

On 3 December 2015 Parliament voted in favour of David Cameron's motion to allow UK airstrikes over Syria. I want to explain to you why I voted against these proposals.

It is important that we understand exactly what we were voting about; so-called Islamic State, or Daesh as I choose to refer to them, is a terrorist organisation that is not interested in any negotiated settlement. Their sole reason for existing is to provoke conflict with countries like our own and to destroy everything that we value. The only thing we have that they want is money and our lives. The only way to destroy this organisation is to undermine them through tackling the economic and social factors on which they prey to sustain their activities and gain recruits. The hard core will only be stopped by force.

They are responsible for actions that have horrified every decent minded person: the mass murder of prisoners including Yazidi women in Sinjar who were deemed too old to be sold into sexual slavery, murdering gay men by tying them up and throwing them off tall buildings, beheadings and crucifixions and leaving bodies hanging in public places for people, including children, to see. I want this terror organisation dealt with, but it must be done in a way that will not result in the opposite outcome which will offer them a propaganda victory that enables them to attract more young men and women to travel to Syria to join them.

So I am not opposed to taking military action that will destroy Daesh. The question before us on Wednesday was whether extending the UK bombing from Iraq to Syria was likely to reduce, or increase, that threat and what was the risk to the thousands of Syrians living in Raqqa?

Voting to take military action is one of the hardest decisions that an MP has to take. I know that everyone who voted yesterday, whether they were in favour or against military action, would have given this matter very serious attention and would have weighed up the consequences of military action before they made their final decision.

No one in the House of Commons has any sympathy for Daesh. Those that chose to oppose the government, like myself, did so because we came to the conclusion that David Cameron had not thought his strategy through and that we were repeating the mistakes made when we invaded Iraq without a long-term plan.

That is why the Prime Minister's comments that anyone who disagrees with his point of view is a "terrorist sympathiser" was so outrageous. David Cameron was given plenty of opportunities to apologise for this comment but chose not to, which I believe was a huge misjudgement.

It is also why I objected to the bullying and harassment of some Labour MPs – some of which appears to have involved Party members. The vile attempts to

intimidate MPs over the last few days targeted at those who had decided to support military action have no place in our party. I welcome people taking the time to contact me to tell me their views and I understand that this is such a serious issue that when people disagree with me they may feel they cannot support me in the future. But the threats and abuse that some of my colleagues had to endure went too far.

Unfortunately the Prime Minister turned down requests from MPs to devote two days instead of one to debate this very grave issue. As a consequence MPs ended up having only three minutes to speak; nowhere near enough time to properly consider the implications of this momentous decision.

I was finally called to speak near the very end of the debate. I expressed my scepticism over the Prime Minister's claim that there were 70,000 "moderate" Syrian ground troops on the ground ready to attack Daesh's forces supported by allied airstrikes. I cannot find any reliable source outside of government circles that agrees with that assessment. People from all sides of this debate agree that Daesh cannot be defeated by a bombing campaign alone. Without ground forces everyone seems to accept that the bombing will have little impact on Daesh and instead of pushing the organisation back it could make matters worse.

I also highlighted the need for the fairer treatment of the Sunni minority in Iraq. I believe that this has been one of the key driving forces leading to the rise of Daesh. Dealing with this issue is more crucial than any bombs, but it received little attention in the recent debate.

Had I had more time I would have raised other concerns:

- UN Resolution 2249 calls on all states to take "all necessary measures to prevent and suppress terrorist acts" However, it follows from this that measures taken must be effective in eradicating the threat of Daesh and I remain unconvinced that the action proposed will do this.
- The Prime Minister's strategy relies heavily on the 70,000 moderate-minded members of the Free Syrian Army he says are ready to fight Daesh on the ground. However this army is in fact made up of over 100 different groups within their ranks, some made up of thousands of men and others only a few hundred. They have no leader or overall command structure. The only thing that unites these groups is their desire to depose President Assad. There is nothing that remotely indicates that they are prepared to move from their home territories to help us defeat Daesh.
- There is a currently an enormous bombing campaign taking place without our involvement during which thousands of sorties have flown. There is no shortage of planes to fly, but there is a shortage of targets. This bombardment has failed in its

stated aim of “degrading” or decapitating Daesh, or to prevent terrorism coming to the heart of one of Europe’s capital cities. The longer that Daesh are able to thwart our activities the more likely they will be able to attract further recruits.

- I also wanted to highlight that the choice facing us was not “take military action or do nothing”. Reports from Syria describe a functioning economy in Daesh-held territory, underpinned by their illegal smuggling of oil across their borders. Much more needs to be done to tackle this trade, most of which crosses the Turkish and Kurdish borders.
- We also need our ally and fellow Nato member Turkey to stop attacking the Kurdish forces that are fighting Daesh and do a lot more to seal their borders to prevent people moving across the border to support the terrorists. We also need to see other countries in the region – especially Saudi Arabia – to show that they are truly opposed to Daesh by shutting down economic activity between them and Daesh. We have tolerated the Saudi’s activities for too long and we should make it clear we are not going to do so any more.
- I also believe that the treatment of the Sunni community in Iraq has helped to support Daesh, particularly in the running of the economy and public services. As a consequence of the De-Ba'athification of Iraq which took place after the war (where many experienced engineers, technicians, soldiers and others were prevented from working in the public sector), many Sunnis are now helping keep the economy and public infrastructure running in Daesh-held territories. In the final days of the Taliban in Afghanistan it was the deterioration of these parts of people’s daily lives that finally caused people to turn against them. We have to make this work in Syria. A key part to achieving this is to get the government in Iraq to engage with the Sunni community and end the discrimination that existed under the previous regime.

Like everyone who took part in yesterday’s debate, I want to defeat the terrorists. However, I do not believe this strategy will achieve this and so I could not support the government on Wednesday. In some ways I hope I am wrong and that events show the government’s strategy to be the right one. However, I fear that this is not going to be the outcome and that we will gradually get drawn further into the conflict.