Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

Foreign Secretary statement on ISIL: Iraq and Syria

2014-10-16

Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond said:

With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement on Iraq and Syria.

I am sure the House will wish to join me in expressing sympathy and condolences to the family and friends of Alan Henning. Mr Henning arrived in Syria armed only with kindness and compassion. His appalling murder, like that of David Haines, the two American hostages, and many thousands of others, has revealed the true, barbaric face of ISIL.

Mr Speaker, the scale and the unity of the international response to the challenge of ISIL is impressive. It involves Muslim countries of the region and the wider international community. The UK is proud to play its part.

Working closely with our allies, under a US lead, we have a clear strategy to take the fight to ISIL. A strategy with military, political and wider counter-terrorism components. A strategy that we recognise, at least in parts, will need to be sustained over the long-term. We are under no illusion as to the severity of this challenge to regional stability and to our homeland security.

At the heart of our strategy is the political strand. ISIL will not be overcome until Iraq and Syria have inclusive governments capable of marginalising its appeal and of mounting a sustained and effective response on the ground to the military and ideological threat it poses.

Let me first address the situation in Iraq, which I visited this week. I did so to show solidarity with the Iraqi people and the new government of Prime Minister al-Abadi; to tell them that they do not stand alone in confronting the ISIL threat; and to encourage them as they put together an inclusive government of national reconciliation.

Now I recognise the concern in this House – shared by, I have to say, many in the region – as to the difficulties of achieving this more inclusive approach. I recognise too the enormous challenges that Prime Minister al-Abadi faces, and the understandable scepticism as to his ability to deliver a genuinely different approach from his predecessor.

But at the same time, I am impressed by the commitment of all three leaderships – Shia, Sunni and Kurd – to ensure that this time is, and must be, different. All agreed that this is effectively Iraq’s last chance as a nation state.

In talks with Prime Minister al-Abadi, Vice President Nujaifi, and Foreign Minister Ja'afari, each of them reaffirmed their understanding of the need for, and their personal commitment to: a more inclusive approach; to de-centralisation of power to Iraq's communities; and equitable sharing of Iraq's natural resource wealth. I assured Prime Minister al-Abadi that Britain will do all it can to support reform and reconciliation and he, in turn, assured me that he expects to complete the formation of his government, by appointing Defence and Interior Ministers over the next few days.

In Erbil, I met the Kurdistan Regional Government President Massoud Barzani, Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani, and other ministers. They likewise assured me of their commitment to work with Prime Minister al-Abadi; and that Kurdish Ministers would be taking up their positions in the Baghdad government this week. There was considerable optimism, both in Erbil and in Baghdad, that this will allow a much needed deal to resolve the long-standing issues between the Iraqi government and the KRG, including oil exports and revenue sharing.

Perhaps unsurprisingly given the history, there is a deep, and mutual, lack of trust, both between the different communities within Iraq and between Baghdad and some of its neighbours in the region. But it is vital now that all parties, having looked at the alternatives, now put the past behind them and have the courage to build bridges to each other, in particular to appeal to the Sunni populations, who are living under, and in some cases, acquiescing in, ISIL's brutal reign, and who must be brought back into the political fold if ISIL is to be defeated in Iraq. For our part, we will do all that is in our power to encourage the different communities, and countries involved to reach out to each other in rebuilding an Iraq capable of rolling back ISIL and the poisonous ideology it represents.

Turning to the military dimension of our engagement in Iraq, Britain, alongside the United States, France, Australia and others, has assumed a key role in carrying out airstrikes and mounting the sophisticated reconnaissance that enables them. We are in the process of re-deploying some of our Reaper remotely-piloted aircraft from Afghanistan to the Middle East, to add to our surveillance capabilities.

The security situation on the ground remains very serious, with ISIL maintaining control of significant swathes of territory in both Iraq and Syria. ISIL has made advances in Anbar Province in recent days, including taking control of the city of Hit and attacking the provincial capital, Ramadi. At the same time, however, Kurdish forces have pushed back ISIL in the north, retaking several strategically important villages. There will be tactical ebb and flow, but the coalition air campaign has stabilised the strategic picture, and the assessment of our experts is that Baghdad is not at immediate danger.

Approximately 20-30% of Iraq's populated territory could be under ISIL control. Liberating this territory from ISIL is a medium term challenge, to be measured in months and years, not days

and weeks. And the horrific effects of ISIL – on governance, security, and the social fabric – will be felt for even longer.

Prime Minister al-Abadi outlined to me his plans to reform the Iraqi Security Forces. He is clear-eyed about the scale of the challenges he faces. And the resistance he will face in meeting them. But reform will be essential if the ISF are to develop the capabilities necessary to defeat ISIL on the ground. The United States and others have committed to providing the necessary training. Britain has funded bomb disposal training for the Kurdish forces, as we did for the Iraqi Security Forces earlier in the year, and I saw for myself on Monday evening, members of the second battalion, the Yorkshire regiment, training Peshmerga to operate and maintain the heavy machine guns Britain has gifted to them.

In Syria, we need to reaffirm clearly, lest there be any doubt, that Assad cannot be part of the solution to the challenge: the depravity of his regime was, after all, a driving factor in creating ISIL.

Indeed, while the international coalition has been trying to save Kobane, Assad has been continuing his attacks and aerial bombardments on the moderates, including around Aleppo and Damascus. Those close to Assad should be in no doubt that he must be removed to clear the way for a government in Damascus that enjoys legitimacy in the eyes of the Syrian people, credibility with the international community and that can take effective action against extremism. For as long as he remains in power, there will be no peace in Syria.

Britain will continue to provide strong support to the moderate opposition, including technical assistance and non-lethal equipment. We have recently increased our funding to areas under opposition control and to regional allies to increase their resilience against the effects of the Syria conflict. Our support, along with that of our allies, is helping the moderates to deliver good governance and strong public services in the areas they control, relieving the suffering of the civilian population.

Airstrikes are being carried out in Syria by the United States, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Jordan. The UK strongly supports this action. No one who has watched a television screen over the last week or so, can have failed to be moved by the plight of the defenders of Kobane. Their situation has at times appeared hopeless. Yet, supported by coalition airstrikes, they are holding on, and in some areas, pushing back. The moderate opposition have held back ISIL in other parts of Northern Syria. Airstrikes have targeted ISIL's headquarters, command and control, and military forces in the eastern provinces of Raqqah and Deir ez zor, degrading their capabilities. They have also hit the economic infrastructure that ISIL has been exploiting to generate revenue from illegal oil sales.

Mr Speaker, the UK government expects to make a significant contribution to the US-led programme to train the Syrian moderate armed opposition, who are fighting both Assad's

tyranny and ISIL's extremism. Details of how that contribution will be delivered are currently being scoped.

ISIL represents a threat to Iraq and to the region. But it also represents a major threat to us, here at home, particularly at the hands of returning foreign fighters; and to our citizens worldwide. The UK has led the coalition on a number of wider counter-terrorism initiatives which aim to cut off the flow of finance and fighters to ISIL in both Syria and Iraq.

Through our membership of the United Nations Security Council, we have been instrumental in securing the listings of 20 individuals, including 16 directly linked to ISIL or the Al Nusrah Front, and two Al Qaeda-related organisations, since the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 2170 on terrorist financing. We are also working closely with partners to disrupt ISIL's access to external markets for illicit sales of oil and other goods. Domestically, we are seeking to strengthen the powers of the Charity Commission to counter terrorist abuse of the charity sector.

And on terrorist recruitment, the UK co-sponsored UN Security Council Resolution 2178 which sets out a framework to dissuade, prevent and disrupt travel, to work with communities, to strengthen border controls and to manage the challenge of returning foreign fighters. We will now actively pursue this agenda throughout Europe and the Middle East.

As co-chairs of the Global Counter Terrorism Forum's Working Group on Countering Violent Extremism, we are looking at new ways to strengthen the ability of partners overseas to counter the terrorist propaganda which contributes to radicalisation, recruitment and mobilisation of individuals to terrorism.

Mr Speaker, the advance of ISIL and the continued attrition against its own population by the Assad regime have caused a humanitarian crisis in Iraq and Syria no less grave than the political and military one. More than 170,000 have fled from Kobane and over 30,000 people have been displaced from the town of Hit in Anbar province as a result of recent fighting – many of them ending up in the Kurdish region of Iraq. The need to winterise refugee accommodation is increasingly urgent as the wet and then the cold weather approaches. The Kurdish leadership made very clear to me the scale and urgency of the humanitarian crisis they are facing in accommodating nearly a million refugees, perhaps half of Iraq's total population of IDPs, at the same time as defending their 600 mile frontline with ISIL.

And the humanitarian challenges go wider than that. In Syria nearly 14 million people need assistance, there are 6 ½ million internally displaced persons and 3 million refugees.

My Right Honourable Friend the Secretary of State for International Development recently announced £100 million in additional funding, bringing the UK contribution to the Syria crisis to £700 million.

Our support is reaching hundreds of thousands of people across Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq and Egypt. UK aid is providing water for up to 1.5 million people and has funded over 5 million monthly food rations. In addition, we are supporting the governments of Lebanon and Jordan to manage the impact of the huge influx of refugees to those countries on their host communities.

Britain was one of the first donors to respond to the worsening situation in Iraq this summer and has allocated a total of £23 million to Iraq since 13 June, to meet immediate humanitarian needs and to support the UN and other agencies in their response. Aid has been focused on need – mainly in the Kurdish region.

DFID has already responded to the urgent needs of the Syrian Kurdish refugees who have recently fled to Turkey and is ready to react swiftly to further developments.

Madam Deputy Speaker, we have a wide-ranging and ambitious strategy to confront an evil which is a direct threat to our national security. I pay tribute to the members of our diplomatic service and our international development teams in the region who are working in very difficult circumstances, and above all to the men and women of our armed forces who are, once again, putting their lives at risk as Britain takes its place at the heart of the international coalition waging a struggle against a barbaric force that has no place in human civilisation in the 21st century. They will always have our whole-hearted support.

I commend this statement to the House.

Further information

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