

# If bombing the Middle East was the way to peace, it would be the most peaceful place on Earth

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By Democratic Audit UK

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*MPs yesterday voted to deploy bomb attacks against ISIS/Daesh strongholds in Syria, in response to their attack on Paris earlier this month. Here, **Sean Swan** argues that this is misguided, and despite the understandable yearning to be seen to ‘do something’, the Middle East has been bombed by the West before without achieving the desired results, and there is nothing to suggest this time would be different.*



*Syria in the pre-war days (Credit: [Christophe](#), CC BY 2.0)*

Mr Cameron wants to bomb ISIS in Syria. The trouble is it will not work. Firstly, there are no targets. The only significant ISIS infrastructure, the oil storage facilities and refineries, have already been destroyed by the [Russians](#). ISIS forces themselves are invisible. As one uniquely informed observer, Jürgen Todenhöfet [put](#) it “Isis fighters only march in tight orderly lines or drive in convoys in their propagand videos. Off camera, they avoid hanging around in large groups and spend their time among the local population, preferably in apartment blocks that house families. That’s the very first chapter in the dummies’ guide to terrorism”. So there are no good targets, just the possibility of killing civilians or of ISIS capturing a downed RAF pilot and burning him to death as they did previously with a Jordanian pilot. Equally, bombing ISIS will unquestioningly have the immediate effect of making a Paris style attack in Britain more likely. These are the truly bleak scenarios that must be considered. And their potentially serious impact on community relations in Britain itself must also be borne in mind.

Secondly, as Mr Cameron himself admits, airstrikes alone cannot defeat ISIS without ground forces. He [seems](#) to pin his hopes on “the Iraqi security forces and the Kurdish peshmerga. In Syria, [...] we believe that there are around 70,000 Syrian opposition fighters, principally of the Free Syrian Army, who do not belong to extremist groups, and with whom we can co-ordinate attacks”. This claim did not convince the more informed. Julian Lewis, the Conservative chair of the Commons defence committee, was sceptical: “[T]he suggestion that there are 70,000 non-Islamist, moderate, credible ground forces is a revelation to me and, I suspect, to most other Members in this House”. In a similar vein Peter Lilley, a former Conservative cabinet minister bluntly asked Mr Cameron, “to convince me that what you refer to as the Free Syrian Army actually exists rather than is a label we apply to a rag-bag group of clans and tribal forces with no coherent force”.

The scepticism as to the existence of non-Islamist anti-ISIS forces would seem justified given the events surrounding 'Division 30', an outfit drawn mainly from the Syrian Turkmen community on which the US was prepared to spend \$500 million in the hope of training 5,400 anti-ISIS fighters a year. A 'Division 30' unit was deployed inside Syria in July, only to be promptly **abducted** by the Nusra Front, Al Qaeda's affiliate in Syria. A second 'Division 30' unit was deployed in September – they apparently immediately **handed** their US supplied weapons over to the Nusra Front. The true insubstantiality of 'Division 30' was revealed in testimony before the US Senate Armed Services Committee on 16 September. General Lloyd Austin, the head of U.S. Central Command, **admitted** that 'Division 30' now only consisted of "a small number [...] we're talking four or five."

The Kurds have performed well, but the Kurds are fighting for Kurdistan, not Syria. They have little interest in fighting outside their own areas – and even less interest in cooperating with any coalition involving Turkey, a country which appears more fixated on **bombing** Kurds than fighting ISIS. Nor is it certain that Kurdish forces would be welcome in Arab areas. As for the Iraqi security forces, it is the accepted wisdom that the Sunni discontent in Iraq (on which ISIS feeds) springs from the sectarianism of the Shia dominated Iraqi government. Iraqi government troops are thus likely to be as much part of the problem as part of the solution. But what, barring more 'regime change', can be done about that?

Thirdly, ISIS are primarily a creature of the Sunni areas of western Iraq and eastern Syria. They openly aspire to undoing the Anglo-French Sykes-Picot carve-up of the middle-east. The first issue of ISIS's magazine *Dabiq* celebrated "the demolition of the Sykes-Picot Borders" (*Dabiq*, issue 1, p. 13). The fact that ISIS are barbaric and obscurantist should not blind us to the fact that they obviously resonate to some degree with the Sunni in Iraq and Syria. Yes, ISIS are in part a pathological product of the brutalizing effect on Iraqi and Syrian society of years of war, and true too that obscurantism is a feature of the region, (ISIS differ from **Saudi Arabia** more in degree than in type), but ISIS also answer some political need amongst the Sunni population in those countries. Providing an alternative means of answering those needs would deprive ISIS of much of its *raison d'être* not only in the eyes of the Sunni population, but of many of its own members. We should not let the obscurantism of ISIS blind us to the fact that it serves a political function for many of them – former Ba'athist army officers are not attracted to ISIS solely from misplaced piety.

Mr Cameron acknowledges the need for a political settlement and **professed** his "support for the diplomatic and political process" towards a settlement. "We are now seeing Iran and Saudi Arabia sitting around the same table as America and Russia, as well as France, Turkey and Britain. All of us are working towards the transition to a new Government in Syria".

Yes, a political solution is the only long term solution, and obviously all these countries are key players, (equally obviously they all have their own agendas in relation to Syria). But is it not also obvious that no solution is possible without involving the people of Syria? Without the involvement of the peoples of Syria, and indeed Iraq, this cannot avoid having the whiff of a new Sykes-Picot, if not of a new Congo Conference or a new Munich. No lasting settlement is possible without the involvement of the contesting parties. The international community's task is to facilitate a peace agreement; they cannot create it over the heads of the people there.

In order to produce any lasting settlement three elements are required:

1. The recognition that what is happening in Syria and Iraq is not simply one conflict involving ISIS but a series of inter-related conflicts. All of the groups involved in the conflict must be represented – the Kurds, the Turkmen, the Sunni tribes, the Druze, the Christians, the Alawites, the Syrian Government, the Iraqi government...
2. The negotiators need to be authentically representative, not the representatives of western approved phantom armies or self-appointed plausible chancers (like Ahmed Chalabi previously in Iraq). The only way to ensure such representation is by drawing on religious and tribal leaders in a manner resembling the old Ottoman **Millet system**. This is as likely to provide genuine representation as any election that might be held

in the area in the near future.

3. Accept that Sykes-Picot is not sacred, Iraq and Syria are not sacred and even the concept of the nation-state is not sacred. The international community should accept any form of political arrangement – short of the Caliphate envisioned by ISIS – that the involved parties can agree upon.

Mr Cameron's desire to bomb ISIS is emotionally satisfying. It has the appearance of 'doing something' (when everybody agrees 'something must be done') and of 'striking back' (when everybody wants to strike ISIS). But he has a duty to put emotion aside and judge the situation according to the facts on the ground – the facts as they are, not as he would have them. There is nothing to indicate that Britain's joining the 'bomb Syria' party will do anything much to solve the problems there – and much to indicate it will potentially make matters worse.

Put bluntly, if the west bombing the middle-east was the way to peace, the middle-east would be the most peaceful place on Earth. It isn't. No peace is possible without a political settlement that has been arrived at by and enjoys the support of, the peoples of the region.

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*Note: this post represents the views of the author, and not those of Democratic Audit or the LSE. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.*

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**Sean Swan** is a Lecturer in Political Science at Gonzaga University, Washington State, in the USA. He is the author of [Official Irish Republicanism, 1962 to 1972](#).