

## STATEMENT ON THE US AIRSTRIKE ON AL SHAYRAT AIRFIELD

8 April 2017

Syrian groups welcome this action.

We wouldn't start from here. The international community's inaction over the past six years led to a position where Assad felt free to unleash the horrific chemical attack on Khan Sheikhoun. President Trump himself was until now a cheerleader for acquiescence in Assad's war crimes and cannot evade sharing responsibility for the permission the world has effectively granted to the regime's murderous actions.

Shocking as the Khan Sheikhoun attack was, it was one more in a relentless and brutal war on the Syrian population that has killed almost half a million people and displaced around eleven million. While the use of chemical weapons induces a special revulsion, most civilians have been killed with conventional bombs and bullets. Following the 2013 chemical weapons deal, Assad escalated the barrel bombing of civilian areas, used with savage effect in the fall of Aleppo.

Nevertheless, Syrian opposition groups in the UK and internationally welcome the air strike as a precise and limited response to the particular horrors of the chemical attack. An action like this is the only way to slow down the killing, protect civilians and to push the Assad regime towards the conference table. Of course, had this happened in 2013, when the regime was at its weakest, it may have saved tens of thousands of lives. But the strike shows it is possible to stop Assad's helicopters and jets. We now hope that it will be the first step towards a new resolve on the part of the international community to protect civilians and bring peace to Syria.

That should include:

- Insisting the agreed ceasefire is fully adhered to by the Assad regime and Russia;
- Taking all necessary steps, including the possibility of further precision air strikes, to ensure that Assad's air force is grounded;
- Insisting, backed by a full roster of potential sanctions, the regime and Russia credibly commit to achieving an overall political settlement with the opposition's High Negotiations Committee.

We share the legitimate concerns that many will have about impulsive, unilateral actions on the part of a US government that has had no coherent policy for the region. We have been openly critical of the disregard for civilian casualties demonstrated by the Coalition's recent bombing campaign, including air strikes in March against a school in Raqqa which killed at least 33 civilians. But there are very many people across Idlib, other parts of Syria and throughout the Syrian diaspora who have some hope today. We stand with them.

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