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## 'Why dropping bombs on Syria is an extraordinarily bad idea'

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RAF Tornado GR4s at RAF Akrotiri Cyprus being armed with the Paveway IV Laser Guided Bombs. RAF war planes are gearing up to launch air strikes on Syria after David Cameron announced that he was ready to seek the green light from Parliament to attack IS

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Most of us – some at rather closer quarters than others – have seen the results of IS actions in Syria, Kuwait, Libya, Iraq, Tunisia, France, Lebanon and other states since the group was created in 2012.

All of us have been horrified by those episodes of slaughter, and I believe all of us would like to act decisively, to 'stamp out' the threat of IS, which is aimed not at 'the West' or at non-Muslims, but at every single person who is not a member or supporter of IS (and in Syria and Iraq, also some who are).

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In the case of Syria, and even IS, more bombs are not a solution; merely a continuation of the misery of life in the state.

To avoid confusion later on, it's probably worth setting a couple of things out here.

First, as far as is possible, I do not intend to make a 'political' argument here – at least not one based in the UK's political climate.

It makes little difference to the situation in Syria that the debate in the UK has so far – largely – been presented as being between the Right-wing government and the moderate Left Opposition.

The actual attacks which are proposed are neither Left- nor Right-wing in nature (though some attacks definitely are) and in any case it is very likely that some Opposition members will vote in favour of bombing while some Conservatives will oppose their party's desire to bomb.

Second, I am in no way 'defending' IS, as I hope will be clear. It is a despicable organisation, which no-one in their right mind could support, and its eradication would absolutely make the world a better place.

Third (and finally), nor do I intend to 'support' the Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad. Although he opposes IS, he and his forces have so far killed more than 250,000 people in Syria, the vast majority of them civilians.

IS has so far killed far fewer people than he has. He is a dangerous mass murderer, and in his case, too, the world would be a better place if he were not in a position of power or influence.



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Indeed, as noted in several previous pieces on this site, one central factor within the Syrian Civil War is that no single group within it can be supported without qualification or codicil. Certainty is an inappropriate response to most wars, and Syria's bitter, multi-sided conflict is no exception.

On 26th November, David Cameron stood before Parliament and laid out his reasons for bombing IS-held positions in Syria.

It was a sincere, well-delivered speech, reflecting what I accept are his truly-held beliefs that an air campaign against IS is the right thing to do, and will make the UK safer from potential attack.

But while sincerity is to be welcomed from all our politicians, it offers no indication about whether a policy is just, correct, or will even deliver its stated objectives. And in Mr Cameron's case, there are clear reasons to believe it is not, and will not.

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As with many mistakes, at the heart of his belief was a definite truth: Bashar al-Assad is a violent, oppressive dictator who was then – as he still is, now with the assistance of Russian aircraft – deliberately murdering civilians all over his country.



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The problem Cameron faced in 2013 was that, in the wake of the disastrous results of violently forcing regime-change in Afghanistan and Iraq (Libya was clearly on a road which did eventually lead to its current disaster, but in fairness, one thing about roads is that you can often turn off them, provided the junction is noted and used), most people in the UK simply did not believe that military action by us would deliver anything better in Syria than it had elsewhere.

That proposal was rejected by just 13 votes.

It is tempting to point out – and some people have done – that had the UK government bombed Assad at that stage, IS, which had entered Syria only months before, would perhaps have had a far easier time in Syria than it has in fact experienced.

But to be as fair as possible, this would not be to state in so many words that Cameron's desire for Assad to stop murdering people was wrong (and in fact, as noted elsewhere on this site, Assad's focus has not been on IS alone; had it been, perhaps IS would be far less of a threat than it is today).

Instead, he has been targeting all opposition forces and – even less acceptably – civilians. His activity may have slowed IS, but were IS his major focus, the organisation would be far less strong than it is). The downfall was – as it is in this case – more a matter of the means he wished to use to make this happen.



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Modern Syria is a state in turmoil. Its Civil War – now also a wider international conflict, with Hizbollah, Al Qaeda, France, the US, Russia and IS itself among the active combatants – is now approaching its sixth year.

More than 11 million of its citizens have been chased from their **homes** by bombs, bullets, missiles, fire and terror.

More than four million of those have fled the country altogether; some 2.2 million are now in Turkey, 1.125m in Lebanon – where one in four people are now Syrian refugees – and more than 690,000 in Jordan (where al Za'atri refugee camp is the nation's third largest 'city' by population).

They are undeniably running from IS – as previously noted this is a cause of acute embarrassment to IS and one reason why it hopes we might close our borders to refugees from the state – but they are also running from Assad.

If we take the point to its logical – and genuine – conclusion, they are running from the threat of death, which is posed by

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The 13 November attacks on Paris astonished and horrified France. It and the previous night's atrocity in Beirut, Lebanon, also carried out by IS, united large areas of the planet in outrage and sympathy.



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### **It's worth noting, however, that Paris was not a 'new type' of IS activity.**

It has consistently launched mass bombings in major cities outside of Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Libya, which are its primary operating locations. Paris shocked Europe because it took place in Europe. It should not fool us into thinking it represents anything new.

In France's case, it inspired President Francois Hollande to confirm that he regarded France as 'at war' with IS (in fact, one reason IS chose Paris to attack was that – after eight months of French bombings of it in Iraq and Syria, it already regarded itself as 'at war' with France) and would continue the state's planned increase in airstrikes on IS.

That was an understandable response, and in effect did not even represent any particular change in policy or strategy by the French government.

But the campaign it has run since then – particularly on IS' Syrian HQ in Raqqa – has been widely reported to have struck very few IS members (who pulled out temporarily in preparation for the French bombardment), instead killing civilians who remain there. In effect, it may be regarded so far as a failure.

And this is an important point. When we – anyone – bombs IS, we are not bombing areas where people have 'signed up' to become active operatives. In Raqqa and elsewhere it holds land in Syria – as well as in the Libyan city of Sirte, and in large parts of Iraq – it is a small but vicious force dominating civilians.

The term 'human shield' is often used, but even that is to slightly misunderstand what is happening.

Raqqa, Sirte and every other town and city where IS currently operate are occupied by IS. Bombing them is statistically far more likely to kill and injure civilians who are being oppressed by IS and who often oppose it, than to actively affect IS itself. It does not do what it is designed to.

One result of this is of course greater death and mayhem across Syria. From a moral perspective, this is an extraordinarily bad idea. From a pragmatic perspective, there are two other major potential negatives.

### **First, the killing of Syrian civilians is likely to make IS stronger.**

I mentioned above that no-one in their right minds would support IS. But we can – and do – accept that people are driven mad by grief and rage. That does not make their activities rational or justifiable.

In fact, that is the point: their rage and grief prevent them from acting rationally. They have already heard over and over again from IS that NATO and Russian activity is in some way a war on Muslims, and suddenly they lose husbands, wives, parents and children to bombs rained on them from exactly those sources.

The rational response may be to understand that this was not the aim. But how many of us would be rational after unfairly and arbitrarily losing all those we love?

**Second – for the UK and other EU states at least – it is likely only to massively increase the number of Syrian people who must gather what they can in their arms and flee, many of them not stopping until they reach Europe.**

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result of being literally forced into the black market) or face a very real risk of death.

And these are people. They are not 'collateral' to be considered as an acceptable sacrifice in the fight against an enemy. Their lives, their skills, aspirations and efforts are central to Syria's future, and therefore the future of the world.

Of course, part of the argument for bombing Syria is that this is exactly the way we may avoid that: that a swift campaign against IS will clear the way for peace in Syria.

There are two problems with that argument. The first is that as noted in a previous blog, this attitude misunderstands IS in a number of ways, not least the specific criteria it requires to exist and operate effectively.

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governments have lost the ability to govern and/or effectively no longer exist. IS requires this chaos, this inability of anyone to focus its attention against it, to survive.

Peace, and with it strong and effective participatory governance in which all people have a say in how they are governed and by whom, is by far the most likely effective first step to the 'defeat' of IS.

It is also attractive to think of airstrikes as exactly the kind of 'attention' which needs to be focussed on IS – meaning other groups can be free to act against Assad.

But this, too, ignores another vital fact. The US Air Force began bombing IS in Syria 14 months ago. France began its campaign against the same group in the same regions eight months ago. Russia started bombing Syria almost two months ago (though only around ten per cent of Russia's sorties have taken place in IS-run regions).

In that 14 month period, these strikes have caused IS to lose just ten per cent of the land it had seized to September 2014. IS has also actively increased its activities in other states during that period. Put simply, bombing IS is failing and has failed to do what we all want – to end IS. Adding the UK to that failed policy doesn't make it good policy, it just adds another participant in a flawed activity.

Mr Cameron also argued that 'we cannot rely on other people for our security'. The fact is that IS has not – as yet – carried out a single act in UK soil. Nobody wishes to tempt fate and so I would state once again that I oppose IS entirely, and desperately and fervently oppose any possibility that it might succeed in murdering people here.

But the point is that as yet, it has not. In France, which is launching strikes on it, it has done.

The point is not 'we should not strike because we are afraid of IS' (in fact, we should not strike because it is not the most effective thing we can do) but that striking directly against IS does not appear to improve security in the states that take this action: it should not be accepted as a reason to strike, because it is not one.

### **Finally, we arrive back at the reason for discomfort when airstrikes were proposed in 2013: what might happen next?**

It is almost certainly incorrect to state that, should IS be destroyed, Assad would immediately win in Syria. It is also absolutely certain that IS – despite opposing Assad – is an opponent no-one in Syria wishes to 'win' the war.

But what bombing IS does in Syria is to further distract us from what is needed there: not more bombs and killing, but less.

A focus not on war, which has since March 2011 delivered nothing but chaos and death, but on a peace in which not only can Syrians recover and rebuild, but also in which Assad can be tried for his war-crimes, and IS eradicated for good.

Mr Cameron did state that there is a 'fund' of £1bn available for when IS is destroyed, and that there are '70,000 troops ready to oppose Assad' when IS is gone.

The problem with this idea is that those 70,000 'troops' are not themselves unified in anything other than opposition to Assad.

They range from Al Qaeda forces to effectively secular militia groups, and from regimented, multi-member operatives to small bands of armed but essentially amateur fighters. In this, they are worryingly reminiscent of the Libyan khetibas, who

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The second is that those forces already oppose Assad. Removing IS will not change that for those groups any more than it will change Assad's own position.

In fact, should that fund actually exist, it would be better used after a peace is worked on, agreed and delivered.

Our failure in Libya, Iraq and Afghanistan was not that we used too little force, but that we offered either close to, or literally, no assistance in what happened when that force had been used.

Experience shows that airstrikes against Syria do not **work**.

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It is of course understandable that we may wish to 'decisively act' but it is vital that we act correctly. And this is not the correct course of action.

We do have the opportunity to do something good for Syrian people, for Syria, and for international security. Bombing Syria is not that thing.

**Rory O'Keeffe is an international journalist and the author of *The Toss of a Coin: voices from a modern crisis*, available from Amazon and at [www.roryokeeffe.co.uk](http://www.roryokeeffe.co.uk)**



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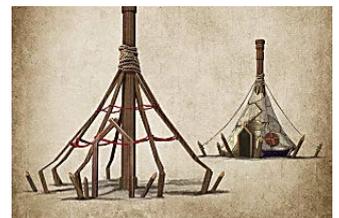
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