Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

"Together we must ensure the forces of moderation prevail in Syria, for the good of the nation, of the region and of the world"

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I am delighted to be hosting this event alongside President Al-Bahra of the Syrian National Coalition and my colleagues from Saudi Arabia, the United States, France, Germany and Turkey and I am delighted too that so many Friends of Syria have accepted the invitation to join us this afternoon. I know that quite a few people are still in the Security Council taking part in President Obama's session on foreign fighters and I think many of them will join us in the next 15, 20 minutes as that session comes to an end.

We meet at a critical time for Syria, for the Middle East and for the world.

A time when we're challenged by the new threat of ISIL, extending their reach in Syria and Iraq, destabilising the region and seeking to build a so-called 'caliphate'. This is a dangerous phenomenon that must be crushed. Airstrikes will be a part of that but we need to combine a tough security response with an intelligent and nuanced political strategy.

If the extremist threat were not enough, the Syrian people also still have to contend with the tyranny of Assad, a man who has spent years systematically brutalising and oppressing his own people.

Some argue that facing the threat from ISIL, we have no choice but to co-opt Assad as the lesser of two evils in the fight against its murderous ideology.

But we do have a choice.

And we must be clear about Assad's record: this is the man who responded to peaceful protest with violence, who then escalated that violence to include the most inhuman forms of attack on civilians: chemical weapons, barrel bombs and tactics of siege and starvation. In Syria's prisons his regime has arbitrarily detained thousands of its citizens and tortured and executed many of them. The UN estimates over 190,000 have been killed in the conflict he precipitated. Three million Syrians have fled to neighbouring countries, including an estimated 130,000 fleeing to Turkey in the last week alone. One in every eight Syrians displaced from the country– a million more than just a year ago.

Assad cannot be the answer to defeating extremism. Working with this brutal dictator would only reinforce the narrative of ISIL and feed radicalisation in our homelands. He has forfeited his legitimacy and any plausible claim to be part of Syria's future. He belongs firmly to Syria's past. His shameful legacy is to have created the conditions in which ISIL's barbarous extremism has taken root.

Assad is not the way. Just as in Iraq, the fight against ISIL must be led by the Iraqi government so in Syria it must be led by the moderate opposition working together as one, with an agreed vision of a future for their country free of both the tyranny of Assad and the barbarism of ISIL. This is what the Geneva process envisaged, and we will continue to work towards it with Special Representative De Mistura.

Our support for the moderates will be steadfast. They remain under extreme pressure. I welcome the leadership shown by the US in supporting them through the plans to train and equip their armed groups. Different partners will contribute in different ways but close coordination will be critical to maximize the impact of our collective impacts. The UK for example has already allocated £30 million this year to support areas under opposition control and strengthen our regional allies from the effects of the Syria conflict. Our support has helped the Free Syrian police establish police stations across the liberated areas. It has supported volunteers in civil defence stations across northern Syria, trained and equipped to carry out search & rescue, fire-fighting and first aid, saving lives, making life better for the citizens of the areas controlled by the Syrian moderate opposition. I am pleased to announce today that we will be committing a further £16 million to this work in Syria and the region helping to consolidate the moderate's grip on the areas they control though good governance and strong public services.

There is still more that the international community must do. But our ability to do it will depend on the opposition. It must unify its political and military visions, establish a single overall chain of command and build institutions that will earn the confidence of Syrians and the international community. We collectively can play a decisive role in that process not least by the way we channel our support. I look forward to hearing, in a moment, from President Al-Bahra about his vision for his country and to working with him and the friends of Syria gathered here today to make it a reality.

Together we have an opportunity to demonstrate that the opposition are everything that ISIL and Assad are not: moderate, democratic and inclusive. Together we must ensure the forces of moderation prevail in Syria, for the good of the nation, of the region and of the world. This will take the unstinting support and attention from the international community, led by the Friends of Syria. It will take courage, resolve and vision from the Syrian people. It may be the work of a generation. But it is a task that has never been more urgent.

Source: https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/together-we-must-ensure-the-forces-of-moderation-prevail-in-syria-for-the-good-of-the-nation-of-the-region-and-of-the-world