

# Eternal warfare: the Syrian campaign nobody wants

2 December 2015



To be honest, I'm not really entirely sure why I am writing this.

It's not to insult/castigate/howl at our political class. Though it's tempting, and I engaged in a bit of it last night when the Commons vote on Syria was announced, it would do little good, now.

Even if that were not true, in the cold light of day the sad truth is that most of the people who voted to bomb the 50 or-so per cent of Syria which is currently occupied by IS – from our Prime Minister David Cameron and leader of the Lib Dems Tim Farron, to the Labour Shadow Foreign Secretary Hilary Benn – were simply and plainly out of their depth.

They displayed, yesterday, an amateurish approach to foreign affairs, arguing and voting for a 20<sup>th</sup> century response to a 21<sup>st</sup> century crisis, and one which showed they understood almost nothing about IS, Syria, or the wider region, its people and its situation.

That may sound like a criticism – and I *do* believe we have to ask some serious questions about how we can be governed by people who are so clearly not in possession of the facts they need to make informed judgement – but it is not.

I am willing to accept – in most cases I actually believe – that the 66 Labour MPs, all but seven Conservatives, and six of the Lib Dems' eight elected politicians who voted to bomb, did so because they believe it is right: that it will protect people in the UK, and pave the way to peace in Syria.

The problem is, they are wrong.

As the Parliamentary debate took place yesterday, I took part in one radio debate, and five interviews.

I was there as the ‘anti-‘ perspective. You can listen to the interviews elsewhere [on this site](#), but I thought it might be useful and/or interesting to share some of what I was there to say, and why. Some of it is similar to my [previous post](#) on this topic, but I hope there is enough new content here to hold your interest.

Before we get into the detail, it’s worth a couple of brief notes on the wider debate yesterday – inside and outside Parliament.

First, the idea that anyone who did not automatically support the idea of an air campaign in Syria was a ‘terrorist sympathiser’ is ridiculous. Not only was its spite and childishness beneath a Prime Minister of the UK, it was also simply incorrect.

It was incorrect because everyone in the UK – and around the world – was united in horror, grief, and disgust at the events in Beirut and Paris on 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> November.

Those of us who have been paying attention, have been disgusted by IS attacks on states including Tunisia, Kuwait, Turkey, (over) Egypt, not to mention Syria, Iraq, Libya and Yemen, the only states in which it has managed to develop an ongoing presence.

And second, it was mentioned many times in the Commons and in debates across media and in public that ‘we cannot just do nothing’ in the face of IS’ outrages.

It is understandable that Mr Cameron and his fellows in the House should have been desperate to act, having had IS and its activities brought to their attention in such a horrible way.

And it is understandable that one’s first response to outrages like Paris and Beirut (*though Mr Cameron mentions Paris far more than Beirut*) is to react with anger and force.

But the point made by those of us who oppose that kind of reaction is not that we should ‘do nothing’ but that what we need is not reaction, but the right action.

And bombing Syria is not the right action.

The reasons why have been outlined in previous pieces on this site, but as a reminder, they are:

The bombing will kill innocent civilians. We know this because it has in every single air campaign, everywhere in the world, ever carried out. Since the 'yes' vote in Parliament last night, representatives of the RAF have spoken on TV and radio about how the UK uses Paveway IV missiles, confidently declaring that these 'do not cause collateral damage'.

The fact is, however, that what they mean is that Paveway IV missiles are less likely to cause collateral damage because their explosive charge and shrapnel production rates are deliberately designed to be lower than other missiles'.

That is a positive thing. But it ignores the fact that in order for that to be effective in reducing collateral damage, the missiles will have to strike their intended targets. Not only is that impossible to guarantee, it is also heavily-reliant on on-the-ground intelligence, which in Libya led to the systematic bombing of schools, universities, houses and hospitals, and in both Afghanistan (*Kunduz*) and more recently Yemen, MSF field treatment centres.

And when we talk about 'collateral damage', we have to remember that we are talking about people: that, in effect, we are stating clearly that British aircraft are now dropping bombs which are mangling the bodies of human beings.

This should be enough to make us pause, but to make matters worse, this is extremely likely to be for an outcome we cannot deliver, and may in fact significantly strengthen the enemy we are hoping to defeat.

The second major problem is that the United States has been bombing IS positions in Syria since September 2014, some 14 months ago. France has been bombing the same regions for eight months. Russia began its own campaign at the end of September – though only ten per cent of its attacks so far have been launched against IS.

In that time, IS has lost just ten per cent of the land it had snatched and has actually increased its activities on other states.

Bombing IS positions in Syria has failed, and is failing still. Adding the UK to a bad policy does not make it a good policy, it just adds the UK to a bad one.

The third problem is that now we are engaged in bombing IS, we are effectively recruiting for it.

There are a number of reasons for this – IS can only exist as a participant in warfare, with clear enemies and threats to it and those it claims to represent; it recruits by presenting itself as the sole realistic opponent to a series of powerful states it claims aim to abuse their global power.

But the major reason was set out by Syria Solidarity UK – a group of Syrian expats and refugees now based in the UK – which sent a letter asking David Cameron not to bomb Syria. In its letter, it said:

‘Selectively bombing IS from the air will not win the support of any of those on the ground who want to defeat it. It will not free them to strengthen their communities and resist IS once again.

‘IS wants nothing more than to say to the communities it occupies that the outside world does not care about them. IS wants to persuade Syrians that countries like the UK are turning a blind eye to the horrors of the Assad regime and are instead choosing to attack them because this is a wider clash of civilisations. Bombing IS while ignoring the much greater violence of the Assad regime would feed this narrative.’

In Raqqa itself, IS’ stronghold in Syria, where thousands of civilians have been forced to live under IS’ domination, the citizen journalist group ‘Raqqa is being Slaughtered Silently’ commented:

‘We are against the UK strikes on Raqqa. All the world is bombing Raqqa and the UK will not make any change in the situation. If the UK wants to help people then it should accept Syrian refugees and not close the border.

‘Just bombing IS in Raqqa from the sky will not defeat IS, but it will make people suffer more. IS will use the UK strikes to recruit new people in the West and new fighters and maybe they will carry out terrorist attacks.’

The only thing I would add is that – given our bombing campaign *will* kill innocent civilians – imagine your husband, wife, mother, father, children or all of the above have just been blown to pieces by a British bomb, and you live in a place occupied by a militia which claims the ‘West’ including the UK is waging a cultural war against you and it.

Isn’t it possible that, driven to distraction – possibly even madness – by your rage and grief, and surrounded by this message repeated over and over again, you might be tempted to join up?

One argument put forward by David Cameron was that British airstrikes would clear the way for ‘moderate forces’ to attack the regime of Bashar al-Assad.

This is interesting, because Assad is a mass-murderer. His regime has killed 250,000 civilians since the start of the Syrian Civil War. This year, he is responsible for seven times as many deaths as IS. The people of Syria are suffering under IS, but they are certainly suffering because of Assad too.

But Cameron's 'moderates' are *already fighting* Assad. And IS – while it opposes all of those forces – *is also fighting* Assad. That is, the removal of IS (*which as we know, will not happen through UK bombing raids*) will not make things comparatively easier for the 'moderates' because it will also make things easier for Assad. There is literally no tactical advantage to either side.

Equally, the 'moderates' are hardly a homogenous group. They range from Al Qaeda-affiliates to secular militias, and from regimented, well-organised groups, to heavily-armed, but small, bands of fighters. In that, the worrying echo is of Libya, where those who united to depose Muammar Ghaddafi have since split and are now engaged in a four-sided civil war – ironically one which has opened the way for IS to enter and operate in Libya.

Not only that, military experts have also pointed out that those forces are likely incapable of doing what Cameron claimed they could.

General Richard Shirreff, former NATO deputy supreme allied commander, Europe, said: 'It's not something you're going to achieve with 70,000 so-called Syria moderates. To take a city of 350,000 is going to need a massive force. Any fighting in cities soaks up troops in a massive way. It's heavily attritional, it's bloody and it's a grim business.'

Of course, a major issue at Parliament, and from a UK perspective, was security. Mr Cameron argued that UK security would be improved by an air campaign on IS in Syria – certainly a factor in many politicians' decisions.

This is not a piece about UK political arguments, but the only note we might make here is that we do not have to state that these airstrikes are likely to make the UK *less* secure, because we do not have to. The fact is that Paris has proven that bombing IS does not guarantee security from IS. Mr Cameron's claim simply does not stand up to basic logic, or recent experience.

The question – which I was asked several times yesterday by BBC radio presenters – is, what should we do instead?

There are two parts to the answer. The first, which may seem glib but in the context of slaughtering civilians to chase a result we are extraordinarily unlikely to achieve is anything but, is that we cannot possibly justify a bombing campaign with the words 'we can't think of anything else'.

The second is that if we look at the places IS is strongest (*and it is not especially strong anywhere*) they are Yemen, Libya, Iraq and Syria. These are all states in which the state has failed or is failing, where war is taking place on the streets and in the skies, where government – actually or effectively – no longer exists.

IS simply does not have any power anywhere else. It requires the chaos of failed states and warfare in order to operate. It cannot withstand the power of organised government and governance, and proper policing (this is explored in more detail [here](#)).

So, though it seems counter-intuitive – and I do understand that it does – the way we defeat IS is by delivering peace and order. From there we can, and will, eradicate IS.

In the discussions before and after the vote, people have variously described this proposal as ‘impossible’ and ‘not even on the table’, but in fact it is by no means impossible and as one friend of mine pointed out, one sensible rejoinder is: ‘well, it’s your table. Put it on there.’

The Syrian Civil War has pitted several rebel forces, backed by a number of interested international actors, against the regime of Bashar al-Assad, who is also backed by a number of states – in the latter case, most notably, Russia and Iran.

Assad’s backers have so far managed to stifle every single attempt to call a ceasefire and/or end to the war (*we should, of course, note that the FSA has refused to enter any talks which do not include as a guarantee the removal of Assad as ruler of Syria. We must remember, however, that Assad has killed more than 250,000 Syrian civilians. I do not wish him dead, and I oppose the death penalty in any case, but if the international criminal court has any job at all, Assad must stand trial for this, meaning he could not realistically remain as Syrian President in any case, while the trial proceeds*), but in fact matters are less complicated by this than they first appear.

Because Assad survives not only – in fact not mainly – because of Iranian and Russian backing, but because he is loyally supported by the Alawite population in Syria. But a large part of the reason for this is because Syria’s Alawites fear reprisals if the FSA take power (*not necessarily from the FSA itself, which claims it is a secular organisation, but from its Sunni Islam backers. This fear may be unfair, but there have been massacres of Alawites by Sunnis throughout Syria’s history, so it is not unfounded*).

The solution to this is reasonably simple – a promise that the new Syrian government will offer full and sensible representation to all ethnic and religious groups, guaranteed in the same constitutional document which would also guarantee Alawites safety from ‘reprisals’ or other violence within the state.

This would not only significantly reduce Assad’s support in Syria, weakening his position to the point at which he could not continue to fight, but also has the potential to placate both Russia and Iran.

Because Russia does not support Assad because the nation likes Assad as a person, it does so because Assad has – as an Alawite ruler of a secular state – made Syria a useful Middle-Eastern ally. Nothing in Syria’s new constitution; which would guarantee the religious (and non-religious) rights of all its citizens, would change that, removing the

major threat to Russian aims in the region – the possibility that Syria would become a Muslim, or indeed Sunni-governed state.

The same issues would also help reduce Iranian fears, which are based on the fact that Assad and his father have for decades held Syria as a non-Sunni-run state, and as a Shiite nation it fears the potential that Syria may become a powerful – and geographically sensitive – rival of it.

Not only can Assad not survive as leader without support from within, sensible and measured constitutional guarantees would also reduce objections from his main international allies (*not to mention that they would also guarantee rights and security to all within Syria – a vital and admirable outcome for all*). That is a plan which could work. And from there, as noted, we could eradicate IS far more easily. Instead, we have chosen to kill people.

And the problem is that now these attacks have been approved – and have already begun (*the first strikes were made 57 minutes after the vote was passed, on Wednesday 2<sup>nd</sup> December*) – there is no sensible moment at which they can possibly end. Because we have committed to wipe out IS, at the same time as contributing to the exact context within which it thrives, and actively assisting its recruitment campaign. We have entered a campaign without any ‘get-out’ and are fated to keep bombing Syria for an extraordinarily long time: possibly forever.

As a footnote, the front page of yesterday’s *Times* stated that polls showed 52 per cent of people opposed the idea of a Syrian bombing campaign. The last poll before the vote’s result was announced showed 75 per cent of people opposed it. Syrian people in Syria don’t want this bombing; Syrian people in the UK oppose it; the majority of the UK population is against it, and NATO military experts and our own experience says it won’t work. Yet last night, 395 MPs voted for it, and just 221 against it.

That is not ‘representation’. Nor is it ‘expertise’. It is not even commonsense. It is the commitment by the few to a potentially endless war in a state – and a region – which simply needs and deserves peace.

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