

Syria: refugees and counter-terrorism - Prime Minister's statement

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Introduction

Mr Speaker, before making a statement on counter-terrorism, let me update the House about what we are doing to help address the migration crisis in Europe and, in particular, to help the thousands of refugees who are fleeing from Syria.

This issue is clearly the biggest challenge facing countries across Europe today. More than 300,000 people have crossed the Mediterranean to Europe so far this year. These people came from different countries under different circumstances. Some are economic migrants in search of a better life in Europe. Many are refugees fleeing conflict. And it is vital to distinguish between the two.

In recent weeks we have seen a vast increase in the numbers arriving across the Eastern Mediterranean from Turkey – more than 150,000 people have attempted that route since January. The majority of these are Syrian refugees – fleeing the terror of Assad and ISIL,

which has seen more than 11 million people driven from their homes.

Mr Speaker, the whole country has been deeply moved by the heart-breaking images we have seen over the past few days. And it is absolutely right that Britain should fulfil its moral responsibility to help those refugees just as we have done so proudly throughout our history.

Find out more about how the [UK government is helping to address the Syrian refugee crisis](#).

But in doing so we must use our head and our heart by pursuing a comprehensive approach that tackles the causes of the problem as well as the consequences.

That means helping to stabilise countries where the refugees are coming from; seeking a solution to the crisis in Syria; pushing for the formation of a new unity government in Libya; busting the criminal gangs who are profiting from this human tragedy and playing our part in saving lives in the Mediterranean, where our Royal Navy has now rescued over 6,700 people.

Mr Speaker, Britain is doing and will continue to do all of these things.

- We are using our aid budget to alleviate poverty and suffering in the countries where these people are coming.
- We are the only major country in the world that has kept our promise to spend 0.7% of our GDP on aid.
- We are already the second largest bilateral donor of aid to the Syrian conflict, including providing over 18 million food rations, giving 1.6 million access to clean water and providing education to a quarter of a million children.

And [last week we announced a further £100 million, taking our total contribution to over £1 billion](#) – that is the UK's largest ever response to a humanitarian crisis. Sixty million pounds of this additional funding will go to help Syrians still in Syria.

The rest will go to neighbouring countries – to Turkey, to Jordan, to Lebanon where Syrian refugees now account for one-quarter of the population. And over half of this new funding will support children, with a particular priority on those who have been orphaned or separated from their families.

Mr Speaker, no other European country has come close to this level of support. Without Britain's aid to these camps, the numbers attempting the dangerous journey to Europe would be very much higher. And as my Rt Hon Friend the Chancellor said yesterday, we will now go much further in the spending review, significantly reshaping the way we use our aid budget to serve our national interest. We will invest even more in tackling the causes of the crisis in the Middle East and North Africa. And we will hold much larger sums in reserve to respond to acute humanitarian crises as they happen.

Turning to the question of refugees, Britain already works with the UN to deliver resettlement programmes and we will accept thousands more under these existing schemes. We have already provided sanctuary to more than 5,000 Syrians in Britain and have introduced a specific resettlement scheme, alongside those we already have, to help those Syrian refugees particularly at risk.

But given the scale of the crisis and the suffering of the Syrian people it is right that we should do much more. So Mr Speaker, we are proposing that Britain should resettle up to 20,000 Syrian refugees over the rest of this Parliament. In doing so we will continue to show the world that this is a country of extraordinary compassion always standing up for our values and helping those in need.

So Mr Speaker, Britain will play its part alongside our other European partners. But because we are not part of the EU's borderless Schengen agreement or its relocation initiative, Britain is able to decide its own approach. So we will continue with our approach of taking refugees from the camps and from elsewhere in Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon. This provides refugees with a more direct and safe route to the UK, rather than risking the hazardous journey to Europe which has tragically cost so many lives.

We will continue to use the established UNHCR process for identifying and resettling refugees and when they arrive here we will grant them a 5 year humanitarian protection visa. And we will significantly expand the criteria we use for our existing Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation scheme.

As we do so we will recognise that children have been particularly badly affected by the crisis in Syria. Mr Speaker, in most cases the interests of children are best met in the region where they can remain close to surviving family members. But in cases where the advice of the UNHCR is that their needs should be met by resettlement here in the UK, we will ensure that vulnerable children, including orphans, will be a priority.

Mr Speaker, over recent days we have seen councils and our devolved administrations coming forward to express their willingness to do more to take Syrian refugees. This has reflected a wider generosity from families and communities across our country and I commend in particular the Archbishop of Canterbury for the offer made by the Church of England.

My Rt Hon Friends, the Home Secretary and the Communities Secretary, will now work intensively with local authorities and the devolved administrations to put in place the necessary arrangements to house and support the refugees that we resettle. And the Home Secretary will update the House on these plans next week.

Finally, on this part of the statement, and in full accordance with internationally agreed rules, we will also ensure that the full cost of supporting thousands of Syrian refugees in the UK will be met through our aid spending for the first year, easing the burden on local communities.

Mr Speaker, this will be a truly national effort and I know the whole House will come together in supporting these refugees in their hour of need.

Counter-terrorism

Mr Speaker, turning to our national security: I would like to update the House on action taken this summer to protect our country from a terrorist attack.

Mr Speaker, with the rise of ISIL, we know the terrorist threats to our country are growing. In 2014 there were 15 ISIL-related attacks around the world. This year there have already been 150 such attacks, including the appalling tragedies in Tunisia in which 31 Britons lost their lives. And I can tell the House that our police and security services have stopped at least 6 different attempts to attack the UK in the last 12 months alone.

Mr Speaker, the threat picture facing Britain in terms of Islamist extremist violence is more acute today than ever before. In stepping up our response to meet this threat, we have developed a comprehensive counter-terrorism strategy that seeks to prevent and disrupt plots against this country at every stage.

It includes new powers to stop suspects travelling. It includes powers to enable our police and our security services to apply for stronger locational constraints on those in the UK who pose a risk. It addresses the root cause of the threat – the poisonous ideology of Islamist extremism – by taking on all forms of extremism, not just violent extremism.

We have pursued Islamist terrorists through the courts and the criminal justice system. Since 2010 over 800 people have been arrested and over 140 successfully prosecuted. And our approach includes acting overseas to tackle the threat at source with British aircraft delivering nearly 300 air strikes over Iraq and our airborne intelligence and surveillance assets have assisted our coalition partners with their operations over Syria.

As part of this counter-terrorism strategy, as I have said before, if there is a direct threat to the British people and we are able to stop it by taking immediate action, then as Prime Minister, I will always be prepared to take that action and that's the case whether the threat is emanating from Libya, Syria or from anywhere else.

Mr Speaker, in recent weeks it has been reported that 2 ISIL fighters of British nationality who had been plotting attacks against the UK and other countries have been killed in airstrikes. Both Junaid Hussain and Reyaad Khan, were British nationals based in Syria who were involved in actively recruiting ISIL sympathisers and seeking to orchestrate specific and barbaric attacks against the West, including directing a number of planned terrorist attacks right here in Britain, such as plots to attack high profile public commemorations, including those taking place this summer.

We should be under no illusion. Their intention was the murder of British citizens. So on this occasion we ourselves took action. Today I can inform the House that in an act of self-defence and after meticulous planning Reyaad Khan was killed in a precision air strike carried out on 21 August by an RAF remotely piloted aircraft while he was travelling in a vehicle in the area of Raqqah in Syria.

In addition to Reyaad Khan who was the target of the strike, 2 ISIL associates were also killed, 1 of whom – Ruhul Amin, has been identified as a UK national. They were ISIL fighters and I can confirm there were no civilian casualties.

Mr Speaker, we took this action because there was no alternative. In this area, there is no government we can work with. We have no military on the ground to detain those preparing plots. And there was nothing to suggest that Reyaad Khan would ever leave Syria or desist from his desire to murder us at home. So we had no way of preventing his planned attacks on our country without taking direct action.

The US administration has also confirmed that Junaid Hussain was killed in an American airstrike on 24 August in Raqqah.

With these issues of national security and with current prosecutions ongoing, the House will appreciate that there are limits on the details I can provide.

However, Mr Speaker, let me set out for the House the legal basis for the action we took the processes we followed and the implications of this action on our wider strategy in countering the threat of ISIL.

Legal basis for action

First, I am clear that the action we took was entirely lawful. The Attorney General was consulted and was clear there would be a clear legal basis for action in international law. We were exercising the UK's inherent right to self-defence. There was clear evidence of the individuals in question planning and directing armed attacks against the UK. These were part of a series of actual and foiled attempts to attack the UK and our allies.

And in the prevailing circumstances in Syria, the airstrike was the only feasible means of effectively disrupting the attacks planned and directed by this individual. So it was necessary and proportionate for the individual self-defence of the UK.

The United Nations Charter requires members to inform the President of the Security Council of activity conducted in self-defence. And today the UK Permanent Representative to the United Nations is writing to the President of the Security Council to do just that.

Process

Turning to the process, as I said to the House in September last year: “it is important to reserve the right that if there were a critical British national interest at stake or there were the need to act to prevent a humanitarian catastrophe, you could act immediately and explain to the House of Commons afterwards.”

Mr Speaker, our intelligence agencies identified the direct threat to the UK from this individual. They informed me and other senior ministers of this threat. At a meeting of the most senior members of the National Security Council, we agreed that should the right

opportunity arise, then the military should take action. The Attorney General attended the meeting and confirmed there was a legal basis for action. And on that basis, the Defence Secretary authorised the operation.

The strike was conducted according to specific military rules of engagement which always comply with international law and the principles of proportionality and military necessity. The military assessed the target location and chose the optimum time to minimise the risk of civilian casualties. This was a sensitive operation to prevent a very real threat to our country. And I have come to the House today to explain in detail what has happened and to answer questions about it.

ISIL in Syria

Mr Speaker, I want to be clear that this strike was not part of coalition military action against ISIL in Syria – it was a targeted strike to deal with a clear, credible and specific terrorist threats to our country at home.

The position with regard to the wider conflict with ISIL in Syria has not changed.

As the House knows, I believe there is a strong case for the UK taking part in air strikes as part of the international coalition to target ISIL in Syria as well as Iraq. And I believe that case only grows stronger with the growing number of terrorist plots being directed or inspired by ISIL's core leadership in Raqqah.

But I have been absolutely clear that the government will return to this House for a separate vote if we propose to join coalition strikes in Syria.

Conclusion

Mr Speaker, my first duty as Prime Minister is to keep the British people safe. That is what I will always do. There was a terrorist directing murder on our streets and no other means to stop him.

This government does not for one moment take these decisions lightly.

But I am not prepared to stand here in the aftermath of a terrorist attack on our streets and have to explain to the House why I did not take the chance to prevent it, when I could have done.

That is why I believe our approach is right.

And I commend this statement to the House.

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