

# Air strikes in Syria are a good start, but the lessons of Iraq and Libya must be learned

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12/2/2015

MPs have authorised UK air strikes in Syria. Despite this being a step in the right direction, defeating ISIS will not, in itself, bring political stability to Syria, writes **Ranj Alaaldin**. He warns that it is counter-intuitive to expect the coalition of jihadists and the regime to come together and contest elections, pursuant to the transition plan world powers have put forward. Instead, what the lessons of Iraq and Libya teach us is that peace requires stabilisation, good governance and reconciliation between divided communities. This cannot be achieved if the transition is led by regime elements and jihadists who have much in common with ISIS.

David Cameron's strategy for confronting and defeating ISIS is a step in the right direction. Targeting ISIS in Iraq and Syria is necessary, since ISIS is a transnational organisation that functions on the basis of territory and with resources from both countries. So intensifying the campaign against ISIS in this way is the least-worst option and an important one if the jihadists are to be defeated.

The government is also right to emphasise a multipronged strategy to bring peace and stability to Syria, one that focuses on and addresses the political, military, and humanitarian aspects of this complex war. But what experience from Libya and Iraq shows is that focusing on short-term gains will lead to long-term costs, no matter how many elections follow. So it is wishful thinking to suggest that a political transition in Syria will lead to peace and stability.

The Vienna transition plan, which Cameron emphasises in his [response](#) to the UK Foreign Affairs Committee, envisages elections and a representative government in 18 months. The idea of holding meaningful elections in a failed state that will take many decades to recover from sectarian war, and elections that will include elements of the current regime (even if it does not include Assad) and either Islamist or Islamist-aligned rebel groups, would be laughable were it not for the tragic fact that the future of many millions will depend on it working.

The problem is two-fold: on the one hand is the Syrian regime and on the other are jihadists, including (but not limited to) ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra (Al-Qaida's affiliate) and Ahrar al-Sham. The current coalition of jihadists in Syria, whose numbers are vast, means that no matter how many airstrikes you launch against ISIS there will always be an abundance of others to take their place. They may not be as effective as ISIS is right now and may not be able to establish another so-called "Caliphate" but they will sustain the same kind of terror and tyranny that ISIS currently inflicts on the population and the region.

A transition agreement that sustains and legitimises the regime, as the Vienna plan does, will also sustain the sectarian conflict and the warlordism that shapes the Syrian state and society today. There are at least 100,000 Arab rebels, moderate and jihadist, dedicated to overthrowing the regime. And whilst Cameron stresses there are 70,000 so-called moderates ready to work with the campaign, he is still yet to suggest how and why these groups might



Credit: Peter Gronemann

suddenly stop fighting Assad and instead switch their focus to ISIS.

Even if these rebels were to stop fighting Assad, it is inconceivable they could take part in a political exercise alongside the Syrian regime, lest they lose their constituencies, who may instead turn to the jihadists for justice – the regime has killed hundreds of thousands, in comparison to the several thousand that ISIS has killed.

Focusing only on ISIS and other jihadists is akin to taking one step forward, only to take two steps back. Syria's jihadists will thrive for as long as the Syrian regime and its elements are in positions of power and influence. So the notion of a political transition in Syria is counter-intuitive at this stage, particularly as there will also be little appetite amongst the international community to deploy troops or other personnel to do the policing that this transition requires.

There are, however, no great options in this messy conflict. Inaction has had its consequences. Less engagement in conflict zones and the region have led to more, rather than fewer, crises. Whilst there are fundamental uncertainties, the UK's involvement will add increased legitimacy and fresh momentum to the campaign, hasten ISIS's demise and will bring more, rather than less focus on the arduous task of bringing stability to Syria.

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### About the Author

**Ranj Alaaldin** is a doctoral researcher at LSE, where he focuses on Iraq and sectarian conflict in the Middle East. He has published with the New York Times, Wall Street Journal, the Guardian, Independent and other publications. He is a contributing author to two books, one on the legacy of the Iraq war and the other on the 2011 Libyan uprising, for which he conducted research in Benghazi and Tobruk. He tweets from [@ranjalaaldin](https://twitter.com/ranjalaaldin)



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