



29/03/2016

## **Briefing: Assad cannot be an ally in the fight against Daesh Reaction to the Foreign Affairs Committee Report of 24 March**

Manchester-based Syrian advocacy organisation Rethink Rebuild Society heavily criticised the [report](#) released by the Foreign Affairs Committee on Syria on 24 March 2016 titled ‘The UK’s role in the war against ISIL following the Cessation of Hostilities in Syria in February 2016’.

The report, published approximately four weeks after the official cessation of hostilities in Syria, lays down its strategy for combating Daesh in Syria. However, instead of recognising the counterproductive role that Assad has played in the creation and expansion of Daesh, the report suggests that Assad can, or should, be an ally in the war on terror, calling upon forces of the Free Syrian Army to cooperate with the criminal Assad regime to force Daesh out of its strongholds.

This suggestion is problematic and unrealistic for the following reasons:

### **Assad enabled the creation and expansion of Daesh**

In 2011 the Assad regime offered a series of [amnesties](#) to prisoners under the pretence of reform. However, instead of releasing political prisoners and civil society activists, Assad overwhelmingly [released](#) prisoners with known militant and extremist tendencies. This was done with the knowledge that they would contribute to the militarisation of the conflict, thus feeding into Assad’s narrative that he was fighting terrorism. Many of these released prisoners can now be found among ISIL and al-Nusra leadership in Syria.

Assad’s indiscriminate use of force against civilians also directly contributed to Daesh’s expansion as acknowledged by November 2015 [report](#) by the Prime Minister: ‘*Assad has in fact acted as one of ISIL’s greatest recruiting sergeants*’, 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.*’

### **Assad is not serious in fighting Daesh:**

According to a March 2015 [report](#) by Amnesty International, the Assad regime consistently failed to attack Daesh-controlled areas. Instead, Assad used Daesh as a pretext in order to carry out indiscriminate bombing of opposition or civilian-controlled areas.

More recently, as the world ‘rejoices’ over Assad’s take-over of Palmyra from Daesh, it should be recalled that the same Assad handed Palmyra over to Daesh in May 2015 on a silver platter. At that time, the regime’s loss of Palmyra to Daesh played into the narrative of the ever-expanding threat of terrorism. Now, Assad’s recapture of Palmyra represents yet another coy to establish himself as a reliable partner in the fight against the group. Assad’s level of military engagement against Daesh is premised upon personal interest and does not represent a commitment to fight terrorism.

## **Assad does not want to fight Daesh**

Assad does not view Daesh as an existential threat, and therefore has no incentive to fight the group. To the contrary, Assad views Daesh as serving three critical purposes:

- 1) Daesh's existence adds legitimacy to Assad's claim that he is fighting terrorism.
- 2) The continued expansion and increasing threat that Daesh poses to the region and the international community forces the West to see Assad as an acceptable player or an ally within the Syrian context.
- 3) Daesh engages in heavy fighting against moderate opposition groups, thus furthering Assad's goal to crush the moderate opposition and to reclaim power for himself.

## **The moderate opposition is the best ally against Daesh:**

The expectation from the Foreign Affairs Committee that the Free Syrian Army take the fight to Daesh has already been met: outside Kurdish-dominated areas, the only group that is effectively opposing Daesh in Syria is the moderate Syrian opposition. This has been proven time and time again although with minimal recognition from Western commentators.

However, to expect the moderate Syrian opposition to fight Daesh alongside Assad forces is ludicrous, and betrays a dangerous misunderstanding of the facts on the ground:

- The FSA was formed by defectors from Assad's army in order to protect civilians from the regime's barbaric policies. To expect the FSA to suddenly side with the regime on the demand of the British government is delusional.
- It is unrealistic and immoral to expect the Free Syrian Army to cooperate with Assad regime forces, the very same forces that have pulverised cities, destroyed entire neighbourhoods, and brought in foreign powers to repress a popular movement for freedom and democracy.
- Supposing that the FSA agrees to attack Daesh alongside Assad's army, the two groups will remain conflicted over who will control Syrian territory that is reclaimed from Daesh. This will potentially lead to a resumption of the fighting.

The FAC's report can only have been formed in ignorance of both the Syrian opposition's long-established resistance to Daesh, and of the tacit support of Daesh by the Assad regime. Such delusions do not serve civilians in Syria, will undermine trust and understanding in the region, and in the long-run will help to continue the conflict and the conditions in which Daesh can thrive.

## **Conclusion:**

The fight against Daesh must begin with addressing the conditions which led to Daesh's creation. This means ensuring a political transition in Syria that guarantees civilian protection and leaves no future for Assad or his regime within the country.

Additionally, the UK must recognise that its primary ally in the fight against Daesh is the Syrian people themselves. They have been most adversely affected by the brutality of this group and have been consistently and effectively combating it. In contrast, Assad (and his Russian allies) was never fighting a credible fight against Daesh nor does it have the incentive to do so. For the West to make Assad an ally in the fight against Daesh would be a grave mistake.

**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.