Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

"The Assad regime created the environment in which extremism and ISIL in particular flourished."

2015-09-30

Thank you Mr President and colleagues, I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this important debate.

None of us doubts that violent extremist ideologies across North Africa and the Middle East constitute a grave threat to international peace and security, regional stability and peaceful civilian life across the world.

In confronting them we are waging a generational struggle in which we will only prevail if we speak with one voice and act with one will.

At the same time, we have to give hope to those who despair of a better future and may be tempted to join the violent extremists.

Whether they are frustrated Palestinians who see no hope of resuming the Middle East peace process, Iraqi Sunnis who await the inclusiveness Prime Minister Abadi has promised or Syria moderate oppositionists who see no other way to fight Assad.

The US-led Anti-ISIL Coalition has brought together more than 60 countries from the region and beyond to take the fight to ISIL.

UK has played a major role in delivering Coalition airstrikes in Iraq and remains committed to the Coalition as the best mechanism to mount a unified and comprehensive response.

We have already met with tangible success, helping to halt ISIL’s precipitate advance across Iraq last year and over time removing its freedom to operate in more than 30% of the Iraqi territory which it once held. As well as cutting financing sources and countering its social media propaganda.

But there is much more to do and we do not shrink from the reality that this will be a long haul.

There is also universal agreement that Syrians have suffered too much for far too long.

We must come to their aid. I want to take the opportunity to acknowledge the generosity of Turkey, of Jordan and of Lebanon, in particular, in hosting millions of refugees fleeing the

violence of the Syrian civil war over years.

The UK has given over £1.1 billion in humanitarian aid towards the Syrian crisis and neighbouring countries hosting refugees.

The crisis in Syria is reverberating globally, both in the violent extremism which it has helped foster and the migration crisis which it has precipitated.

There will be no lasting solutions to these challenges without lasting peace and stability in Syria.

We have to do more than respond to the humanitarian consequences of the conflict if we are to achieve that stability.

But to help Syria navigate its way out of this crisis we must be clear about how it arrived there in the first place.

It was the Assad regime which led Syria into the crisis. Its brutal repression of peaceful protesters, which we've just heard about from Secretary Kerry, and the years of indiscriminate attacks on civilians which follow, especially through the indiscriminate use of barrel bombs, was the root cause. The Assad regime created the environment in which extremism and ISIL in particular flourished.

So we reject the advice of those who say the poison of Assad is the cure of the cancer of ISIL. It is Assad who released jihadis in the early stages of the conflict.

It is Assad who continues to trade with them even now. And it is Assad's forces which are killing more civilians in Syria each month than any other actor.

Assad has been, and remains, one of ISIL's greatest recruiting sergeants and his forces remain focussed on the destruction of moderate opposition groups and civilian population centres.

Any attempt to ally with Assad against ISIL will only strengthen ISIL, making them de facto leaders of the Sunni resistance to the Assad regime.

We owe it to the Syrian people to secure a future free both of the terrorism of ISIL and the tyranny of Assad.

Because Syria can only be an effective partner in overcoming violent extremism if it has a representative government: a government capable of working with the international community to confront ISIL militarily and counter their twisted narrative.

So the best contribution Assad and those around him can now make is to put their countries interest before their own and step aside to allow a political transition that will end the civil war

and allow Syrians to unite in the struggle against Islamist extremism.

A transition that will provide a representative and inclusive government, and enable the Syrian people to begin the task of rebuilding their nation.

And the best contribution we can make is to support the efforts of the UN Special Envoy, Staffan de Mistura, in negotiating such a transition, standing ready to work with all partners to make this happen.

Over the last few weeks, the realities on the ground in Syria have changed. Russian intervention has strengthened regime morale and reinforced regime capability.

Russia has taken a major decision and assumed a heavy responsibility by this public propping up of Assad, while he continues the terrorization of his own people.

The international community will expect Russia to use the increased influence it has to stop the use of weapons like barrel bombs that have targeted and killed thousands of innocent civilians, and to prevent any use of chemicals as weapons by the regime.

We've heard over the last few days about Russia's intention to use force against ISIL and we welcome that focus. But for the reasons I have already outlined, it is not possible to be an effective part of the fight against ISIL and at the same time with the same force be attacking the moderate opposition resisting the oppression of the Assad regime.

To say it clearly, actions in support of the regime are incompatible with the effective prosecution of the war against ISIL in Syria.

This is not a moral judgment, it's a pragmatic judgment. And we've heard this morning of the first Russian airstrikes in Syria. Russia will be well aware of the message that those strikes will deliver.

The targets of those strikes would not have been selected carelessly or at random; and it's very important that Russia is able to confirm to the international community that the military action is has undertaken in Syria this morning is directed at ISIL and AQ affiliated targets only and not at moderate opponents of the Assad regimes.

Mr. President, I have also listened to those who say that the Syrian people should decide in elections whether Assad stays or goes. I have to say this is an illusion.

It denies the reality on the ground. How can there be fair elections in a country which has lost a quarter of a million dead and has 12 million of its citizens displaced, many of them outside its borders.

Healing these wounds can only start when Assad leaves, whether that is at the start of a transition or later during the process.

There is of course a way forward, if we can see an end to the barrel bombing and the indiscriminate attacks on civilians, if we can encourage the escalation on the battlefields so as to reduce casualties.

If we can at the same time embark upon a political process that leads to a new Syria with a new government without Assad, then we could focus opposition strength on fighting ISIL.

Mr. President, the question for this Council is whether those who have the influence to deliver this outcome are willing to use that influence to do so.

I call upon all Security Council members to unite in order to deliver a future for Syria.

Thank you.

Source: https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/the-assad-regime-created-the-environment-in-which-extremism-and-isil-in-particular-flourished