

3rd December 2015

Dear Constituents,

Thank you for contacting me about military action in Syria.

Voting on whether or not to authorise the use of military force is one of the most significant decisions that Members of Parliament can be asked to make. It is a responsibility that I take incredibly seriously, have given a great deal of thought to and have not made my decision lightly. I also absolutely understand that many people have very strong feelings on this issue on both sides.

On 26th November 2015, the Prime Minister published his response to the Foreign Affairs Committee report on Syria, laying out the case for extending British airstrikes against ISIL into Syria. In that report the Prime Minister set out his proposed strategy for defeating this brutal regime.

The strategy includes plans to:

- Maintain counter-terrorism capabilities to protect the UK.
- Advance a political settlement.
- Deliver a Syrian government that credibly represents all of the Syrian people.
- Defeat ISIL through military and wider action.
- Continue to provide humanitarian support to alleviate the suffering of the Syrian people.
- Plan for the stabilisation and reconstruction of Syria.
- Work with international partners to mitigate the impact of ISIL on the stability of the region.

On the basis of this comprehensive strategy and, after listening carefully to the case put forward by the Prime Minister in the Chamber, I voted to support the following motion put before the House of Commons:

“That this House notes that ISIL poses a direct threat to the United Kingdom; welcomes United Nations Security Council Resolution 2249 which determines that ISIL constitutes an ‘unprecedented threat to international peace and security’ and calls on states to take ‘all necessary measures’ to prevent terrorist acts by ISIL and to ‘eradicate the safe haven they have established over significant parts of Iraq and Syria’; further notes the clear legal basis to defend the UK and our allies in accordance with the UN Charter; notes that military action against ISIL is only one component of a broader strategy to bring peace and stability to Syria; welcomes the renewed impetus behind the Vienna talks on a ceasefire and political settlement; welcomes the Government’s continuing commitment to providing humanitarian support to Syrian refugees; underlines the importance of planning for post-conflict stabilisation and reconstruction in Syria; welcomes the Government’s continued determination to cut ISIL’s sources of finance, fighters and weapons; notes the requests from France, the US and regional allies for UK military assistance; acknowledges the importance of seeking to avoid civilian casualties, using the UK’s particular capabilities; notes the Government

Alok Sharma, MP for Reading West

will not deploy UK troops in ground combat operations; welcomes the Government's commitment to provide quarterly progress reports to the House; and accordingly supports Her Majesty's Government in taking military action, specifically airstrikes, exclusively against ISIL in Syria; and offers its wholehearted support to Her Majesty's Armed Forces."

I appreciate that some will disagree with this decision but ultimately, I had to make a decision based on what I believe is right for Britain and I am happy to explain why I voted this way.

First and foremost I believe that ISIL/Daesh poses a direct threat to our country and our way of life. As the Prime Minister has noted, ISIL attacks us because of who we are, and not because of what we do.

In the last 12 months ISIL has been behind more than 40 successful terrorist attacks around the world. The murder of 30 British citizens holidaying in Tunisia in June was linked to ISIL. In October, ISIL murdered 102 people at a peace rally in Ankara and a Russian passenger plane was blown out of the sky, killing 224 people flying home from Sharm-el-Sheikh – a resort visited by tens of thousands of British tourists every year. In November, ISIL murdered 43 people in Beirut and at least 130 people in Paris, including one Briton.

Although action obviously comes with risks, I believe that inaction – not dealing with ISIL at source – carries much graver risks. The proposition that our military intervention in Syria will lead to ISIL threatening us on British soil is, sadly, redundant. ISIL has already repeatedly tried to attack us in Britain. In the last 12 months, our police and security services have disrupted seven terrorist plots to attack the UK – every one of which was either linked to ISIL or inspired by its propaganda. It is wrong for the United Kingdom to sub-contract its security to other countries and expect the aircrews of other nations to carry the burdens and the risks of striking ISIL in Syria to stop terrorism here in Britain.

Just over a year ago the House of Commons voted overwhelmingly to support airstrikes in Iraq at the request of the Iraqi government, to help defeat ISIL. I do not believe it is logical or credible to confine action within borders that ISIL has disregarded. Stopping ISIL means taking action in Syria, because Raqqa is the centre of its command.

There is a strong case for intervention on a humanitarian basis. ISIL is a terrorist organisation unlike those we have dealt with before. Its brutality is staggering: beheadings, crucifixions, the use of rape as a weapon and the slaughter of children. The combination of the Assad regime's mass murder of its own people and ISIL's bloodthirsty work has created a human catastrophe that has now crossed the borders of Europe. Over a quarter of a million people have been killed and half the population of Syria have been forced to flee their homes. There are 4 million Syrian refugees in neighbouring countries, particularly Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon. A further 6.5 million people are displaced inside the country.

The legal basis for supporting airstrikes in Syria is supported by the UN Security Council, which has been unanimous in its condemnation of ISIL. The UN Security Council passed a resolution on 20th November, which states that ISIL "constitutes a global and unprecedented threat to international peace and security" and calls for member states to take "all necessary measures" to prevent and suppress terrorist acts committed specifically by ISIL and, crucially, it says that we should "eradicate the safe haven they have established over significant parts of Iraq and Syria".

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I do not believe that we can defeat ISIL with military action alone. The military campaign in Iraq and Syria is just one aspect of a broader strategy which also includes measures to restrict the flow of foreign fighters, stop foreign financing, provide humanitarian assistance to Iraq and Syria and strategic communications intended to counter ISIL's ideology. Britain has so far given over £1.1 billion in humanitarian assistance to Syria, surpassed only by the USA, and would contribute at least another £1 billion for post-conflict reconstruction to support a new Syrian Government when it emerges.

Some have argued that we should ally ourselves with Assad and his regime against the greater threat posed by ISIL, as the 'lesser of two evils'. But this misunderstands the causes of the problem and would make matters worse. By inflicting brutal attacks against his own people, Assad has acted as one of ISIL's greatest recruiting sergeants.

We therefore need a political transition in Syria to a government that the international community can work with against ISIL, as we already do with the Government of Iraq. To this end, the Prime Minister has indicated that we will intensify our diplomatic engagement, to build trust between all of the major foreign parties involved and to deliver an inclusive settlement for the people of Syria. That includes working with Russia and Iran, and the more than 60 other countries currently engaged in international efforts to counter ISIL, in order to build a consensus that will allow for a more effective and coordinated campaign against ISIL.

A number of my constituents have pointed to the mistakes made in previous conflicts as reason to avoid any future military engagement. The Prime Minister has acknowledged that preserving the institutions of the Syrian State through post-conflict transition will be vital and de-Baathification after the Iraq war was a significant mistake, which we must avoid repeating. In respect of Syria, we ultimately need a government that is representative of all the Syrian people and I believe the Prime Minister has set out a credible plan to move us towards making that a reality.

No one is pretending that our intervention will deliver an immediate solution to destroying ISIL, I acknowledge that this will take time. But simply, doing nothing is not an option at this time and that is why I voted to support UK military intervention in Syria.

Yours sincerely,



Alok Sharma MP