



PARLIAMENTARY LABOUR PARTY

PLP Briefing

SO24 debate - Syria

Tuesday 11 October 2016

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Top Lines:

- With the innocent civilians of Aleppo living in a modern hell, and their situation getting more desperate by the day, we need an ever more urgent and concerted effort by the international community to end the violence on all sides, institute and maintain a UN-led ceasefire, and create safe corridors so vital aid can be delivered.
- If deliberately-targeted, attacks on civilian targets or humanitarian aid convoys, whether by Russian or Syrian forces, are clear war crimes for which there can be no excuse, and for which they must be held to account.
- But anger and recrimination over those acts will not stop the suffering in Aleppo or bring relief to its people, so as difficult as it is, we need all sides to get back around the negotiating table as soon as possible, calm the rhetoric, and start afresh on the hard work of securing a ceasefire, isolating the Jihadist extremists, opening safe channels for humanitarian aid to besieged areas, and negotiating a lasting peace.
- In particular, we would urge the government to give the UK's support to the proposal from the UN's Syria Envoy Steffan de Mistura to ensure a safe escort from Aleppo for fighters belonging to Jabhat Fateh al-Sham to remove one clear obstacle from the chances of securing a lasting ceasefire in the city.

Lines on the wider fight against Daesh:

- Labour welcomes the progress that has been made in the fight against Daesh and other Jihadist groups, but more must be done. We must restrict their funding, their supply of arms, their trade, and infrastructure, and clamp down on the individuals and institutions who are providing them.
- Labour voted for airstrikes against Daesh in Iraq in 2014. This action is taken at the request of the Iraqi government in line with international law. Our policy has not changed.
- Our thoughts are with our brave armed forces serving their country in operations over Syria, and we will continue to hold the Government to maintain diplomatic efforts to bring an end to the Syrian civil war.

Lines on the refugee crisis:

- The refugee crisis that Europe currently faces is the largest since the end of the second world war. There are more displaced people in the world now than there have been at any time in recorded history. Thousands of people have died making perilous journeys across the Mediterranean and in other places around the world.
- As an advanced, democratic, civilised nation, we have a duty to reach out the hand of humanity, support and friendship. We should also recognise that a disproportionate burden has been placed on Syria's neighbours, particularly Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey.
- Labour will continue to press the government to provide more funding to local councils across the UK to meet the long-term costs of supporting child refugees and to encourage Labour Councils to offer resettlement and support for those fleeing the conflict in Syria.

Background:

1. The Syrian Civil War

- Anti-government protests in Syria began on 14 March 2011, in Deraa, in the south of the country, following the arrest and torture of a group of teenagers who had painted revolutionary slogans on a school wall.
- Security forces opened fire on demonstrators, killing several and triggering nationwide protests against President Bashar Al-Assad. By July 2011, hundreds of thousands had taken to the streets, and opposition supporters eventually began to take up arms.
- In the midst of the Arab Spring, there was reason to believe that the Assad regime would fall quickly, as had Mubarak in Egypt, Qaddafi in Libya and Bin Ali in Tunisia. Former UK ambassador to Damascus, Simon Collis, confidently predicted this would happen.
- However, without a clear united force against Assad, the rise of Daesh, and the entering into the conflict of regional and world powers, the situation has become increasingly multi-dimensional, and locked in stalemate. At least 14 nations, including all the permanent members of the UN Security Council bar China, are now militarily engaged in Syria.
- It is estimated that between 250,000 and 470,000 have been killed in the conflict to date, and around 4.5m have fled the country. The UN has also estimated that 4.6 million civilians are trapped in both besieged and hard to reach areas.
- Most notably in Aleppo, where mixed rebel groups hold the east of the city and the Assad regime holds the west, successive attempts by both sides to encircle and besiege each other have left hundreds of thousands of civilians in the city trapped without running water, electricity, medical support, or humanitarian relief.

2. The US-Russian ceasefire

- After 10 months of negotiations, US Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov announced on 10 September that they had reached an agreement on a temporary ceasefire, due to coincide with the Eid festival, on the following basis:
 - Assad's forces and the Russians would suspend their air strikes on territory controlled by non-Jihadist rebel forces, effectively grounding themselves;
 - Those rebel forces would take action, with US support, to isolate themselves from Jihadist forces, Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, formerly known as the al-Nusra Front;
 - Once isolated, the US and Russia would coordinate on air strikes against Jabhat Fateh al-Sham and Daesh; and

- Meanwhile, humanitarian corridors would be opened for the relief of civilians in Aleppo and other besieged areas.
- In response to criticism of the proposed military cooperation with Russia, John Kerry said: *“Going after Nusra is not a concession to anybody. It is profoundly in the interests of the United States to target...Nusra, an organization that is opposed to a peaceful transition, an organization that is an enemy of the legitimate opposition, an organization that is currently plotting attacks beyond Syria’s borders, including against the United States.”*
- However, the ceasefire was violated almost immediately, before being fatally undermined by the attack on an aid convoy entering East Aleppo by Russian/Syrian forces, and then definitively buried by their ongoing, devastating assault on East Aleppo.
- During the early phase of the ceasefire, US planes also accidentally attacked Syrian ground forces advancing on Daesh positions at the Al-Tharda mountain, killing more than 60 and injuring hundreds. Assad called the attack ‘definitely intentional’, and Syrian state television said it was evidence that the US was secretly supporting Daesh.

3. Defence Select Committee report

- A Defence Select Committee report, *“UK Military Operations in Syria and Iraq”* (21 September 2016), gives the most up-to-date, independent analysis of the effect of the UK’s intervention in Syria, and the strategy that underpins it.
- They said it is *“disappointing”* that the MoD has been unable to provide the Select Committee with full statistical analysis of UK airstrikes in Syria, which the Committee requested. Although the MoD’s rationale for doing so may be sound, their inability to provide detail may still undermine the Government’s assertion that *“the bombing campaign in Syria is in support of credible moderate ground forces”*.
- On this basis, the Committee recommends that: *“If the Government is to continue to justify and validate its policy of airstrikes in Syria, it should provide the necessary detail on what is being targeted. We therefore recommend that the MoD put this information, as far as possible, into the public domain so that realistic judgements on the effectiveness of the UK’s air operations can be made.”*
- It says it is *“much less certain”* that the UK’s efforts in Syria are succeeding, in comparison to efforts in Iraq – this is because the goals in Syria are too ambitious to be realised by military means alone; that is, to not only defeat Daesh, but to also establish a government that will be *“neither authoritarian and repressive, on the one hand, nor Islamist and extreme, on the other”*. To this end, the Committee recommends the Government outlines *“exactly how it intends to help ensure that political reform is achieved and what action it is planning to take to keep it in step with the military campaign”*.

4. Steffan De Mistura plan

- The UN's Syria Envoy Steffan de Mistura last week appealed directly to the forces of Jabhat Fateh al-Sham to leave the city of Aleppo *"because 1,000 of you are deciding the destiny of the 275,000 civilians."*
- The US estimates there are around 800 Jabhat fighters left in Aleppo; de Mistura says 1,000; Russia says 3,000, although it is in the latter's interests to talk up their presence as a pretext for the bombardment of East Aleppo.
- De Mistura offered to physically accompany the terrorists out of the city in order to remove that pretext, and provide the basis for restoring the Kerry/Lavrov ceasefire. He said: *If you did decide to leave, in dignity, and with your weapons, to [Jabhat stronghold] Idleb, or anywhere you wanted to go, I personally, I am ready physically to accompany you".*
- There are precedents for this plan: Jabhat forces were escorted out of Old Homs city in May 2014, and from Homs city in May 2015.
- Sergey Lavrov said on Friday the proposal deserved further exploration: *"We are ready to support this approach for the sake of Aleppo and will be ready to urge the Syrian government to agree".* The US and the UK are yet to comment on the UN proposal.

5. Calls for war crimes charges against Russia and Syria

- Following the Russian veto of a Franco-Spanish UN Security Council resolution calling for an end to the bombing in East Aleppo, France is now pressing for Russia to face war crimes charges at the International Criminal Court for their role in the bombardment.
- *"These are people who today are the victims of war crimes,"* said President Hollande. *"Those that commit these acts will have to face up to their responsibility, including in the ICC. If I do receive him [Mr Putin, due to visit Hollande next week], I will tell him that it is unacceptable. It could also seriously affect Russia's image."*
- French Foreign Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault had previously said France was working to find a way for the ICC prosecutor to launch an investigation into attacks on rebel-held eastern Aleppo, one difficulty being that neither Russia nor Syria belongs to the ICC.
- Last week US Secretary of State John Kerry also called for war crimes charges, saying Russian and Syrian government attacks on hospitals were *"beyond the accidental"* and part of a deliberate strategy.
- Commenting on September's attack on the aid convoy entering Aleppo, Boris Johnson has also said: *"We should be looking at whether or not that targeting is done in the knowledge that those are wholly innocent civilian targets. That is a war crime."*

6. Latest humanitarian situation in Aleppo

- The United Nations latest summary of the humanitarian crisis in Aleppo (compiled last week) is as follows:
 - *“Access to potable water remains limited despite service resumption of one of the water stations and repairs of water network”;*
 - *“Civilian casualties reported in both parts of the city despite a limited reduction in the number of airstrikes”;*
 - *“Medical items, such as anaesthetics, IV fluids, ICU supplies, surgery and trauma supplies are urgently needed in eastern Aleppo.”;*
 - *“Distribution of remaining food rations will be split in half to increase coverage”.*

Suggested questions:

- Does the government support the proposal from the UN's Syria Envoy Steffan de Mistura to ensure a safe escort from Aleppo for fighters belonging to Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, formerly the al-Nusra front, in order to remove one clear obstacle from the chances of securing a lasting ceasefire in the city?
- Will the government urge their American counterparts to support the De Mistura plan, as a basis for getting the Russian government back around the negotiating table?
- By what process does the government envisage those responsible for violations of International Humanitarian Law in Aleppo and more widely in Syria being brought to account for those violations?
- The Defence Select Committee has said that the UK's goals in Syria are too ambitious to be realised by military means alone; that is to establish a government that will be *"neither authoritarian and repressive, on the one hand, nor Islamist and extreme, on the other"*. What is the government's strategy to square that circle?
- What is the government's current assessment of the numbers of non-Jihadist rebel fighters in Syria, and the extent to which they are trained and equipped to play the role for which the government told this House they are capable?
- What impact has the fighting in Aleppo and elsewhere had on the number of non-Jihadist rebel fighters in Syria, especially in light of recent evidence that Russian airstrikes have systematically targeted groups like the Free Syrian Army?
- What progress has been made with coalition efforts to expand the number of non-extremist Sunni opposition fighters in northern Syria in order to reduce the dependence of the ground campaign on Kurdish forces?
- It is incumbent on all sides in this conflict to avoid civilian casualties from airstrikes, especially when we are holding others to account for the casualties they have inflicted. The government has said all 'credible' reports of civilian casualties from UK airstrikes will be investigated; how many such investigations has the government carried out?