

## **Assessed Effectiveness of Proposed UK Military Action in Syria against ISIL Briefing 30 November 2015**

Prime Minister David Cameron made the case on 26 November for extending UK military airstrikes against ISIL into Syria and issued a memorandum in this regard.<sup>1</sup>

While the Prime Minister's risk assessment of the threat posed by ISIL may be rightly placed, we have a number of pressing concerns regarding the policy that has been advanced to deal with this threat, namely bombing ISIL. We do NOT believe that Mr. Cameron's proposed policy plan will be effective in combating ISIL, but will rather make the situation worse on the ground. We therefore recommend policy makers NOT to endorse this proposal for the following reasons:

### **1. ISIL's threat to the UK is ultimately attributable to the Assad regime**

Cameron submitted in his report that '*[t]oday one of the greatest threats we face to our security is the threat from ISIL*'.<sup>2</sup> The truth is, however, that the root cause of the Syrian conflict – and all its manifestations – is the Assad regime.

- In 2011 the Assad regime released prisoners with known militant extremist tendencies with the knowledge that they would contribute to the militarisation of the conflict.<sup>3</sup> Many of these prisoners are can now be found among ISIL leadership in Syria.<sup>4</sup>
- The Assad regime has overwhelmingly failed to attack ISIL, striking instead opposition-controlled areas or civilian areas within ISIL-held territory.<sup>5</sup>
- The destruction, chaos, and anarchy that results from the Assad regime's indiscriminate use of force continuously contributes to the radicalisation of the people on the ground. This was acknowledged by the Prime Minister's report: '*Assad has in fact acted as one of ISIL's greatest recruiting sergeants*',<sup>6</sup> and that '*ISIL has grown and thrived in the chaos in Syria; filling the vacuum, and exploiting the fear and anger that the Assad regime has created*'.<sup>7</sup>
- Even if the US-led Coalition ('the Coalition') were to theoretically succeed in destroying ISIL (highly unlikely given that its strategy is flawed), the situation on the ground is such that, because of the Assad regime's violence, another group will inevitably emerge to take its place.

**Recommendation: Although ISIL is engaging in actions that directly threaten UK national security, it should not be forgotten that the Assad regime is the primary enabler of this group and the primary driver of its operations. Without addressing Assad's role in this equation, UK national interests against terrorism cannot be secured.**

### **2. ISIL's threat to the UK can only be alleviated AFTER the threat of its enabler is addressed**

The Prime Minister says: '*We do not have the luxury of being able to wait until the Syrian conflict is resolved before tackling ISIL*'.<sup>8</sup> He also says that '*[c]ombating ISIL and resolving the broader Syrian conflict must be pursued in parallel*'.<sup>9</sup>

However, the reality is that defeating ISIL cannot occur without **first** addressing the primary driver of the wider Syrian conflict, namely the Assad regime. ISIL thrives upon the chaos and destruction created by Assad. The airstrikes that the Assad regime conducts – now along with Russia – against the moderate opposition groups further enable ISIL to grow.

Overall, the Coalition has been unsuccessful in combating ISIL in Syria, as this group now controls more territory today than it did before the Coalition began its operations.<sup>10</sup> This is because the Coalition’s strategy is flawed, namely combating ISIL without looking at the wider cause of radicalisation in Syria.

**Recommendation: Without first addressing Assad’s role in the conflict, we cannot effectively defeat ISIL.**

### **3. Without ground troops, the strategy against ISIL is doomed to fail**

The Prime Minister acknowledges that the fight against ISIL cannot be won without ground troops. He identifies a moderate opposition of 70,000 troops as a group that can effectively combat ISIL.<sup>11</sup> However, Mr. Cameron fails to identify how he will convince these moderate rebels groups to become partners in this policy plan.

**It is unlikely that moderate rebel forces will be willing partners to the Coalition:**

- They are being instructed or expected to turn their efforts against ISIL in exclusion to their primary enemy which is the Assad regime. Given that the Assad regime remains the primary killer of civilians and the primary threat to the moderate opposition forces, any policy option that does not address this threat will not work. **This is why the US’s train-and-equip programme failed: it sought to train and equip Syrian rebels on the condition that they fight ISIL, and not fight Assad.**<sup>12</sup>
- They have not been promised air cover from the Assad regime’s bombardments to enable them to effectively combat ISIL on the ground

**Recommendation: Gain support of moderate opposition forces by protecting them (as well as the civilians for whom they are fighting) from the Assad regime’s aerial bombardments. This can occur either through the implementation of a NO-BOMBING ZONE or through direct support to the rebel groups.**

### **4. There is no alternative to moderate opposition forces in combating ISIL on the ground**

The use of ground troops by coalition forces has been conclusively ruled out by Coalition members.

With respect to the Assad regime, the Prime Minister’s report implies that moderate rebel forces will have to cooperate with Assad forces in order defeat ISIL:

*‘In the medium-term, we will work through the political negotiations towards a ceasefire between the Syrian armed forces and moderate opposition, which would create the conditions to allow both sides to focus their military efforts on ISIL. In such circumstances,*

*ground taken from ISIL in Syria could be administered effectively by one or other of those forces.’<sup>13</sup>*

However, a policy of reliance upon Assad forces in whole or in part to defeat ISIL is flawed on a number of levels:

- It will undermine the political track, which is working towards a transition from an Assad-free Syria.
- The Assad regime has not been exerting its efforts to combat ISIL. Rather, it has been using this group to bolster its own legitimacy and to weaken the military capacity of the moderate opposition. The relationship between Assad and ISIL is that of mutual interdependence.<sup>14</sup> They are, in effect, two sides of the same coin.
- It will not be met with support on the ground, and hence will be doomed to fail: Without the guarantee of civilian protection from the regime’s aerial bombardments, the Syrian people (and moderate opposition) will most likely not agree to any alternative policy options.
- Rebel groups cannot work with Assad as a partner, since he is an oppressor and criminal in their eyes.

**Recommendation: Moderate rebel forces are the only credible partners to an anti-ISIL coalition. However, to gain their support, protection from the Assad regime’s bombing must first be achieved.**

## CONCLUSION

By voting against the Prime Minister’s plan to participate in the Coalition, the UK is NOT exporting its fight to other countries as alleged by Cameron: *‘By staying out of the Coalition’s collective effort, we leave other nations, including those less capable than us and with whom we have collective defence arrangements, to meet our security needs for us.’<sup>15</sup>*

The Coalition’s strategy has proven to be flawed. It has achieved only very limited success in Syria in over a year. Therefore, in not joining the Coalition, the UK is not reneging on its moral obligation, but is rather avoiding involvement in a flawed policy. As a more productive course of action, the UK can pursue a policy option that will see an end to the wider conflict in Syria, including the threat from ISIL:

- Seek primarily to address the violence and destruction caused by the Assad regime.
- Protect moderate rebel forces and the people for whom they fight from the regime’s aerial bombardments, for example through a no-bombing zone.
- Increase political pressure upon the regime to end its atrocities.
- Push for mechanisms of accountability for the violations that have been committed in Syria.

The above will gain the trust of the rebels and will make them the most effective ground force for effectively defeating ISIL.

**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.

## References

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- <sup>1</sup> ‘Memorandum to the Foreign Affairs Select Committee Prime Minister’s Response to the Foreign Affairs Select Committee’s Second Report of Session 2015-16: The Extension of Offensive British Military Operations to Syria’. November 2015. <http://www.parliament.uk/documents/commons-committees/foreign-affairs/PM-Response-to-FAC-Report-Extension-of-Offensive-British-Military-Operations-to-Syria.pdf>
- <sup>2</sup> ‘Memorandum to the Foreign Affairs Select Committee Prime Minister’s Response to the Foreign Affairs Select Committee’s Second Report of Session 2015-16: The Extension of Offensive British Military Operations to Syria’ at 1.
- <sup>3</sup> Simon Speakman Cordall. ‘How Syria’s Assad Helped Forge ISIS’. Newsweek, 21 June 2014. <http://www.newsweek.com/how-syrias-assad-helped-forge-isis-255631>.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>5</sup> ‘Syria: Ruthless and unlawful government attacks killed scores of civilians in al-Raqqa’. Amnesty International, 17 March 2015. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2015/03/syria-ruthless-and-unlawful-government-attacks-killed-scores-of-civilians-in-al-raqqa/>.
- <sup>6</sup> ‘Memorandum to the Foreign Affairs Select Committee Prime Minister’s Response to the Foreign Affairs Select Committee’s Second Report of Session 2015-16: The Extension of Offensive British Military Operations to Syria’ at 5.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid* 13.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid* 4.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid* 13.
- <sup>10</sup> Victoria Richards. ‘Isis: 5 maps that show how fast the group has spread through Syria and Iraq.’ The Independent, 20 November 2015. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-5-maps-that-show-how-fast-the-group-has-spread-in-syria-and-iraq-a6740331.html>.
- <sup>11</sup> Memorandum to the Foreign Affairs Select Committee Prime Minister’s Response to the Foreign Affairs Select Committee’s Second Report of Session 2015-16: The Extension of Offensive British Military Operations to Syria’ at 18-19.
- <sup>12</sup> Michael Weiss. ‘Exclusive: Syrian Rebels Backing Out of U.S. Fight Vs. ISIS’. The Daily Beast, 31 May 2015. <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/05/31/key-rebels-ready-to-quit-u-s-fight-vs-isis.html>.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid* 23.
- <sup>14</sup> Alice Fordham. ‘Syrians in Raqqa Believe Assad Regime Benefits from War on ISIS’. NPR, 5 December 2014. <http://www.npr.org/2014/12/05/368640526/syrians-in-raqqa-believe-assad-regime-benefits-from-war-on-isis>; Zachary Laub. ‘The Islamic State’. Council on Foreign Relations, 18 May 2015. <http://www.cfr.org/iraq/islamic-state/p14811>.
- <sup>15</sup> Memorandum to the Foreign Affairs Select Committee Prime Minister’s Response to the Foreign Affairs Select Committee’s Second Report of Session 2015-16: The Extension of Offensive British Military Operations to Syria’ at 13.