

This is how the public stance of one Conservative MP – James Gray, North Wiltshire – has changed over the last month on the issue of the UK bombing Syria

15th October - For me, one of the most important issues we are facing is the situation in Syria and throughout the Middle East. I have to admit to being, uncharacteristically for me, in two minds. It is perfectly logical that if ISIL/Daesh are our enemies (which of course is beyond doubt), then bombing them at their headquarters around Raqqa in Syria is both sensible and logical. Thus, I am strongly inclined to support such action. However, I am increasingly also of the view that our 8 Tornado aircrafts are having very little effect, and that the whole region is becoming a wholly unpredictable maelstrom.

Russia, Iran, Hezbollah, perhaps even China are supporting President Assad with overwhelming military might both against the moderate Syrian rebels, who have been armed and trained to a degree by the West. They are also targeting Daesh. Is our enemy's enemy automatically our friend? Should we overlook the situation in the Ukraine and Crimea for pragmatic reasons? Should we rattle sabres in the Baltic States if President Putin is to be our new best friend? Can we overlook Assad's Hitler-style dictatorship, his slaughtering of hundreds of thousands of his own people and that he has caused millions to flee their homes? Can we overlook Russian planes in NATO airspace over Turkey in favour of defeating Daesh? The whole thing is a mess and the consequences of doing the wrong thing are, I believe, potentially profound.

The conclusion I have come to is that whilst our comparatively insignificant military contribution may not make a massive impact on the outcome of this conflict, doing nothing would ignore the strong moral and self-interested duty to defeat and destroy the evil which is Daesh. If we do not do at least our own little bit, we run the risk of leaving this vital task to others. A risky strategy in any instance, but perhaps more so when it would be those who we cannot and do not trust. The long-term consequences of such delegation could be very grave indeed.

The will of parliament was, when last tested, against intervention in Syria but is there not also an argument that these matters should not be decided by a vote of backbenchers in the House of Commons? If I, who have spent many years trying to understand the complexities of such situations, remain unclear as to the best course of action, can it really be best for the matter to be decided on a democratic basis where the House, as often as not, votes on party lines. Is it not the case that those who have the secret intelligence, the legal advice, the military expertise are better placed to decide whether or not we should take action and whether it is indeed in Britain's best interests to do so.

Whilst I take my responsibilities as a Member of Parliament very seriously, I believe that it should be for the Prime Minister and Cabinet, the Intelligence Chiefs and Generals to make these decisions and then to seek to justify them to the nation. If they get it wrong they will pay a heavy price for it, but they must not try to delegate those responsibilities to we backbenchers

who are in truth ill-qualified to take them. By doing so, they also deprive us of the right and ability to scrutinise and question, and perhaps criticise what they have done for, if we vote for it, then we are to a degree responsible for the action and thus emasculated by our compliance. There are no easy answers available. I will be watching and thinking deeply over the coming months.

19th November - There are some occasions in history when the world stands still, frozen, aghast at the awfulness of what has happened, at the sheer inhumane brutality of it. The assassination of JFK; the death of Princess Diana, 9/11, 7/7, Charlie Hebdo, and now most chillingly brutal of all Paris on Friday 13th. We mourn with the French; we stand shoulder to shoulder with them, not least because "there, but for the grace of God, go I."

But what now? My role in multiple defence matters in Parliament means that I was wrestling with worries before Friday, which are now compounded. Should we smash ISIS with military force? If so, how do we stop an equally hideous hydra appearing in its place? How can we stabilise Syria without siding with one of the worst dictators since Hitler, Bashar al-Assad? Should we now mend our fences with Putin, in which case would we not risk encouraging Russian military incursions in the Baltic states - which of course are NATO and EU members - thereby risking massive escalation? Should we really insert ourselves between Sunni and Shia? Yet there is no logic in bombing in Iraq, but leaving the Americans to kill Jihadi John because he happens to be in Raqqa in Syria at the time.

Russian bombing in Syria very probably led to the downing of the Sharm el-Sheikh plane with a loss of 224 innocent Russian lives. French bombing in Syria is probably partly to blame for the Paris atrocity and at least 129 lives. Yet let us never forget that Peshmerga advances in Iraq and the killing of senior ISIS personnel there and in Syria is at least partly thanks to British military assistance and efforts. Daesh have their backs to the wall to a degree in the Middle East, and the serpent is striking out elsewhere as a result.

But the atrocity and its aftermath have wider implications than the purely military. The tide of migrants must be stopped, not least because it has become clear that some part of them are ISIS terrorists. But how do you stop it? And where do they go? What happens to the millions of innocent refugee women and children? And what do you do about those who may well be here already? What does it all mean for the future of the Schengen Agreement (surely cannot survive) and perhaps of the EU as a whole? Does its existence and our membership of it help at a time like this? Or do these matters demonstrate how useless and pointless it all is?

The world is indeed in turmoil; and that turmoil is now lapping at our shores, knocking down our front doors. Now must be the time for mourning for the French; for urgent action against criminals and terrorists on our own territory; for stronger defence against migrants; for determined action against murderers in the Middle East and elsewhere. But it is also the time for cool, quiet reflection and analysis. Knee-jerk military reactions in the short term without deep planning for its purpose and future would be the worst of all possible outcomes.

Now is indeed the time for the world to stand still, to grieve, and to plan. We need a strong arm but a cool head to govern it.

26th November -Thinking – and the events which drive it – in the Middle East are moving at breath-taking speed. This time last week, I outlined my immediate post-Paris thoughts. I laid out many of the complexities and worries about either doing something in Syria, or indeed not doing it. Those concerns remain, and always will do. The downing of a Russian warplane over Turkey is a good example of the chaos and unpredictability of war. But despite all that, my thinking has hardened into an absolute determination to destroy Daesh wherever they may be.

We must never forget the 30 British people killed, including two locals (from Biddestone) by Daesh on the beach in Tunisia, the 224 Russians blown out of the sky at Sharm-el-Sheikh, the 130 killed and many more injured in Paris. Now we have a lock-down in Brussels lasting several days as a result of a real and imminent threat to public security. London might be next, and we have to do something about it (I was pleased that the Prime Minister is, for instance, removing obstacles for getting troops on the streets to augment the police if necessary). That fact was recognised in a unanimous UN Security Council resolution (including Russia and China whose planes and soldiers are already deployed in Syria).

David Cameron has in the meantime brought out his Strategic Security and Defence Review, which outlines a significant strengthening in our ability to deal with military terrorist and cyber threats at home and abroad. It has been widely welcomed as addressing the very real crisis we now face. And today, the Prime Minister will be laying out his detailed answers to the concerns many of us have raised – about the purpose in striking Daesh in Syria, about the aftermath and the strategic goals.

For me it is very simple. We can no longer bury our heads in the sand and ignore the appalling outrages which this evil organisation are perpetrating on an almost daily basis. We can no longer leave it to America, France, Russia, and China to deal with it. We have to make our contribution (which is not inconsiderable). We cannot stand by and watch as yet more innocent civilians are slaughtered. We must destroy for good the evil which is Daesh; and we must not shrink from doing so.

So I will be voting next week with the Government to authorise strikes against Daesh wherever they may be. Now is the time to act. We must not allow the habitual pacifists and nay-sayers to make us shrink from it. The children of the innocents would give us no thanks for doing so.

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3rd December - I voted Â in favour of extending our airstrikes against Daesh in Iraq into Syria. Here's why. First, any ultra-hawk who argues that this will be the decisive solution to the problem, will somehow or another solve the myriad and complex problems in the region is fooling himself and his listeners. The results of the action cannot be predicted with dogmatic certainty.

I would be the first to agree that there are many difficult questions attached to it.

Will our modest eight Tornados, even with their decisive Brimstone missiles make much difference? Who will carry out the ground operations necessary to secure the ultimate destruction of Daesh? How can we prevent the deaths of innocent civilians? Will it make security at home here better or worse? Is our enemy's enemy our friend? In which case

are we now on the same side as Bashar Assad and Vladimir Putin? If so is our action helping the Sunni majority population? Are they better under Assad or under ISIS? (The people of Afghanistan might have a view on that.) These and a thousand other questions are of course perfectly legitimate concerns. And anyone who claims to have the answer to them has either got the wisdom of Solomon multiplied a thousand times, or else he is fooling himself. No-one, but no-one can be certain that taking the action we were discussing on Wednesday will necessarily be of long-term benefit to humanity. The fact is that the Middle East is a cauldron, a viper's nest, a maelstrom, and there can in reality be no dogmatic certainty as to what is best to do there.

Yet by the very same token, no-one but no-one can be certain that doing nothing will be the right thing to do either. Can we really ignore Paris, Tunisia, Sharm-el-Sheikh? Can we turn a blind eye to the women sold into slavery, the crucifixions, burnings alive and beheadings of people largely because of their religious beliefs? Are we really too timid to react with force to mass rape, genocide, thousands murdered? How will we look our constituents in the face if doing nothing means an outrage of some kind in the UK? Can we really sit back and let the US and France, Russia and Hezbollah do our job for us? It is always easy to argue that doing nothing is the safe option; action demands the tougher argument.

All of that means that Parliament's vote cannot be based on certainty, on dogma. It cannot be based on party allegiance nor on superior knowledge. It is truly a conscience vote. A vote based on our instincts, on the balance of probabilities, on our allegiances, our hopes for peace in the future.

And on balance it seemed to me that there is no logic in turning our planes back at the Syrian border, allowing our work to be done by the Americans and French, turning a blind eye to Daesh and their inhumanities. We are not 'going to war with Syria'. We are at war with Daesh, and it is they who have declared it. We must now see it through.