

## Peace Researchers Urge Caution over Bombing in Syria.

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The attacks in Paris on the 13 November have provided an emotional justification for deeper military intervention in Syria by the French and UK governments. As peace researchers, however, we urge caution, prudence and reflection, before authorising more extensive military engagement. The Middle East has already suffered 14 years of military intervention with little positive to show for it. The challenge facing us, now, is how to develop creative, plausible and non-violent alternatives to the current cycle of violence.

The critical and under explored questions about a new intervention in Syria are: is it justified? Will it work to weaken ISIS? And what are the likely consequences for both Syria and the UK when the bombing stops?

Past answers to these questions ended badly in Afghanistan, Iraq (twice) and Libya. We should reflect before making the same mistakes in Syria.

We need to pause and step back from violence for the following reasons:

1. As stated above, the rationale for bombing is unclear on several grounds: The Prime Minister's case for bombing was based on shared values and alliance solidarity, rather than evidence that expanded bombing will remove the threat from ISIS. He has not managed to establish any causal connection between expanded bombing and how this would weaken ISIS or make Syria more stable. If the primary justification for expanded bombing is enhancing the security of British citizens, then this connection has not been made either. A US marine commander, Lieutenant General Robert Neller, offering his best assessment of how the war is going, described it as "a stalemate".

"The US-led coalition engaged in air attacks in Syria and Iraq had by the middle of last month conducted 7,600 attacks (4,900 in Iraq and 2,700 in Syria). Their main problem is finding targets to hit. ...The pilots frequently return to base without firing missiles or dropping bombs, partly they say because of fear of hitting civilians but mainly because after a year there is little left to hit" (Diplomacy Today 30/11/15)

2. There is no compelling legal authority for bombing in the UN Security Council statement. Security Council Resolution 2249 does not give any state a licence to declare war. The resolution asks members to "take all necessary measures to prevent and suppress terrorist acts committed specifically by ISIS and to eradicate the safe haven they have established over significant parts of Iraq and Syria". It also speaks of being determined to combat Islamic State by "all means". It did not, however, invoke Chapter VII of the Charter, which specifically sanctions military action. It was also not a formal decision of the Security Council rather a request for action from states. To act as though it were a Chapter VII resolution further erodes the integrity of the Council and the Charter.

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3. There is no historical reason for thinking that deeper military engagement-especially deeper aerial bombing) will end any more happily than any Western intervention since the first Gulf War in 1991. These interventions (Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Syria) have arguably made bad situations worse. They have not degraded the capacity of regimes or militias in the Middle East to wage war on citizens and neighbours nor generated better regimes than those they toppled and replaced.
4. There is no evidence to support the claim that 70,000 moderate Syrian militia remain ready and poised to overthrow both ISIS and Assad and develop a regime capable of restoring peace and stability to Syria and the region. Very little attention has been given to the post war reconstruction strategy and on the basis of past experience the West has proven woefully inadequate on these issues.

ISIS is a violent group and their methods are deadly and horrific. To respond to their violence with violence, however, is to cede the ethical high ground and exclude nonviolent possibilities.

It has been said that trying to stop 'terrorism' with 'air strikes' is like trying to stop a seeding dandelion by hitting it with a golf club. Bombing Syrian towns is likely to increase recruitment to ISIS, both in the Middle East and in Europe. This is why ISIS courts attacks from the West, and why Al-Qaeda welcomed Soviet and US attacks on Afghanistan. Responding to terrorism with 'air strikes' justifies the ISIS narrative that they are engaged in a holy war with the West, and arguably creates the very radicalisation it purports to be fighting.

Based on the evidence of the Global Terrorism Index Report 2015, we judge that the 'war on terror' is likely to have increased terrorism to date. The incidence of terrorist attacks in Afghanistan and Iraq increased significantly following the military interventions in those countries. The growth of jihadism in response to the war on terror has led to a sharp rise in terrorist incidents, the great majority of which have taken place in just five countries where the 'war on terrorism' has concentrated: Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Pakistan and Nigeria (Global Terrorism Index 2015) Terrorism and the war on terror are locked into one another, each fuelling an escalating cycle of violence and conflict.

There are alternative courses of action available. The conditions which allowed ISIS to breed are the civil wars in Syria and Iraq. The top priority, as Syrians themselves say, is to stop the war. In the short term, the need is for a UN-mandated ceasefire. Over the longer term, the need is to continue and intensify the search for a political settlement, to end the outside supply of weapons and finance which fuel the war, to wind down outside military interventions and move towards disarming and demobilising the forces inside Syria.

In the immediate future, we urge a pause rather than adopting an irreversible course, which is likely to kill and maim more innocent people in Syria, to fuel terrorism, and to have further damaging effects in the Middle East and the world. We need more creative and imaginative solutions to the problems we are confronting than those currently on the table.