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There are no easy solutions to the problems in Syria. This is partly because there are many different layers to the conflict, including fighting between government forces and Islamist militias, struggles between Kurds and Turks, and proxy wars involving other nations. Atrocities have been committed on all sides. The crisis remains one of the worst humanitarian disasters of our time, resulting in massive internal displacement and outflow of refugees, affecting people of many ethnicities and religions.

As the civil war enters its eighth year, there is a need for the international community to recognise that the Syrian people must be free to decide their own future, without foreign interference.

Issues that need to be highlighted include:

1. Support for opposition forces
2. Imposed regime change
3. Recent missile strikes
4. Foreign occupation
5. Sanctions
6. Media

1. SUPPORT FOR OPPOSITION FORCES

The US and UK has provided considerable financial support to so-called “moderate” armed opposition forces. Yet the vast majority of these forces are now dominated by jihadist militants with no intention of creating democracy in Syria. They would readily dismantle the broadly secular constitution in which most Syrians take pride.

The UK contributed at least £199m (of taxpayers’ money) to opposition forces between 2015-2017, offering political support, infantry training, communications apparatus and logistics equipment.¹

¹ House of Lords Hansard, Answer to Written Question, 20 September 2017, HL1251; House of Commons Hansard, Answer to Written Question, 20 April 2018, C135396

Many armed opposition groups, although diverse, are not moderate. They adopt the same extremist ideology as Jabhat al-Nusra, ISIS or other terrorist factions. For example, the Army of Islam, which controlled much of Eastern Ghouta prior to their eviction, paraded prisoners including women through the streets in cages.²

Case study

The so-called “moderate” Free Syrian Army (FSA) were major partners in the attack on the Christian town of Maaloula. According to local residents, the FSA fought alongside al-Qaeda affiliates such as Jabhat al-Nusra. On the first day of the attack, 4 September 2013, 29 local people were killed, including three civilians who refused to convert to Islam. Six men were kidnapped, five of whom were later found dead, with evidence of torture; the other is still missing. The town’s most popular four-star Safir Hotel was obliterated. Situated at the top of the hill, it proved a strategic stronghold for Islamist fighters. The same fighters occupied nearby ancient monasteries, smashing altars, stealing relics and burning crosses.

In December 2017, the UK government was forced to cease some of its funding to opposition groups following reports that money was “diverted to extremists” and that recipients were linked to groups which had committed atrocities such as stoning.³

Despite these concerns, the US and UK continue to support projects involving armed opposition groups. What is more, government ministers continue to refuse to disclose the names of opposition groups supported.

2. IMPOSED REGIME CHANGE

As there is no moderate armed opposition, enforced regime change would create a chaotic situation similar to, or perhaps even worse than, those in Iraq or Libya. Commitment to a “transition of power” in Syria, as a prerequisite of any settlement, has proved unachievable and will remain so.

Prime Minister Theresa May insists that UK military action in Syria is “not about regime change”⁴ yet the Foreign Office continue to endorse publicly “a transition

² *Human Rights Watch*, ‘Syria: Armed Groups Use Caged Hostages to Deter Attacks’, 2 November 2015

³ House of Lords Hansard, 20 December 2017, column 2112; *BBC Panorama*, ‘Jihadis You Pay For’, 9 December 2017

⁴ House of Commons Hansard, 16 April 2018, column 40

away from the Assad regime".⁵ Indeed the UK Government has been wedded for a long time to the mantra that "Assad must go".⁶

Likewise, the United States is committed to maintaining a military presence in Syria to ensure "stabilisation", "the departure of Assad" and "the establishment of new leadership".⁷

US-UK foreign policy clearly reflects a commitment to impose regime change. For example, the continuing support for opposition fighters, the *de facto* partition via military occupation of the North East and Al Tanf enclave, and a declared readiness to bomb presidential residences and Syrian government control centres. All attest to such a commitment.

3. RECENT MISSILE STRIKES

The legal justification for the UK, US and French joint airstrikes in April 2018 was significantly flawed. Neither the UN Charter nor international law permit military action on the basis of humanitarian intervention.

According to Dapo Akande, Professor of Public International Law at the University of Oxford, the legal justification for military action "was not in accordance with the United Nations Charter and international law" and was dependent on a "radical restructuring of the most fundamental rules of the international legal order."⁸

Neither the UN nor the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) investigated the Douma attack before missiles were fired. The US-led Coalition did not have conclusive proof of the use of chemical weapons or, if such an attack had occurred, by whom.

In the UK, Theresa May did not seek parliamentary backing in advance of the bombing raids. Despite her defence of the "right to act quickly in the national interest",⁹ the government exhibited a blatant disregard of the necessary checks and assessments on intelligence information.

⁵ House of Lords Hansard, 9 May 2018, columns 153-155

⁶ Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson MP, speaking to the Select Committee on International Relations, 26 January 2017

⁷ The then Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, in a speech at Stanford University, 18 January 2018

⁸ Akande, D, *The Legality of the UK's Air Strikes on the Assad Government in Syria*, University of Oxford, 16 April 2018, pages 1 and 3

⁹ House of Commons Hansard, 16 April 2018, column 42

Voices from Syria

Three Orthodox Patriarchs in Syria issued a statement following the airstrikes: "This brutal aggression is a clear violation of international laws and the UN Charter, because it is an unjustified assault on a sovereign country, a member of the UN. It causes us great pain that this assault comes from powerful countries to which Syria did not cause any harm in any way... This brutal aggression destroys the chances for a peaceful political solution and leads to escalation and more complications."

4. FOREIGN OCCUPATION

A third of Syria is effectively under US and Turkish control, supported by the UK and France. It is understood that NATO powers work largely through surrogates – their own special forces forming the kernel around which local opposition forces are organised, trained and supplied from the air.

Russia and Iran also have a significant military presence in Syria. However, their presence is legal under international law since it is sought by the host state. Their military support of the Syrian government has had a severe impact on civilian populations, but no more so than actions by NATO powers. The withdrawal of Russia and Iran, enforced and divorced from an overall peace settlement, would be likely to result in a vacuum of power, leading to factional hyper-activism and mass bloodshed, from which ISIS would be a main beneficiary.

Case study

During the Battle for Raqqa, US, UK and French forces carried out thousands of airstrikes, killing and injuring thousands of civilians. According to Amnesty International, who visited 42 airstrike sites across the city and interviewed 112 residents, the Coalition's military campaign included "indiscriminate attacks that violated international humanitarian law and are potential war crimes."

5. SANCTIONS

US and UK-backed sanctions greatly harm civilians, for whom it is very difficult to obtain employment – and adequate supplies of food, medicines and medical equipment. Pressure should be maintained for them to be sharply curtailed or dropped altogether.

The sanctions include a *de facto* prohibition of transactions denominated in US dollars. This acts as a dampener on many aspects of the economy and forces much trade to proceed via the black market or legally through expensive intermediaries in Lebanon, Turkey or elsewhere.

Voices from Syria

Church leaders in Syria say that economic and financial sanctions “constitute a huge burden which deepens the suffering of the Syrian people. These sanctions represent another aspect of the crisis and result in more pressure on individuals, institutions, companies, and consequently on the entire people.”

Unilateral coercive measures are illegal under the UN Charter and the Rome Statute as they are a form of collective punishment and of economic warfare, which should not be imposed without internationally-recognised authorisation.

Impact of sanctions

According to the medical journal *The Lancet*: “The economic losses of the country at the end of 2014 stood at US\$143.8 billion, with more than 80% of the population living in poverty, of whom a third... were in abject poverty, unable to obtain even basic food items... Life expectancy has been reduced from 75.9 years in 2010 ... to 55.7 years in 2014—a loss of 20 years...

“The cost of basic food items has risen six-fold since 2010, although it varies regionally. With the exception of drugs for cancer and diabetes, Syria was 95% self-sufficient in terms of drug production before the war. This has virtually collapsed as have many hospitals and primary health-care centres. Economic sanctions have not removed the President: as with other countries under siege... Sanctions are among the biggest causes of suffering for the people of Syria and a major factor perpetuating the conflict”.

6. MEDIA

Undoubtedly, as is the case with all governments during war, the Syrian Government is guilty of instances of human rights violations. Such atrocities are impossible to condone. However, atrocities committed by ISIS and other terrorist groups have received much less media coverage in countries such as the UK.

Responsibility for human suffering must predominantly be attributed to the insurgency of ISIS and other Islamist groups who have perpetrated genocidal policies and atrocities on an immense scale, including abductions into sexual slavery, torture, burning civilians alive and beheadings.

Voices from Syria

A Muslim woman in Latakia, who had been forced to flee her home by Islamist fighters after she watched them behead her husband and son, said: "War is tragic and people die from shellings on both sides. But on one side, you die from shellings, on the other side, you die from shellings and beheadings, and we don't want the beheadings."

CONCLUSION

The issues highlighted above relate to one central principle: the Syrian people must be free to determine their own future. At several key points, Western intervention is undermining that principle. In particular, there are serious concerns that imposed regime change will create a political vacuum, providing a dangerous opportunity for ISIS-related Islamist extremists.

There is an urgent need for the US, UK and French governments to re-consider their priorities so that foreign policy initiatives do not prolong the suffering of the Syrian people. Rather than using proxies and coercion to prevent the restoration of stability, these governments should:

- Work for diplomatic solutions;
- Support international law in both spirit and form;
- Support solutions that allow the Syrian people alone to be arbiters of their future;
- Lift sanctions;
- Join international efforts at rebuilding Syria.