

“Deeper engagement, greater responsibility” Civilian Protection in Syria

Briefing document
29 October 2015

Facts and figures

12.2 Million

People are in need of humanitarian assistance in Syria

180,000

Civilians are thought to have been killed in the Syrian civil war

More than
50%

Of the Syrian population is displaced

7.6 Million

Internally displaced people inside Syria's borders due to the violence

4.1 Million

Syrians have fled the country

Only
8%

Of Syrian refugees in Europe want to remain indefinitely - the huge majority wish to return home

In situations where a state manifestly fails to protect its citizens from the gravest crimes - crimes against humanity, ethnic cleansing, war crimes, and genocide - the UK has a responsibility to act. In Syria this threshold has long been met; the Assad regime is committing war crimes and crimes against humanity against its own civilian population.

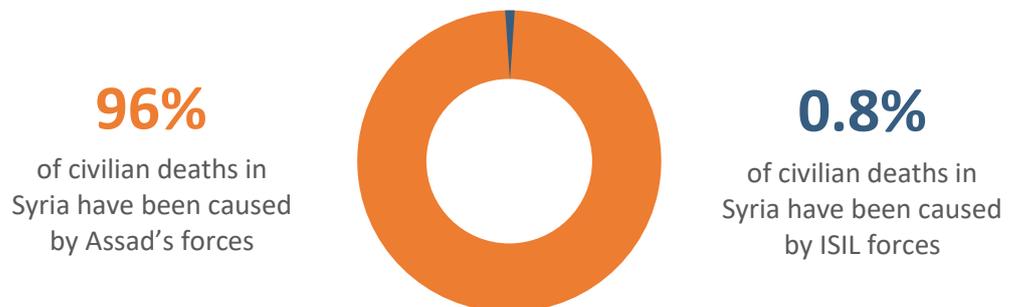
The so-called Islamic State (or ISIL) is suspected of committing genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and ethnic cleansing against communities of all religions and creeds in Syria and Iraq.

Like Bosnia and Rwanda, Syria will be remembered as a humanitarian crisis where civilian groups were purposefully targeted for destruction by their own state: As with Bosnia and Rwanda, the failure (or reluctance) of the international community to identify the dominant perpetrator is inhibiting effective international policy responses, to the detriment of the Syrian people.

Whilst there are numerous actors engaging in the conflict there are two primary aggressors that are explicitly targeting civilians in Syria: The Syrian government and ISIL. Both are suspected of carrying out mass atrocity crimes (see The International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [reports](#)).

There are no easy answers in Syria and the conflict there is becoming increasingly bound to Iraq's fight against ISIL. Furthermore, Syria is at risk of becoming a global proxy war involving Russia, Iran, the US, the UK and many other state powers.

The complexity of the situation does not mean that doing nothing is the right thing to do.



5 principles for a responsible Syria policy:

1. **Responsibility to protect** civilians at risk must be the driving force
2. **Legitimacy** must be sought from the Syrian people and international community
3. **Dialogue** with all actors is essential
4. **Reconciliation** efforts between communities must begin as soon as possible
5. **Justice** for victims must be pursued

5 objectives of a responsible Syria policy:

1. Halt the indiscriminate barrel bombing of civilians by the Assad regime
2. Protect civilians at risk from ISIL and Syrian government forces
3. Alleviate the acute humanitarian crisis in Syria
4. Create conditions for dialogue and peace negotiations
5. Begin preparations for post-conflict framework for peace

Global diplomacy

The primacy of the United Nations, as the sole international organisation with universal membership and legitimacy, must be acknowledged and respected, and efforts at the UN will continue to play a crucial role. However, disagreement among the permanent members of the UN Security Council on how best to approach the conflict has prevented the international community from acting to protect civilians. The decisions by Russia and China to employ their veto power as has repeatedly closed down diplomatic discussions and stymied efforts to bring an end to the violence through due process. The Council's deadlock has undermined its credibility and damaged the UN's international standing. Legitimacy for any deeper engagement in Syria should be sought from both the Syrian people and the region, and should be used to put pressure on Council members to come to an agreement on a strong resolution to protect civilians.

- It is unlikely that military action on any side will bring a solution to the crisis; diplomatic efforts therefore remain a crucial component in the pursuit of peace
- The UK should make proper use of its position as a permanent member of the UN Security Council to encourage, facilitate and broker difficult diplomatic negotiations

A UNSC Resolution on ISIL: The UK needs to work with all members of the UN Security Council in order to draft a credible resolution for combatting ISIL that prioritises the protection of civilians in Syria and Iraq. Four of the five permanent members are already taking military action against ISIL and the UK should use its position to broker a workable and robust resolution as a matter of priority.

Humanitarian priorities: The UK should redouble its efforts to negotiate a UN Security Council Resolution on implementing and strengthening existing agreements to improve humanitarian access in Syria. The UK must continue to provide support to refugees, including but not limited to financial support to those in the affected region in partnership with host countries.

UK engagement in Syria

If Parliament commits to deepening the UK's engagement in Syria, Parliament must also acknowledge that in so doing the UK's responsibility towards the Syrian people increases. If the UK deepens its engagement in Syria, it must commit to providing long-term support for Syria as the country rebuilds.

- Deeper engagement must be accompanied by an increase in diplomatic and humanitarian efforts
- The primary objective must be civilian protection and therefore to halt the indiscriminate aerial bombing of civilians by the Assad regime
- Deeper engagement in Syria risks escalating the conflict and deepening regional sectarian divides
- International humanitarian law must be respected
- Legitimacy for any strategy must be sought from the Syrian people and the international community to help to ease the deadlock in UN Security Council

Proposals for safe zone(s): While many Syrian NGOs support the proposal and have themselves long called for the creation of safe zones, further clarification is needed. The massacre of 9,000 men and boys under the watch of the United Nations in Srebrenica serves as a tragic warning from history that no safe zone can be guaranteed without the political will to protect.

- How will safe zones be created?
- Who will be allowed to seek refuge there?
- Will they be demilitarised?
- Who will protect them and with what mandate?

Proposals for no fly zone or no bombing zone: Either would save lives, preserve humanitarian law, and assist the peace process however it remains unclear if a policy would be enforced. While the concept of a no bombing zone would have powerful moral legitimacy, without the will to respond to violations impact would be rhetorical.

Long-term engagement the responsibility to help rebuild Syria:

Any strategy for Syria must be accompanied with a framework for peace, developed by Syrian stakeholders, assisted by the international community.

- A mass atrocity and conflict prevention focus must be applied to any long-term Syrian policy
- Mediation, reconciliation and inclusivity should be integrated into any post-conflict settlement
- Plans for post-conflict justice and accountability need to be prioritised
- International development programmes aimed at addressing underlying identity-based divisions are essential to lasting peace.

Lessons to learn - Changes to make:

The UK has no clear policy on atrocity prevention and the protection of civilians. The absence of an explicit commitment to the protection of civilians from atrocity crimes inhibited a strong UK response to the threat the Assad regime posed to Syrian civilians early on in the revolution.

There are simple ways to strengthen the UK's toolkit:

- Political parties can appoint a spokesperson for civilian protection / the prevention of mass atrocities
- Convene an APPG for the protection of civilians from mass atrocity crimes
- Commit to integrating Britain's responsibility to protect civilians from mass atrocity crimes into primary policy streams such as the Building Stability Overseas Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review
- Continue to support and work to strengthen proposals for the restraint of veto powers by UN Security Council permanent members in contexts of mass atrocity crimes
- Launch a cross-Government review to examine how to strengthen capacity, coordination & understanding of atrocity prevention across Whitehall