighters from across the world. On the other hand, the Syrian regime also sought help from Iraqi, Lebanese, and Iranian groups, leading to an influx of foreign fighters from these countries to fight on its behalf.
5. **Currently:** The Syrian people continue to fight for their freedom and dignity, although they are faced with challenges on multiple fronts including from the regime and from criminal and terrorist groups. The outcome has been, in the words of UN Special Envoy to Syria Staffan de Mistura, the worst humanitarian crisis since World War II,⁸ with hundreds of thousands of casualties, the displacement of over half of the population, and the collapse of Syrian infrastructure.⁹

Bound within the context of wider international inaction towards the conflict, UK policy on Syria has thus far been lacking in effectiveness, cohesiveness, and clarity. Meanwhile, the continued escalation of the Syrian conflict runs counter to the interests of not only innocent Syrian civilians, but also the UK, as illustrated through a brief overview of the country's involvement within the conflict:

1. The UK has contributed £1 billion in humanitarian aid as of September 2015, making it the second largest single donor to humanitarian efforts for Syrians;¹⁰
2. There are over 4,000 registered Syrian refugees within the UK;¹¹
3. There are over 500 estimated British foreign fighters who travelled to Syria to fight with opposition and/or terrorist groups;¹²
4. The UK has actively called upon Assad to step down;¹³
5. The UK has provided direct military aid to Syrian opposition groups;¹⁴
6. The UK has recognised the Syrian National Coalition (political opposition group) as the sole legitimate representative of the Syrian people.¹⁵

With this in mind, this document provides policy makers with key information, in the form of seven policy proposals, that will contribute towards more informed decision-making on Syria and subsequently to more effective policy in this regard. It outlines practical means by which the UK can engage effectively with the Syrian issue in a manner that will uphold its reputation internationally, be met with support domestically, further its national security interests, and fulfil its moral responsibility in helping to alleviate the humanitarian crisis.

Common Misconceptions about the Syrian Conflict

1. Assad is 'fighting terrorism'

The Assad regime has frequently made the claim that it is fighting terrorism caused by groups such as ISIS.¹⁶ However, it must be recalled that the regime is itself a major perpetrator of terrorism:

- It committed, and continues to commit, war crimes and crimes against humanity against its civilian population in order to maintain its hold on power.¹⁷
- It allowed its borders to be used as a lifeline for al-Qaeda groups in Iraq.¹⁸
- It has regularly caused instability in Lebanon. For example, it supplied explosives in August 2012 to former Lebanese minister Michel Samaha with the intent of assassinating political and religious figures.¹⁹

The Assad regime was also instrumental in the creation and expansion of terrorist groups such as ISIS in Syria. For example, at the beginning of the conflict in March 2011, it released known militant and extremist individuals from prison through a series of amnesties (allegedly in response to protesters' demands) with the knowledge that they would contribute to the militarisation of the conflict.²⁰ Many of these individuals can now be found among the leadership of groups such as ISIS.²¹ On the other hand, political prisoners who were known advocates of non-violence were largely kept in prison, where many remain to this day.²² In this way, Assad essentially created his terrorist enemies.²³

The Assad regime has also overwhelmingly failed to engage ISIS directly or to take genuine measures to weaken it. Most notably, it failed to control ISIS's spread to cities such as al-Raqqa in northern Syria and Palmyra in central Syria. Even when it conducted airstrikes in these cities, it largely targeted civilian areas rather than ISIS military strongholds as affirmed in a March 2015 Amnesty International report detailing the regime's offensive on al-Raqqa.²⁴ Additionally, US Secretary of State John Kerry has affirmed:

*'[Assad] has used [ISIS] as a tool of weakening the opposition. He never took on their headquarters, which were there and obvious, and other assets that they have. So we have no confidence that Assad is either capable of or willing to take on [ISIS].'*²⁵

The regime's relationship with ISIS has been described as one of mutual interdependence, whereby ISIS is used to engage other opposition groups and thus weaken their military capacities relative to the regime.²⁶ This means that Syrian mainstream opposition groups have to fight on multiple fronts, as demonstrated in Aleppo in July 2015 whereby the Free Syrian Army fought ISIS forces from the north while at the same time resisting regime forces from the west.²⁷

While the problem of terrorism does exist within Syria, Assad is clearly perpetuating it himself and is using it to further his own strategic goals (i.e. to bolster his position as a viable alternative) rather than engaging in a genuine fight against it.²⁸

2. Assad is the least worst alternative

Some argue that an elimination of Assad will open the door for ISIS to take over Syria, and therefore, that he remains the least worst alternative for Syria's future. This argument, however, makes the false assumption that the Assad regime is fighting ISIS or is preventing its expansion (see Misconception 1 above).

Rather than allowing ISIS to expand, the elimination of the Assad regime (or at least the neutralisation of its capacity to harm its people) will allow Syrian opposition groups to focus their efforts on ISIS, which they have jointly stated as a shared objective.²⁹ These opposition groups currently face two

major obstacles in their pursuit of this objective. The first is that their efforts are exhausted at having to fight two enemies: the regime and its use of airstrikes on the one hand, and ISIS on the other. Second, these groups are insufficiently supported by the international community, thus decreasing their effectiveness as a viable force (see Issue 2 below).

Arguing that Assad is the least worst alternative also overlooks the root cause of the conflict in Syria. The regime has, since 2011, violently suppressed its civilian population, destroying entire cities and neighbourhoods,³⁰ employing barrel bombs and chemical weapons,³¹ using starvation as a method of war,³² and inviting foreign militias to wreak havoc upon civilians.³³ The instability, chaos, and desperation that resulted as a consequence of this brutality provided fertile grounds for criminal groups such as ISIS to take root within Syria.³⁴ As stated by UK Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond and French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius in a joint article in February 2015:

*'Proposing Assad as a solution to the extremists is to misunderstand the causes of the extremism. After 220,000 deaths and millions of displaced persons, we would be foolish to assume that a majority of Syrians would willingly agree to live under the control of their tormentor. And for us to dash their hopes of a better future for Syria without Assad would only serve to make many Syrians even more radicalised, pushing moderate people towards extremism rather than the reverse, and consolidating a jihadi stronghold in Syria.'*³⁵

Undoubtedly, ISIS has demonstrated itself to constitute a ruthless group that takes as an enemy anyone that opposes it or refuses to pledge allegiance to it.³⁶ Its brutal tactics are well-documented, including public beheadings, mass executions, and stonings.³⁷ It is furthermore a designated terrorist group as per UN Security Council Resolution 2710.³⁸ In light of this, its elimination remains a valid objective.

However, until the Assad regime's actions (responsible for over 85% of the casualties in Syria³⁹) are put to an end, criminal groups, whether ISIS or otherwise, will continue to grow in Syria. Even an effective elimination of ISIS will only see the emergence of other similar groups to fill the voids. UK policy towards Syria, therefore, should be targeted towards the root cause of the issue, namely the Assad regime.

3. Assad remains in power because of popular support

Assad has alleged multiple times that the only reason that he maintains power is because he commands the support of the Syrian people. However, it is foreign backing, not popular support, that has propped up the Assad regime until now.

Russia and Iran, for example, have provided training, arms, and financial backing to the Assad regime, all of which have been instrumental in keeping it in power.⁴⁰ There are also thousands of estimated pro-regime foreign fighters in Syria including Iraqi Shiites, Lebanese Hezbollah fighters, Iranian and Russian troops, and others from countries around the world including the US and Canada.⁴¹ These foreign fighters helped the regime achieve a military comeback after it seemed in 2013 that its collapse was inevitable. With the regime army now less than one-third its original size, it depends directly upon foreign support for its survival.⁴²

Assad has furthermore highlighted that Sunni Muslims, who have most obviously taken a stand against him, seek refuge from opposition-held areas by fleeing to regime-held areas. While this may be true, the reason for this is not out of support for the regime, but rather because opposition-held territory is subject to the daily and indiscriminate use of force by the regime, thus making such areas uninhabitable.⁴³ The Assad regime remains in power, therefore, only through foreign support, through its rule with an iron fist, and through its gross destruction of opposition-held areas within the country.

4. ISIS is an 'opposition group'

With the exception of Kurdish military groups which are fighting for regional autonomy or for an independent Kurdish state,⁴⁴ Syrian opposition groups exist within the context of a national struggle against a brutal dictatorship. Despite being fractured and diverse themselves, their primary aims are to depose Assad and to instate their visions for a post-Assad Syria.

ISIS, on the other hand, exists for a purpose that is unrelated to this struggle against the Assad regime, and does not even have Syria-specific objectives (even its origins and its leadership come from Iraq rather than Syria⁴⁵). Rather, ISIS's aims, as it formally declared in June 2014, are to establish and maintain a caliphate that will rule over Muslim lands.⁴⁶ This vision has no regard for state boundaries, and hence, ISIS poses a threat to the modern international legal order.

ISIS has assumed as an enemy any group (including the Assad regime) that does not submit to its rule.⁴⁷ However, its central aim is unrelated to the Syrian people's uprising against the Assad dictatorship. As such, it cannot be designated as an opposition group in the strictest sense, but should rather be considered as a third party to the Syrian conflict.

5. ISIS's primary targets are religious and ethnic minorities

Minority groups are undoubtedly at grave risk under ISIS rule, as the group has adopted a clear stance against 'all non-believers and apostates' in its quest to establish an allegedly pure Islamic caliphate.⁴⁸ The group has engaged, for example, in forced displacement, ethnic cleansing and possible genocide against the Kurdish, Yazidi, Christian, Shiite, and other minority communities in both Syria and Iraq.⁴⁹

However, the reality is that victims of ISIS brutality are not confined to any specific demographic. Indeed, ISIS has inflicted its brutality against any group that resists its rule or refuses to adopt its specific interpretation of Islam,⁵⁰ thus including Sunni Muslim groups that refuse to pledge allegiance to it or to accept its stipulated manner of practicing the religion.⁵¹ This is evidenced, for example, by the massacre of 700-930 men and disappearance of 1,800 more of the Sunni Shei'tat tribe in Deir Ezzor in August 2014, as well as the massacre of over 300 members of the Sunni Albu Nimr tribe in Iraq in November 2014 when each resisted ISIS rule.⁵² ISIS also launches attacks against rival Sunni armed groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra, Liwa al-Tawhid, Ahrar al-Sahm, and has killed key rebel commanders including Kamal Hamami of the Free Syrian Army in July 2013.⁵³

ISIS's threat therefore lies upon any group that resists its rule and is not confined to minority communities. Sunni Muslims, constituting the majority of the Syrian population, are also not protected or safe under ISIS.

Issue 1: Civilian Protection

Policy Recommendation:

To establish a no-fly zone over the entirety of Syria which will create safe havens for civilians and protect them from regime brutality. Once this has been done, expand UK involvement within the US-led coalition against ISIS to include Syria as well as Iraq.

Policy Explanation:

The UK should work with allies to establish a no-fly zone over Syrian territory which will create safe havens (particularly in non-state controlled areas) and protect civilians from regime air attacks. The UK should be prepared to work outside the Security Council given that Russian and Chinese vetoes will likely prevent the body from adopting binding coercive measures in this regard. Instead, the UK can legally justify such action through the doctrine of humanitarian intervention, which it has already invoked within the Syrian context.⁵⁴

After a no-fly zone has been instated over Syria, the UK can expand its current involvement with the US-led coalition against ISIS to include Syria as well as Iraq (as of September 2015, the UK's involvement with this coalition has been limited to operations within the latter country).

It is crucial that the above points of action are undertaken in the indicated order. The biggest threat to civilian protection in Syria remains the Assad regime,⁵⁵ which, even

with the presence of ISIS, is responsible for 85% of the total casualties through its continued use of airstrikes, chemical weapons, barrel bombs, and more.⁵⁶ Any action against ISIS that is not preceded by civilian protection from regime brutality will therefore be met with frustration and low levels of support by Syrians.



People gather at the scene after Syrian government forces dropped barrel bombs on the northern Syrian city of Aleppo on 30.05.2015

In addition, any military intervention in Syria should adhere to 'just war' criteria and should be conducted with the primary purpose of civilian protection. Particularly, answers to the following questions should be made clear to the British public and to Syrian communities both inside and outside of the UK:

- Is military action likely to achieve its intended purpose?
- What methods will be employed?
- Which groups will the Government collaborate with?
- What safeguards will be in place for the protection of civilians?
- What safeguards will there be for the scope and duration of the intervention?
- What plans are in place for post-conflict reconstruction? How can the UK help ensure that the situation will not descend back into chaos post-intervention?

Policy Incentives for the UK:

1. Economic advantage
 - a. Civilian protection will substantially decrease the amount of humanitarian aid required on the ground in Syria, thus alleviating economic pressure in the long term upon donor countries such as the UK. The UK is currently the second largest single donor to humanitarian efforts in Syria with an estimated total of £1 billion in contributions as of September 2015.⁵⁷
2. Stem the flow of Syrian refugees to the UK
 - a. If Syrians are protected within their own country, they will have less incentive to seek refuge abroad.
3. Protect the UK from blowback
 - a. Anti-western sentiment has been traditionally quick to flare when interventions are perceived to become prolonged, witness high levels of civilian casualties, or pursue hidden agendas at the expense of human rights (for example, Afghanistan and Iraq).
 - b. An example of blowback within the Syrian context: the US-led air campaign against ISIS further legitimised the group in the eyes of those mistakenly perceiving it as fighting a war against 'crusaders'.⁵⁸ This led to a surge of new recruits for the group.
4. Remove the incentive for British nationals to travel to Syria to fight
 - a. A primary motive cited by foreign fighters who travel to Syria is that they are coming to the aid of an oppressed people to whom the international community has turned a blind eye.⁵⁹ Robust, narrowly tailored, and calculated action to protect civilians from the Assad regime will demonstrate the UK's commitment to Syrians and will thus remove the incentive of those intending to go abroad and fight.
5. Maintain the UK's image internationally
 - a. The UK's active assistance to the Syrian people will not be forgotten and will put it in a better position to help shape Syria's post-conflict political and economic environments.
 - b. The UK's active involvement in the protection of Syrian civilians will reinforce its image as a staunch advocate of human rights.

Issue 2: United and Democratic Syria without Assad

Policy Recommendation:

To strengthen the Syrian National Coalition (SNC-political opposition) and the Free Syrian Army (FSA-military opposition) which will enable a smooth transition to a post-conflict Syria, and to actively encourage the emergence of a united and democratic Assad-free Syria that adheres to international human rights standards.

Policy Explanation:

The UK should maintain its long-held position that the Assad regime is the underling factor causing instability in Syria and the wider region and has therefore lost its legitimacy to rule. In this regard, British Ambassador to the UN Sir Mark Lyall Grant stated in 2014 that 'Al-Assad is not the answer to the terrorist threat; he is the cause of it',⁶⁰ and that 'as long as Al-Assad remains in power, there will be no peace in Syria'.⁶¹ UK Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond further affirmed in February 2015 that '[Assad] is the problem, not part of the solution. The UK's position has not changed, we have no dialogue with Assad; there must be a political transition to a future in which Assad has no part.'⁶²

As an alternative to both Assad and ISIS, the UK should work with allies to strengthen (politically, financially, and militarily) both the SNC and the FSA. This should include efforts to consolidate individual states' support for these groups (for example, that of the UK, US, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey), as currently each state is backing different elements of the opposition.⁶³ With unified international assistance, the SNC and FSA will be in a better position to assert control over Syrian territory and to lead the country through a transition period that establishes a viable Syrian state that is ruled by the people, for the people.

The SNC (also known as the Etilaf) is a western-backed political opposition body.⁶⁴ It is recognised by a number of states and international organisations as a legitimate representative of the Syrian people,⁶⁵ and by others (including the UK and the US) as the sole legitimate representative of the Syrian people.⁶⁶ The FSA constitutes the official military wing of the SNC.⁶⁷

Allegations exist that the SNC and the FSA are fractured and inefficient.⁶⁸ However, this is in many ways attributable (as they have complained multiple times) to the lack of serious international support which has rendered them unable to establish themselves as credible actors within the Syrian political and military landscapes.⁶⁹ For example, the FSA withdrew from Homs in March 2012 after its fighters simply ran out of bullets, claiming that it had not received any military support from international powers.⁷⁰ More generally, many FSA fighters have been switching allegiances to groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS to take advantage of the protection offered by the groups' strong positions as well as the monthly stipends that they offer to their fighters.⁷¹

With foreign aid (political, financial, and military), the SNC and the FSA can undoubtedly acquire power and influence on the Syrian scene, especially given that their aims mirror those of the Syrian people, namely, to get rid of Assad and to establish a united and democratic Syria.⁷²

Additionally, while Syria's post-conflict transition phase is expected to be long and fraught with difficulties, there are a number of core values that Syrians undeniably desire for their future state. The UK should actively encourage the incorporation of these ideals into any transitional or constitutional framework:

- Unity: We are unequivocally opposed to the division of Syria along ethnic or sectarian lines. Syrians have always lived as one people and dividing them along their ethnicities or sects will serve only to cause alienation, division, and instability.
- Representative government

- Equality before the law
- Basic human rights, such as the freedoms of religion, expression, assembly, and affiliation, in accordance to Syria's international human rights obligations
- Minority rights
- Women's rights

The development and implementation of these principles should be Syrian-led. The UK's role should be to offer genuine support to Syria in the post-conflict phase so as to create the conditions whereby these values can effectively take hold.

Policy Incentives for the UK:

1. Weakening of ISIS and other terrorist groups
 - a. Strengthening the FSA will enable it to take on terrorist groups in Syria such as ISIS. The FSA could also potentially supplement the US coalition's airstrikes against ISIS through on-the-ground operations.
2. Strengthen the UK's position in a post-Assad Syria
 - a. The UK's firm and genuine support to the Syrian opposition will put it in a better position to help shape Syria's post-conflict political and economic environments.
3. Ensure regional stability
 - a. Given Syria's strategic position within the Middle East, a stable and democratic Syria lies in the best interest of all actors from economic, cultural, and security perspectives.
 - b. The weakening of Syria contributes to the rise of anti-Western and terrorist groups within the region.
 - c. Any division of Syria will only exacerbate the situation on the ground. It has the potential to result in an endless cycle of secessions, as ethnic and religious groups within Syria are not confined to specified geographic areas.
4. Stem the flow of refugees
 - a. A breakup of Syria along ethnic or sectarian lines is likely to cause tensions to flare. Hostility towards minority groups will lead to the continued flow of asylum seekers to Europe.

Issue 3: Enable Humanitarian Aid Work

Policy Recommendation:

To enable humanitarian aid work through providing clear guidelines for the collection and distribution of humanitarian aid to Syria, and through advocating for the full implementation of UN Security Council Resolutions 2165 and 2191 which authorise humanitarian aid distribution within Syria across borders and conflict lines without regime consent.

Policy Explanation:

There has already been a huge decrease in the number of aid ambulances going to Syria due to fear of potential arrest or association with terrorism.⁷³ UK registered NGOs have also cited the country's counter-terrorism measures as severely limiting their scope of work within the Syrian context.⁷⁴ Specifically, people within the UK have been more reluctant to donate or to participate in fundraising efforts for Syria due to potential association with terrorism.⁷⁵

This pattern is unacceptable given the plight of the Syrian people within Syria and its neighbouring countries. The Government should therefore provide clear guidelines for the collection and distribution of humanitarian aid to Syria. Such guidelines should take into account national security although without placing undue obstacles on the collection and distribution of aid that is so desperately needed on the ground.

On an international level, although regime consent is no longer required for the distribution of humanitarian aid in Syria as per Resolutions 2165 and 2191,⁷⁶ the vast majority of aid distribution is still conducted in coordination with (and with the consent of) the Syrian regime. Restrictions imposed by the regime mean that the vast majority of this aid is being directed to areas under its control and is subsequently being withheld from opposition-held areas.⁷⁷

For example, in 2014, the UN was able to obtain access to only 3 out of 33 besieged areas that it tried to reach.⁷⁸ This is not to mention that the regime has been channelling aid for its own use rather than to the civilian population.⁷⁹ This is most blatantly demonstrated in the figure below, which illustrates an Assad promotional tent for the 2014 presidential elections propped up by UNHCR tents.

Therefore, the UK should advocate for the full implementation of UN Security Council Resolutions 2165 and 2191. This will help ensure that humanitarian aid reaches a wider geographic distribution that is more representative of Syria's needy communities.



Assad promotional tent for the 2014 presidential elections propped up by UNHCR tents

The UK should also channel more humanitarian aid through agencies (for example, through UK-registered charities or other NGOs that operate locally within Syria) that distribute aid independently of the Syrian regime and which also conform to relevant British and international laws. This will ensure that aid distribution is impartial and reaches those in greatest need.

Policy incentives for the UK:

1. Provide a safe avenue for British people to help Syria
 - a. Excessive or undue restrictions placed upon safe methods of helping Syria may drive more people to pursue alternative routes, such as sending cash through individuals or even travelling there to fight.⁸⁰
2. Ensure that aid is distributed to those who are in dire need of it
 - a. In allowing aid to be collected and distributed albeit within certain parameters, the UK can ensure that this aid reaches those who are in desperate need of it and that it does not fall into the wrong hands.
3. Stem the flow of refugees
 - a. Bringing aid to the home towns of Syrians will decrease the incentive for them to seek refuge abroad.
4. Increase the UK's standing domestically and internationally
 - a. Demonstrating solidarity with the Syrian people by allowing humanitarian aid to be collected and distributed will help alleviate the sentiment that the West is inconsistent in its foreign policy, especially when it comes to Muslim-related issues. Reports of humanitarian aid workers stopped at the UK borders under Schedule VII, for example, have exacerbated such sentiments.⁸¹
 - b. Ensuring that the distribution of aid occurs independently of the Assad regime reinforces the UK's stance against it. In contrast, channelling humanitarian funds through mediums that coordinate with the regime can be perceived as a form of cooperation with it.

Issue 4: Support Syrian Refugees

Policy Recommendation:

To provide comprehensive support for Syrian refugees which will allow them to live a dignified and productive life in the UK.

Policy Explanation:

In September 2015, UK Prime Minister David Cameron declared that 'Britain has a moral responsibility to help [Syrian] refugees' and said that it 'will accept thousands more', acting with 'head and heart'.⁸² He furthermore announced that the UK will accept up to 20,000 Syrian refugees by 2020.⁸³ While this is a welcome move, the UK needs to ensure that this policy is sufficiently developed. Namely, we call upon the Government to fulfil the following:

- Reduce the timeframe for the announced UK policy to two years. The resettlement of 20,000 Syrian refugees to the UK is a good start, although a five-year implementation plan is too long especially taking into account the horrible conditions that Syrian refugees face.
- Maintain an open-ended commitment to take in more Syrian refugees following this two-year period which is proportional to the intake of countries such as Germany and Sweden (together, these countries received 47% of the Syrian asylum applications in the EU from April 2011 to July 2015).⁸⁴
- Ensure that the most vulnerable Syrian refugees are resettled to the UK. This entails working with the UNHCR to ensure that it is processing refugees in line with this objective. Individuals such as Khaldoon Sinjab, a quadriplegic Syrian refugee in Lebanon who depends on electricity to breathe,⁸⁵ should receive priority for resettlement to the UK.
- Faster processing times for asylum claims: Asylum seekers generally face long wait times for their claims to be processed. In the meantime, they are unable to work, contribute to their wider society, or file for reunion with their immediate family members, many of whom remain in immediate danger in Syria.
- Family reunions:
 - Faster processing times for family reunion applications: The family reunion process takes a number of months, in many cases leaving the family of the applicant at risk in Syria. In some cases, family members have been killed in Syria while waiting for their reunification claims to be processed here in the UK.
 - Less stringent requirements for family reunion applications: Syrian refugees often find it difficult to provide official papers proving their relationships with their spouses and/or children, either because they fled their homes without such documents or because they lost them en route to the UK. Additionally, the authenticity of documents presented by Syrians for family reunion purposes is often (unfairly) questioned. With such issues in mind, documentation requirements regarding family reunion applications should be somewhat relaxed when dealing with Syrian cases.
 - Allow refugees (especially those under the age of eighteen) to bring their parents to the UK through family reunion.
 - Resolve the issue regarding the Form for Affixing the Visa with Turkey: A number of Syrians without passports have been unable to exit Turkey because Turkish authorities do not accept the Form for Affixing the Visa (issued by the British Consulate General in Istanbul) as a valid entry visa to the UK. This leaves many Syrian families stranded in Turkey and unable to join family members here in the UK. We ask that UK officials resolve this issue with Turkey or that the UK issue emergency travel documents instead of the Form for Affixing the Visa to ensure Syrians' exit from Turkey.

- More effective integration schemes for Syrian refugees: Many Syrian refugees are professionals and are eager to commence work in the UK in line with their professions. However, the process of converting their qualifications is often tedious and thus many Syrians take up unskilled jobs instead. The UK should instate effective integration schemes that allow Syrians to take up professions and careers in line with their skills, thus allowing them to contribute more to wider society.

Policy Incentives for the UK:

1. Acquire political and economic gains
 - a. Syrian refugees will benefit UK trade and investment (analogising to similar impacts that Kosovar and Iraqi refugees had upon the country).⁸⁶
 - b. A generation of Syrian children, educated within the UK, will develop strong ties to the country. Some will inevitably end up as Syrian leaders with high pro-British views.
 - c. Greater intake of Syrian refugees will place the UK in a better position to help shape Syria's post-conflict political and economic environments.
2. Introduce powerful and compelling voices against ISIS
 - a. Many Syrian refugees will have witnessed firsthand the brutality of ISIS. Through sharing their experiences, they can affirm that the existence of this group harms, rather than helps, the Syrian people.
 - b. By actively hosting and supporting Syrian refugees within its borders, the UK would be powerfully disclaiming the assumption that it is not doing enough to help the Syrian people, thus decreasing the incentives of young Britons to travel abroad to join groups such as ISIS.
3. Improve the UK's image internationally, especially among Syrians
 - a. Bringing in and supporting Syrian refugees in the UK will demonstrate Britain's high level of solidarity with Syrians. This is in contrast to making humanitarian contributions abroad, which is a welcome move although more remote.
 - b. Britain's more direct involvement with Syrian refugees is likely to spur other countries to similarly increase their intake of Syrian refugees.



Syrian refugee children flash V-signs at a Turkish Red Crescent camp in the Altinozu district of Hatay, near the Syrian border

Issue 5: Rehabilitate (Rather than Criminalise) Foreign Fighters

Policy Recommendation:

To rehabilitate and educate (rather than prosecute) foreign fighters and people holding violent extremist views who have not committed any crimes.

Policy Explanation:

Prosecute only those British foreign fighters (hereinafter, foreign fighters) for whom there is clear evidence that they have committed a crime while abroad in Syria. Pursue rehabilitation and reintegration for those British nationals who either intended to travel to Syria (but did not go) or travelled but did not commit crimes.

Policy Incentives for the UK:

1. Decrease the flow of foreign fighters
 - a. The UK's current policy of criminalisation is not sufficiently deterring individuals from travelling to Syria to fight.⁸⁷ This is in stark contrast with Denmark's model as well as Germany's Hayat Programme which utilise rehabilitation and reintegration to curb the flow of foreign fighters.⁸⁸ For example, the number of foreign fighters leaving Aarhus, Denmark decreased from 31 in 2013 to only 1 in 2014,⁸⁹ while Germany's Hayat Programme describes itself as having made progress in 30-40 (out of 100) cases since 2011.⁹⁰
2. Provide an effective escape for those foreign fighters who regret their decision to travel abroad
 - a. Many foreign fighters travel to Syria out of ignorance and subsequently regret their decision,⁹¹ often risking their lives to escape the groups that they joined.⁹² In denying these individuals the option of returning home, the UK is essentially condemning them to a life of international crime that they so desperately want to avoid.⁹³
 - b. Refusing UK citizens who have chosen to travel to join ISIS the option of returning to the UK additionally passes the weight of responsibility on to the Syrian people. By not taking responsibility for British citizens, the UK Government creates a direct threat to the civilian population in Syria.
3. Obtain the increased cooperation of families and communities in dealing with the issue of foreign fighters
 - a. Families and communities overwhelmingly do not want their children to travel to Syria to fight.⁹⁴ However, prospects of heavy sentencing can deter them from cooperating with the authorities. For example, the mother of Yusuf Zubair Sarwar, who alerted the authorities of her son's disappearance to Syria, later regretted her decision to do so given the heavy twelve-year sentence that he received.⁹⁵
4. Establish strong voices to prevent the radicalisation of Britons
 - a. Rehabilitated and reintegrated foreign fighters, who have seen the realities on the ground in Syria, can serve as powerful voices to prevent the radicalisation of other individuals.⁹⁶ This approach was utilised in Saudi Arabia, where returning fighters went on the media to expose the realities of ISIS.⁹⁷
5. Alleviate concerns regarding the inconsistent application of the law
 - a. Foreign fighters to Libya, Iraq, Israel, and Lebanon were not prosecuted by the Government.⁹⁸
 - b. Even within the Syrian context, not all cases of foreign fighters are treated equally.⁹⁹
 - c. The UK Government itself provides military support to some Syrian opposition groups.¹⁰⁰ Therefore, prosecuting individuals who travel to support these groups (without committing any war crimes) is counter-intuitive.¹⁰¹

Issue 6: Bank Account Closures

Policy Recommendation:

To require banks to provide and maintain services to Syrian individuals and entities unless there is clear evidence of a violation of the law.

Policy Explanation:

Banks (most notably HSBC) have been denying service to and inhibiting and closing the accounts of Syrian nationals, companies, and charities under the pretence of complying with sanctions regulations.¹⁰² Not only has this caused inconvenience to Syrians on an individual scale, but it has also severely hindered the operational abilities of a number of Syria-related UK-registered companies and charities.¹⁰³

The profiling of Syrian individuals and entities on behalf of the banks constitutes a discriminatory policy against an already-vulnerable people and must be stopped.

EU sanctions against Syria admittedly impose certain obligations upon banks to ensure that financial activity by their customers is in compliance with financial laws. However, suspicion of non-compliance with these regulations should not automatically arise from customers' identities. Rather, any denial of service by banks to their customers should be premised upon reasonable and well-founded suspicion of illegal activity.

In order to stop the profiling of Syrians and Syrian entities within UK banking institutions, we recommend the following:

- Require banks to reveal to their customers the basis upon which they are taking action to inhibit and/or close bank accounts and to further provide an explanation where such action is taken.
- Provide increased guidance to banking institutions as to the legal remit of sanctions laws, which are generally designed to carry minimal effect upon civilians. Any action undertaken by banks to close customers' accounts should be premised upon well-founded suspicion of illegal activity.
- Provide increased guidance to banking institutions in offering their services to UK-registered charities and companies that undertake work within or pertaining to sanctioned countries. UK-registered charities and companies should not face undue burdens in opening or maintaining bank accounts.
- Require banks to provide adequate notice to their customers before closing their accounts. Customers should also be able to access to their accounts within this notice period.
- Allow group complaints to be made to the Financial Conduct Authority.

Policy Incentives for the UK:

1. Uphold British values of inclusivity and non-discrimination
2. Demonstrate the UK's commitment to the Syrian people
 - a. Ensuring that Syrian individuals and entities are not unduly discriminated against reinforces the UK's stance in solidarity with this group.
 - b. The removal of unnecessary barriers for charities that deal with Syria highlights the UK's commitment to facilitating aid to the vulnerable civilian population.
3. Increase currency circulation in the UK and hence add value to the economy
 - a. The unnecessary inhibiting and closing of bank accounts stifles the exchange of currency within the UK which is required for economic growth. This trend is compounded when it is companies and charities (which conduct work on a large scale and with large sums of money) that are being hindered in their financial operations.

Issue 7: Airport Stops of Syrians

Policy Recommendation:

To cease the routine airport stops of Syrian residents within the UK upon their return to the country.

Policy Explanation:

Syrians (British residents) returning to the UK from travels have been consistently stopped at airports upon entry to the country, irrespective of where they had been travelling or the duration of their travels.¹⁰⁴ This blanket policy must cease; airport stops should be utilised only when there is a clear need for them.

Policy Incentives for the UK:

1. Maintain consistency in policy
 - a. While Syrians are being stopped in airports regardless of their place or duration of travels, others are returning to Britain from Syria having fought and are not being questioned in this manner. For example, Harry (with the assumed name of Macer Gifford) returned to Britain after fighting ISIS in Syria alongside the Kurdish YPG (People's Protection Units) and passed through airport security without question.¹⁰⁵ Questioning someone like Harry, who knowingly partook in fighting in Syria, is arguably more necessary than doing so for Syrian civilians who travel for non-Syria related purposes or to destinations lying outside the Middle Eastern region.
 - b. Inconsistency in policy is severely damaging for equality and justice. It causes targeted communities to feel stigmatised and marginalised because of their origins or beliefs, which could become a driver for eventual criminal or terrorist activity.
2. Demonstrate solidarity with the Syrian people
 - a. Many Syrian residents within the UK travel abroad to visit family members in countries such as Turkey or Jordan who have become refugees as a result of the conflict. Allowing for ease of travel in this regard demonstrates solidarity with the Syrian people.

Endnotes

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