

Would bombing Syria be a Just War and would it work? It's generally accepted that a Just War requires four conditions to be met. It must be fought by a legal recognised authority such as a government; the cause of the war must be just; the war must be fought with the intention to establish good or correct evil, and there must be a reasonable chance of success. Direct military action against Syria (that is, action which ends up with dead people) would be legal, having been sanctioned by the United Nations unlike the Iraq invasion. Having seen the atrocities committed by or in the name of Daesh (it's not Islamic and it's not a state, so let's call it what most Arabs do) it would certainly be just. Establishing good is where the doubts start. What exactly would our "war aims" be? We'd be interfering in a long running civil war, which has at least 3 sides competing. If we break the stalemate, what happens then? Will we then be picking another side to back? That's where a reasonable chance of success comes in. When making war plans, it's sensible to ask yourself three questions. How do we know we won? How do they know they lost? And then what happens? In World War II this was clear. Our war aims were simple unconditional surrender. We achieved this by occupying Germany and nuclear bombing Japan. We had plans for what happened next, and they worked well with the rebuilding of prosperous but broadly pacifist nations able to retake their places in the international community. In Iraq it wasn't clear. We won, the Iraq army lost, the Allies occupied Baghdad. Then the problems really started as society fell apart and the occupiers declined to pick up the pieces there was no plan beyond groundless US right wing optimism. Despite its tenuous new democracy, Iraq still has simmering inter-communal war. Thousands of civilians have been slaughtered by their fellow citizens. Nobody noticed the 11 killed by an IED last Thursday, the 15 by explosions and gunfire on Friday. There is no plan for post conflict Syria except for more wishful thinking. It's said that madness lies in doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result. Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya have surely shown that the bombs don't work once they stop falling. Then there's military utility. We have 8 Tornado fighter bombers based in Cyprus and manage to get 2 missions over Iraq at that Government's request each day. Word is that a further 2 Tornados and 6 or 8 Typhoons will be deployed, for 3 missions a day. This is hardly shock and awe. We just don't have the aircraft manned or unmanned - to drop a great deal of ordnance, so let's not allow the gung ho to convince us otherwise. What we can do if we want to help doesn't involve us killing the innocent along with the guilty. The British terrorist known as "Jihadi John" was killed by a drone strike (nobody has ever said who the other 3 men in the car were) It took a lot of tracking and strategic patience before the strike was authorised. Would strikes against Syrian targets be done on the same basis? I very much doubt it. We have intelligence, tracking and reconnaissance capabilities second to none which would enable leadership to be identified, funds frozen. We need every ounce of "soft power" to persuade, cajole and if necessary push Daesh's nation-state backers to back off. The Kurdish Peshmerga have shown themselves to be capable ground troops especially when given the tools for the job. But even here beware the consequences the Kurds are showing they have the characteristics of a nation, and their long term price is likely to be nationhood. And as they live in 3 different countries, that won't come easy. Bombing Syria is far too simplistic a solution. Remember Northern Ireland. Operation Motorman in 1972 was designed by the British Army to protect the Catholic population from the majority Protestants. Then gratitude turned to hate. It took 36 years to get to the Good Friday agreement, still not fully implemented. The UK bombing Syria could easily make us part of the problem, and it wouldn't be quick or easy or certain. Far better to keep

doing what we're doing ♦ we're the biggest funder of refugee camps in Syria's neighbours, and Syrians will be welcomed to Newcastle soon ♦ and liadopt a similar maxim to doctors "first, don't make it worse"

Peter Ford, UK ambassador to Syria 2003-06 and Dr Julian Lewis MP , chairman of the defence committee in Parliament, writing in a personal capacity, set out a more detailed case in The Guardian on 21st October

One of us is a member of the Labour party and the other is a Conservative. We have our differences, but both agree that bombing Syria under present circumstances would be a high-risk and pointless endeavour which should be rejected by the House of Commons, if the prime minister unwisely seeks to put it to the vote.

Bombing Islamic State (Isis) is certainly not wrong in principle. Britain is already doing that in Iraq at that country's request. The question is, why extend this to Syria? The government has utterly failed to come up with any convincing rationale, merely saying that we cannot leave it to the Americans to carry the burden.

Yet, our effort in Iraq is only about 5% of total bombing missions. With the best will in the world, extending this scale of effort to Syria would make little difference. If we feel duty-bound to take on a bigger share of the burden, why not take up more of it in Iraq? It is not as if bombing there had been spectacularly successful and additional efforts in Iraq were unnecessary.

The truth is that, historically, aerial bombardment usually fails to be decisive unless it supports credible ground forces. In Syria, apart from Kurds in limited areas, there are no credible, non-Islamist ground forces other than President Assad's.

Extending our efforts to Syria would be of marginal utility at best. This is partly because the UK government has set itself against coordination with the Syrian army or the Russians, which hobbles our military from the outset. The government is in denial that intervention in Syria means deciding which is the lesser of two evils, Assad or the Islamists, and acting accordingly. If the government is not prepared to face up to this hard reality ♦ a reality that does not apply in Iraq ♦ then we should stay out of Syria completely.

The main reason for holding back on Syria, however, is not that it would be futile but that it would be extremely dangerous. Can we be sure that the prime minister would not seek opportunities to extend the bombing to the Syrian army as well as Isis? After all, we are constantly told that parliament was wrong to prevent the bombing of the Syrian army in 2013, and that it still remains essential to remove Assad.

The government does not accept that its preferred "moderate" forces are a fantasy and that a jihadi victory would be the only outcome if Assad were overthrown ♦ with all the biblical-scale horrors which would flow from that for the Christians, Alawites, Shia and other minorities, as well as secular Sunnis. The Russians are criticised for concentrating their fire on the non-Isis rebels, even though this category includes groups like the powerful al-Nusra Front, an affiliate of al-Qaida. With the removal of Assad, groups like this would be like vultures at a feast. No serious analyst argues that the handful of "moderates" would be a match for the jihadis.

It is claimed that the Russians are holding back on bombing Isis in order for this terror group to prosper. But the Russians seem to be focusing on al-Nusra and other jihadis because these are the groups most engaged with the Syrian army in its heartland. Isis is active mainly in the east and north-east, which the undermanned Syrian army has more or less abandoned.

There is a serious danger of deliberate mission creep. Before action began in Libya in 2011, MPs were assured that bombing operations would be limited to creating a no-fly zone to protect the citizens of Benghazi. As soon as the vote went through, operations began in order to overthrow Muammar Gaddafi, with the result that Libya is now a playground for Islamist radicals ♦ including Isis. It is only too easy to imagine this technique being applied to Syria ♦ for example, to police "safe havens" ♦ almost certainly leading to dogfights with Syrian military aircraft and thence to open

warfare with the Assad regime.<br />This would result in enormous risks for the RAF, flying in the same skies as Russian aircraft whose mission is to ensure the victory of the Syrian army. It is not at all reassuring to hear "reliable, high-level sources" telling us that RAF pilots have latitude to attack Russian aircraft when they feel threatened. What about possible misunderstandings, accidents or even deliberate "false-flag" operations designed precisely to engineer such an incident? Has all this been properly thought through? We see no sign that it has.<br />If the gains from the proposed intervention were likely to be considerable ♦ for example, if we were asked to support credible, local, non-Islamist ground forces ♦ or if we were acting in this way because it was forced on us, some risk would be worth taking. But that is definitely not the case now. Our intervention would have only a minimal effect even under the most optimistic scenarios.<br />In short, the arguments against bombing are compelling. If the prime minister is wise he will use the Russian intervention as a reason not to proceed, rather than risking a second defeat on an issue of war and peace in parliament or, at best, a pyrrhic victory.</p>