

House of Commons Hansard Debates for 26 Sep 2014 (pt 0001)

publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmhansrd/cm140926/debtext/140926-0001.htm

26 Sep 2014 : Column 1255

House of Commons

Friday 26 September 2014

The House met at half-past Ten o'clock

Prayers

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

Sittings of the house

Ordered,

That this House, at its rising this day, do adjourn until Monday 13 October 2014.—
(Harriett Baldwin.)

business of the house

Ordered,

That, at this day's sitting, the Speaker shall put the Questions necessary to dispose of proceedings on the Motion in the name of the Prime Minister relating to Iraq: Coalition against ISIL not later than 5.00pm; such Questions shall include the Questions on any Amendments selected by the Speaker which may then be moved; proceedings may continue, though opposed, after the moment of interruption; and Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply.—*(Harriett Baldwin.)*

Iraq: Coalition Against ISIL

10.35 am

The Prime Minister (Mr David Cameron): I beg to move,

That this House condemns the barbaric acts of ISIL against the peoples of Iraq including the Sunni, Shia, Kurds, Christians and Yazidi and the humanitarian crisis this is causing; recognises the clear threat ISIL poses to the territorial integrity of Iraq and the request from the Government of Iraq for military support from the international community and the specific request to the UK Government for such support; further recognises the threat ISIL poses to wider international security and the UK directly through its sponsorship of

terrorist attacks and its murder of a British hostage; acknowledges the broad coalition contributing to military support of the Government of Iraq including countries throughout the Middle East; further acknowledges the request of the Government of Iraq for international support to defend itself against the threat ISIL poses to Iraq and its citizens and the clear legal basis that this provides for action in Iraq; notes that this motion does not endorse UK air strikes in Syria as part of this campaign and any proposal to do so would be subject to a separate vote in Parliament; accordingly supports Her Majesty's Government, working with allies, in supporting the Government of Iraq in protecting civilians and restoring its territorial integrity, including the use of UK air strikes to support Iraqi, including Kurdish, security forces' efforts against ISIL in Iraq; notes that Her Majesty's Government will not deploy UK troops in ground combat operations; and offers its wholehearted support to the men and women of Her Majesty's armed forces.

The question before the House today is how we keep the British people safe from the threat posed by ISIL and, in particular, what role our armed forces should play in the international coalition to dismantle and ultimately destroy what President Obama has rightly called "this network of death".

26 Sep 2014 : Column 1256

There is no more serious an issue than asking our armed forces to put themselves in harm's way to protect our country, and I want to set out today why I believe that is necessary. If we are to do this, a series of questions must be answered. Is this in our national interest? In particular, is there a direct threat to the British people? Is there a comprehensive plan for dealing with this threat? Is the military element necessary? Is it necessary for us to take part in military action? Is it legal for us to take part? Will we be doing so with the support of local partners, and will doing this add up to a moral justification for putting the lives of British servicemen and women on the line? And above all, do we have a clear idea of what a successful outcome will look like, and are we convinced that our strategy can take us there?

I want to address each of those questions head on—first, our national interest. Is there a threat to the British people? The answer is yes. ISIL has already murdered one British hostage and is threatening the lives of two more. The first ISIL-inspired terrorist acts in Europe have already taken place, with, for instance, the attack on the Jewish museum in Brussels. Security services have disrupted six other known plots in Europe, as well as foiling a terrorist attack in Australia aimed at civilians, including British and American tourists.

ISIL is a terrorist organisation unlike those we have dealt with before. The brutality is staggering: beheadings, crucifixions, the gouging out of eyes, the use of rape as a weapon and the slaughter of children. All these things belong to the dark ages, but it is not just the brutality; it is backed by billions of dollars and has captured an arsenal of the most modern weapons.

In the space of a few months, ISIL has taken control of territory that is greater than the size of Britain and is making millions selling oil to the Assad regime. It has already attacked Lebanon and boasts of its designs right up to the Turkish border. This is not a threat on the far side of the world; left unchecked, we will face a terrorist caliphate on the shores of the Mediterranean and bordering a NATO member, with a declared and proven determination to attack our country and our people. This is not the stuff of fantasy; it is happening in front of us; and we need to face up to it.

Next, is there a clear, comprehensive plan? Yes. It starts at home with tough, uncompromising action to prevent attacks and hunt down those who are planning them. As the House knows, we are introducing new powers. These include strengthening our ability to seize passports and to stop suspects travelling, stripping British nationality from dual nationals and ensuring that airlines comply with our no-fly lists. And in all this, we are being clear about the cause of the terrorist threat we face. As I have said before, that means defeating the poisonous ideology of Islamist extremism, by tackling all forms of extremism, not just the violent extremists. So we are banning preachers of hate, proscribing organisations that incite terrorism and stopping people inciting hatred in our schools, universities and prisons.

Of course, some will say that any action we take will further radicalise young people. I have to say that that is a counsel of despair. The threat of radicalisation is already here. Young people have left our country to go and fight with these extremists. We must take action at home, but we must also have a comprehensive strategy to defeat these extremists abroad.

26 Sep 2014 : Column 1257

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): On a comprehensive strategy, there are two questions the Prime Minister has not put to himself: how long will this war last and when will mission creep start?

The Prime Minister: Let me answer that very directly: this mission will take not just months, but years, and I believe we have to be prepared for that commitment. The reason for that is that America, Britain and others are not—I think quite rightly—contemplating putting combat troops on the ground. There will be troops on the ground, but they will be Iraqi and Kurdish troops, and we should be supporting them in all the ways that I will describe.

In terms of mission creep, I will address very directly, later in my speech, why we are discussing what is happening in Iraq today and only that. That is the motion on the Order Paper.

Hazel Blears (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): The Prime Minister has said on a number of occasions in this House that we face a long-term generational struggle and the priority is to fight this poisonous ideology. Will he commit now to working with the mainstream,

moderate Muslim community in this country—who see these atrocities carried out in the name of their religion and utterly reject them—and to having a practical programme to make that happen?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely commit to doing that and we have to do it not just in Britain, but right around the world. We should be very clear that the cause of this problem is the poisonous narrative of Islamic extremism. Wherever there are broken states, conflict and civil wars, we see this problem arise, whether it is Boko Haram in Nigeria, al-Qaeda in Yemen or ISIL in Iraq and Syria. We need Muslims to reclaim their religion from these extremists. That is happening in our country and around the world. It was notable that President Obama, in his speech to the United Nations, singled out Muslims in Britain who are saying, “This is not being done in my name,” and we should praise those people.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): The Prime Minister places his trust in the Iraqi army. The problem is that, having caused this mess in Iraq, we armed the Iraqi army, they ran away and ISIL now has their arms. Is he seriously contending that by air strikes alone we can actually roll back ISIL, or is this gesture politics?

The Prime Minister: To be absolutely direct, I am not claiming that by air strikes alone we can roll back this problem. What this problem requires is a comprehensive strategy, including a well formed Iraqi Government and well formed Iraqi armed forces, because they in the end will be the ones who have to defeat this on the ground.

Where I disagree with my hon. Friend is on the cause of how this came about. As I have said, there is the background of Islamic extremism, but I would say that the two principal causes of this problem are the fact that in Syria Assad has been butchering his own people and acting as a recruiting sergeant for the extremists, and that in Iraq the Maliki Government did not represent all the people of Iraq. I thought that Ban Ki-moon, in one of the most powerful interventions I have heard him make, got it spot on when he said that missiles can

26 Sep 2014 : Column 1258

kill terrorists but it is good governance that will kill terrorism. We should have that thought front and back of mind as we debate this afternoon.

Mr John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Does the Prime Minister agree that the Iraqi Government need a political strategy to win over Sunnis and Kurds in their own country, and is he satisfied that they now know how to do it and will get full diplomatic support?

The Prime Minister: In answer to the first part of my right hon. Friend’s question, that is absolutely essential. A lot more needs to be done. I met Prime Minister al-Abadi in New York and discussed this very directly with him. We need to make sure that the Government in Iraq are not just supporting the Shi’a community, but bringing together Shi’a, Sunni and Kurd in a united country, with armed forces that are respected by every

part of the community. That has not happened yet, but it is happening and I think that President Obama was absolutely right to delay this action until we had an Iraqi Government with whom we can work as a good partner.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

The Prime Minister: I am going to make a little progress with my speech and then I will take several more interventions.

As I have said, we have to take action at home and abroad. As we take action abroad, it must involve using all the resources at our disposal. That means humanitarian efforts, which Britain is already leading, to help those displaced by ISIL's onslaught. It means diplomatic efforts to engage the widest possible coalition of countries in the region as part of this international effort. At the United Nations, we are leading the process of condemning ISIL, disrupting the flows of finance to ISIL and forging a global consensus about preventing the movement of foreign fighters. Vitally, and as I have just been saying, this strategy also involves political efforts to support the creation of a new and genuinely inclusive Government in Iraq and to bring about a transition of power in Syria that can lead to a new representative and accountable Government in Damascus so that they, too, can take the fight to ISIL. As one part of that comprehensive strategy, I believe that our military have an indispensable role to play. In a moment or two, I will say why, but first I will take an intervention from the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock).

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Prime Minister say more about the vital subject of trying to change the nature of government in Syria, and about Iran's potential role in that?

The Prime Minister: To be frank, what Syria needs is what Iraq needs: an inclusive, democratic Government that represents all of its people. We have had our strategy in that regard—backing the moderate Syrian opposition, the Syrian National Council, and working with others—but I do think that Iran has a role to play. I met President Rouhani in New York to discuss that and other issues, and Iran can play a role in helping to bring about better government in both Syria and Iraq. The jury is still out as to whether Iran will play that role, but we should certainly be encouraging it to do so.

26 Sep 2014 : Column 1259

Several hon. Members *rose*—

The Prime Minister: I will give way to my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt) and to my hon. Friend the Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron), and then I will make some progress.

Alistair Burt (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): I am sure that we are all grateful for the recall of Parliament and the opportunity to debate this matter. My right hon. Friend has mentioned Syria, and he has mentioned that the Kurdish peshmerga and the Iraqi army are on the ground fighting ISIL. Also fighting ISIL on the ground is the Free Syrian Army.

Given that last week the United States Congress voted to support the Free Syrian Army overtly with weapons, and given that the Free Syrian Army is conducting a ground war, which we are not prepared to do, will my right hon. Friend say whether we are looking again at the possibility of giving military hardware to the Free Syrian Army? It has the people, but it does not have the weaponry to take on Assad or ISIL. It has been attempting to do so for the past year, and it needs our help.

The Prime Minister: As my right hon. Friend knows, we have supported the Syrian National Coalition and the Free Syrian Army with advice, training, mentoring and non-lethal equipment, and I am not proposing a change to that today.

Let me address directly the issue of ISIL in Syria. I am very clear that ISIL needs to be destroyed in Syria as well as in Iraq. We support the action that the United States and five Arab states have taken in Syria, and I believe that there is a strong case for us to do more in Syria, but I did not want to bring a motion to the House today on which there was not consensus. I think it is better if our country can proceed on the basis of consensus. In this House, as I am sure we will hear in the debate today, there are many concerns about doing more in Syria, and I understand that. I do not believe that there is a legal barrier, because I think that the legal advice is clear that were we or others to act, there is a legal basis, but it is true to say that the Syrian situation is more complicated than the Iraqi situation. It is more complicated because of the presence of the brutal dictator Assad. It is more complicated because of the state of the civil war. We should be clear that we have a clear strategy for dealing with Syria, backing the official opposition, building it up as a counterpoint to Assad and working for a transition. As I have said, in the end, what Syria needs is what Iraq needs: a Government who can represent all of their people.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): Does the Prime Minister accept that without the Iraqi army being able to take and hold ground, there is a real risk that air strikes alone will not only prove ineffective but could become counter-productive, especially if civilian casualties mount and ISIL spins the story that it has withstood the might of the west and held its ground, which it has so far managed to do?

The Prime Minister: I would disagree with my hon. Friend on the basis that the air action that has already been taken by the Americans and, to a degree, by the French has already made a difference. Lives have been

26 Sep 2014 : Column 1260

saved. Christians, Yazidis and other minorities, who otherwise would be butchered, have been saved by that action. If my hon. Friend is asking me, “Do we need a better Iraqi army that is more capable on the ground?” Yes, of course we do, but the truth is that, because we, rightly, are not prepared to put our own combat troops on the ground, we should be working with the Iraqis and the Kurds so that they become more effective. However, we cannot wait for that and allow minorities and others to be butchered and the risk to our own country to increase, without taking action.

Several hon. Members rose—

The Prime Minister: Let me make some progress on why I believe military action is necessary before taking more interventions. Frankly, without it, I do not believe there is a realistic prospect of degrading and defeating ISIL. We should be frank: a military conflict is already taking place. ISIL has taken territory. It is butchering people in Iraq. Iraqi, including Kurdish, security forces are already fighting ISIL. We have to decide if we are going to support them and I believe that we should. If we are to beat these terrorists, it is vital that the international community does more to build the capability of the legitimate authorities fighting extremism.

Along with our European partners, as has been discussed in the House, we are playing our role, supplying equipment directly to the Kurdish forces. We are strengthening the resilience of military forces in Lebanon and Jordan and our Tornado and surveillance aircraft have already been helping with intelligence gathering and logistics to support American attacks on ISIL in Iraq. To be frank, and it is vital for the House to understand this, the Iraqi Government want more direct assistance. Earlier this week, the Iraqi Foreign Minister wrote to the UN Security Council requesting military assistance to support its actions. When I met Prime Minister Abadi in New York on Wednesday, he reiterated that request to me. In Iraq, the real work of destroying ISIL will be for the Iraqi security forces, but they need our military help and it is in our interest, and theirs, to give it.

Several hon. Members rose—

The Prime Minister: I give way to the former Secretary of State for Defence.

Mr Bob Ainsworth (Coventry North East) (Lab): There is a problem in Iraq, though, that we need to recognise. It is not just political and it is not just about capability. There needs to be a will from the Iraqi army to defend the Sunni areas of the country. In the Prime Minister's talks with the new Government, has he seen that change, which actually means that our air strikes will support a country that has the will to defend all its own people?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. That is the conversation we are having with the Iraqi Government. There is no doubt in my mind that this Iraqi Prime Minister is a change from the previous regime. They understand this point but frankly we should be tough in our interactions with them. They want our help. They want more training and more expertise. They want our counter-terrorism expertise to help them to defend against these appalling car bombs

26 Sep 2014 : Column 1261

in Baghdad. We should give them that help, but we should say as we give it to them, "This is conditional on you defending and protecting all your people, and that must include the Sunnis in Iraq as well."

Nadhim Zahawi (Stratford-on-Avon) (Con): The Kurdish President is on record as saying that the Kurds do not want British servicemen and women on the ground fighting the fight for them. What they need is better equipment, training and the air support. Did Prime Minister Abadi deliver a similar message to our Prime Minister? What is the situation vis-à-vis the Sunni tribes, because they need to play a role and to take the fight to ISIL, too?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is spot on. The Iraqi Prime Minister was very frank in his requests to me. He said clearly in New York, “We need your help to drive these people out of our country and indeed out of the world.” He was very frank about that. We are supplying equipment to the Kurds. We can do more to help the Iraqi security forces. As for the Sunni tribes, of course, we need them to help but they need to see that they can be part of a successful Iraq. That is why the involvement of other Arab countries is so important. There are particular countries that may be able to encourage the Sunni tribes to take this step.

Several hon. Members rose—

The Prime Minister: Let me give way to my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) and then I will make some progress.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I am glad that the Prime Minister seems to accept that air strikes alone cannot hope to be successful unless they are in close co-ordination with credible ground forces. The only ground forces he has mentioned so far are those of the Kurds and the Iraqis. What are the other Arab states proposing to do, because surely those ground forces have to be Sunni-Muslim ground forces and we need other Arab countries to supply them?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes an important point but we should tread carefully here. We are proposing to act at the request of the legitimate Iraqi Government. That Government are supposed to represent all their country—Shi’a, Sunni and Kurd. That country should be doing that, rather than relying on other countries to provide Sunni forces in order to deliver that effect.

It is important that we keep up the pressure, because it is the Iraqi Government who should be representing all their people, rather than getting proxies to do it for them.

Several hon. Members rose—

The Prime Minister: I will take more interventions, I promise, but I want to answer this question, which is whether it is necessary specifically for Britain to take part in this international action. Should we just leave it to others? I do not believe that is the right answer. The coalition needs our help, in particular with the vital work being done in terms of air strikes. Britain has unique assets that no other coalition ally can contribute:

26 Sep 2014 : Column 1262

the Brimstone precision missile, which minimises the risk of civilian casualties and which even the United States does not have; we have our unique surveillance and intelligence capabilities; and we have our highly professional forces, which are well used to working with their US counterparts. These are some of the reasons why President Obama made it clear to me that America wants Britain to join the air action in Iraq, which has now been under way for several weeks.

I believe it is also our duty to take part. This international operation is about protecting our people too, and protecting the streets of Britain should not be a task that we are prepared to subcontract entirely to other air forces of other countries, so it is right for us to act.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): Will the Prime Minister recognise that killing extremists does not kill their ideas? On the contrary—it can often feed their ideas, and for that reason the former MI6 head of counter-terrorism has said that getting Saudi Arabia and Iran around a negotiating table would be far more effective than bombing. Why are we not hearing far more from this Prime Minister about the political and diplomatic solutions to this situation, rather than reaching for the military solution, which could undermine them?

The Prime Minister: With respect to the hon. Lady, we are taking those diplomatic initiatives. My right hon. Friend the Defence Secretary has recently returned from Saudi Arabia; I am the first British Prime Minister in 35 years to meet an Iranian President. We need all those political and diplomatic moves to take place—they are absolutely vital—but in the end there is a part of this that requires a military solution. ISIL has to be defeated on the ground. That is principally the work of the Iraqi security forces, but we can play a role as well.

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): Many of those who we have heard speak against the action, and some of those who have contacted me, give voice to the fear of the consequences of action, but is it not the point, and the reason that we have been recalled today, that the consequences of non-action—as I believe this House proved last summer—are far, far worse?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right. What we have to weigh up are, of course, the consequences of action. That is why I set up a National Security Council, at which the heads of MI5, MI6 and GCHQ, and regularly the head of the Metropolitan police, attend and advise. But we have also got to think of the consequences of inaction. If we allow ISIL to grow and thrive, there is no doubt in my mind that the level of threat to this country would increase. We have already seen ISIL murderers butcher innocent people in a museum in Brussels; we have already had plots here in Britain by ISIL. How much stronger will ISIL be before we decide that we need to take action as well?

Mr David Winnick (Walsall North) (Lab): ISIS, indeed, is made up of murderous psychopaths; that is not the issue. We know that. The question is: will what the Prime Minister and the Government are proposing be effective in destroying ISIS? Look at what

the House of Commons agreed to: Iraq; Afghanistan; and, under this Government, Libya. None are success stories. Are we going to embark on action that could last for years?

26 Sep 2014 : Column 1263

The Prime Minister: I will come on to why this is different to the decision the House made in 2003 about Iraq, but the fact is that this is about psychopathic terrorists who are trying to kill us and we have to realise that, whether we like it or not, they have already declared war on us. There is not a “walk on by” option; there is not an option of just hoping this will go away. As I have just said, the plots are not in doubt.

Several hon. Members rose—

The Prime Minister: I promise the House that I will give way more. I want to leave plenty of time for other contributions, but I want to turn directly to the question of legality. The Attorney-General has given his advice on the action we propose to take. There is a clear legal base for UK military action to help Iraq defend itself from ISIL. A summary of this legal position is being placed in the House of Commons Library. The Iraqi Government have requested our help and given their clear consent for UK military action, so there can be no question about this. We have the letter from the Iraqi Government to the UN Security Council, we have the public statements from Prime Minister Abadi and President Masum, and we have the personal requests made to me and to the full UN Security Council by Prime Minister Abadi in New York on Wednesday. So there is no question but that we have the legal basis for action, founded on the request of the Iraqi Government.

Let me briefly address the fact that we will be acting in support of local partners, which has been a major concern of Members across the House. We have a substantial international coalition in place, including Arab nations committed to confronting and defeating ISIL. Sixty countries are acting in some way to help to tackle ISIL. Of these, 10 are Arab states, five have already taken part in air strikes with the Americans in Syria, and even regional powers, such as Iran, are publicly condemning the extremists.

As I have said, our differences with Iran remain. Iran’s support for terrorist organisations, its nuclear programme, the treatment of its people, all have to change, and we will not back down on these things. But if Iran’s political leaders are prepared to help a more secure, more stable, more inclusive Iraq and Syria, we should welcome their engagement.

Mr David Burrowes (Enfield, Southgate) (Con): On the question of the legal principle, clearly there is one given the consent from the Iraqi Government, but will the Prime Minister confirm that there is also the important principle of responsibility to protect from genocide, which is on the table, and capable of wider application?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. There are a variety of legal arguments that can be deployed. In this case it could not be clearer that we are acting at the request of a sovereign state, and if we were to act in Syria, I believe that would be the legal basis too: collective self-defence against ISIL which threatens Iraq. But my hon.

Friend is absolutely right to say, and I have said this in the House before, that if one is averting a humanitarian catastrophe, that is a legal basis on which to act. Let me be clear again that although it is right that we are having this debate and this vote, if there was a moment when it looked as though there

26 Sep 2014 : Column 1264

could be an urgent humanitarian need for intervention, I would be prepared to order that intervention and then come to the House and explain why.

We have a comprehensive strategy for action. As I have said, we have a clear request from the Iraqi Government. We have a clear basis in international law. We have a substantial international coalition, including many Arab partners, and we need to act in our own national interest. So I believe that it is morally right that we now move to a new phase of action by asking our armed forces to take part in international air strikes against ISIL in Iraq, and I believe we should do so now.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): Muslims around the world have made it clear that ISIL has nothing to do with Islam; it is an evil organisation. Linked to that very point, have there been discussions with the 57 members of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference, which represents Muslim states, to see whether many more of those Islamic countries will be joining this international coalition, along with the five Arab states, to ensure that it is a wider, broader coalition and has the most effective outcome?

The Prime Minister: All these conversations were taking place this week at the UN General Assembly, and one of the most important things that can happen is Muslim Governments, Islamic countries across the world, coming out and condemning ISIL, and explaining that this is not a bunch of people acting on behalf of a religion, but a bunch of psychopaths who have perverted a religion, and that it is not being done in their name.

Let me address briefly what I believe a successful outcome would look like, and then I will take some more interventions. We would want to see a stable Iraq and over time a stable Syria too. We want to see ISIL degraded and then destroyed as a serious terrorist force. But let me be frank: we should not expect this to happen quickly. The hallmarks of this campaign will be patience and persistence, not shock and awe. We are not deploying British combat troops, but we are providing air power in support of local forces on the ground. No British or western troops will occupy Iraq. Many other elements will be needed for a long-term success, many of which I have set out clearly at the Dispatch Box today.

Mr Mike Weir (Angus) (SNP): I am listening closely to what the Prime Minister is saying. He has talked about the international coalition, but the peshmerga fighters from the Kurds have taken a lot of the brunt of fighting ISIL in the first instance. Can he assure us that all the parties within Iraq also support this intervention, in particular the Kurdish political leadership?

The Prime Minister: What I can be clear about, having spoken to them, is that both the Kurdish leaders in Iraq and the Iraqi Prime Minister have been frank that they want our help. They have both said very clearly, “We do not want British combat troops on the ground, but we do need the arms and the ability to defeat this murderous, terrorist organisation.” We are helping in exactly the way they would like us to help.

Mr Peter Hain (Neath) (Lab): I support the Prime Minister’s motion. I also think that, in the end, we will have to deal with ISIL in Syria as well. Did I hear him correctly a moment or two ago? Did he say that if there

26 Sep 2014 : Column 1265

was an urgent humanitarian need, he would take the action and then get subsequent support from the House? Surely it should be the other way round.

The Prime Minister: No, no. To be absolutely clear, the right hon. Gentleman heard me right the first time round. If there was the need to take urgent action to prevent, for instance, the massacre of a minority community or a Christian community, and Britain could act to prevent that humanitarian catastrophe—if I believed we could effectively act and do that—I am saying I would order that and come straight to the House and explain afterwards.

Let me be clear: I think the convention that has grown up in recent years that the House of Commons is properly consulted and there is a proper vote is a good convention. It is particularly apt when there is—as there is today—a proposal for, as it were, premeditated military action. I think 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. I am being very frank about this because I do not want to mislead anybody.

Dr Julian Huppert (Cambridge) (LD): It is very good that this House debates and votes before action happens. May I press the Prime Minister, however, because he has often said that there would no boots on the ground. The motion is very carefully worded—slightly differently. Will he confirm whether he is asking the House to allow any presence of UK military personnel in Iraq, and if so, in what roles?

The Prime Minister: No. The reason for choosing the words “combat troops” is very important. Of course, when we, for instance, contemplated putting in Chinook helicopters to evacuate the Yazidi people from Mount Sinjar, that would have involved British forces being in an area of Iraq. The servicing, efforts and helping of those helicopters would have involved British personnel. That is why we talk about British combat troops. Again, we should be very clear about that.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

The Prime Minister: I give way to the hon. Gentleman from Birmingham.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab) *rose—*

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab) I am grateful—*[Laughter.]* We are both from Birmingham; we get everywhere.

I am grateful to the Prime Minister for giving way. Whether or not we are militarily involved in Syria, there is no doubt that the fighting in Syria has been and is intensifying, which means that the humanitarian crisis that has already been unfolding in Syria will also intensify. For example, there have been more than 650 major impact strikes on Aleppo since February. This will require new ways of getting humanitarian aid in. What preparations are being made for that, because the current

26 Sep 2014 : Column 1266

arrangements need to be stepped up, and who are the Prime Minister and the international community co-operating with to ensure that that aid gets in?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. We have a very advanced aid programme. Britain is the second biggest bilateral donor. We have been providing more aid across the border, and we are working with all the international partners, as expected. That includes, this week, increasing our aid contribution to make sure that that happens.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

The Prime Minister: I want to make some progress with my speech, and I will then take some more interventions.

As I have said, what is required is an inclusive Iraqi Government. We need a Syrian Government who represent all their people. But I want to be frank with the House. Even after ISIL has been dealt with, we should be in no doubt that future British Prime Ministers and future British Governments will, I suspect, be standing at the Dispatch Box dealing with the issue of Islamist extremism in different forms and in different parts of the world for many years to come. ISIL has sprung up quickly, but around the world we see the mayhem caused by other groups, whether Boko Haram in Nigeria, al-Shabaab in Somalia or al-Qaeda in Yemen. We are dealing with a generational struggle caused by the perversion of one of the world's great religions, Islam, but I have no doubt that this struggle is one that this House and this country are more than equal to.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): General Dannatt hinted today on television that we may well need to use ground forces at the end of the day, and it does take time to train the Iraqi army. If that were the case, will the Prime Minister come back to the House?

The Prime Minister: I have said that we will come back to the House if, for instance, we make the decision that we should take air action with others in Syria, but I am not contemplating the use of British combat forces because I think it would be the wrong thing

to do. The lesson to learn from previous conflicts is that we should play the most appropriate role for us. It is for the Iraqi Government and for the Iraqi army to defeat ISIL in Iraq. Indeed, in time I hope, it is for a proper, legitimate Syrian Government to defeat ISIL in Syria. Where we should be helping is with aid, diplomacy and political pressure and, yes, with our unique military assets where they can help, but it should be part of a comprehensive strategy and should not go over the heads of local people and should not ignore the regional powers, learning the lessons of the past. That is what this debate is about, that is what this motion is about, and that is why I believe that we are taking the right steps.

Mr James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): Does the Prime Minister agree that the wording of the motion before the House today was carefully chosen to ensure that we get support for it? Would he accept that it to some degree hamstrings the Government? Is there not a place here for leadership and statesmanship, rather the popular support of the House? He needs the support of the country, but do we really need a vote on the matter?

26 Sep 2014 : Column 1267

The Prime Minister: I say to my hon. Friend that we live in a robust democracy where this House of Commons frequently demands and wants, quite rightly, to see Ministers at the Dispatch Box defending their actions and setting out, as I have just done in this now accepted convention, that if there is to be premeditated military action, the House of Commons should be consulted in advance. I have set out where I think there are gaps in that convention, about which I could not have been clearer, and I think that that probably has all-party support.

I will take two more interventions and will then complete my speech.

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister. He has rightly talked about defeating ISIL militarily and politically, including with help in the region. Will he say something about how we need also to defeat ISIL financially? Which countries are supporting ISIL, including by purchasing oil, and what are the British Government and others going to do about that?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady is absolutely spot on with that point. There are a number of things that we need to do. First of all is action at the UN, which has now been taken, to cut off the financial flows to ISIL. We need to take action to tell the world that ISIL, supposedly the enemy of Assad, is actually selling oil to Assad and making millions of pounds from it. American air strikes have already dealt with some of the so-called mobile oil refineries that ISIL has been using to raise funds, but clearly more needs to be done to persuade those who may have backed organisations such as ISIL in the past, because they were seen as Sunni Arab organisations, that they made a terrible mistake and should not do it again. That was very much what was being discussed around the table at the UN Security Council and is an issue that I would support.

Alok Sharma (Reading West) (Con): I thank the Prime Minister for giving way. I was going to make a point about ensuring that we can cut off funding to ISIL, but will he expand a little more on that in terms of what is going on with international pressure to ensure that ISIL's funding is squeezed? At the end of the day, it is currently a well-funded organisation and squeezing its funding will ensure that it cannot operate in the way that it has been up until now.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right. Part of the reason why ISIL has got hold of so much funding is because it has the oil and also simply took money out of banks in some of the towns it took in northern Iraq. A long-term squeeze must be applied in this case.

Zac Goldsmith (Richmond Park) (Con): I thank the Prime Minister for giving way. Does he agree that if we are serious about tackling jihadi terrorism in the middle east, we must take a much tougher line with some key allies, including Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Kuwait, which have been fuelling and funding terrorism for decades and, if reports are accurate, continue to do so?

The Prime Minister: What I would say to my hon. Friend is that we need to have this very direct conversation with everyone in the middle east about the dangers of sectarianism and of supporting groups because they are

26 Sep 2014 : Column 1268

Sunni or Shi'a. That is part of the background that has led us to this problem. We need everyone to recognise that, whatever branch of Islam they are from, terrorism breeds further extremism and terrorism and, in the end, comes back and damages their own countries and societies.

It is inevitable that the shadow of the United Kingdom's last military involvement in Iraq hangs heavy over this Chamber today, but the situation that we face today is very different. We are acting in response to a direct appeal from the sovereign Government of Iraq to help them deal with a mortal terrorist threat. It is a threat to Iraq and a threat to Britain. We are not acting alone, but as part of an international coalition of 60 countries, many of them from the region and all of them committed to rolling back ISIL, however long and difficult the task may be. This is not 2003, but we must not use past mistakes as an excuse for indifference or inaction. We will play our part in destroying these evil extremists. We will support our Muslim friends around the world as they reclaim their religion, and once again our inspirational armed forces will put themselves in harm's way to keep our people and our country safe. I pay tribute to them for their extraordinary bravery and service, and I commend this motion to the House.

11.15 am

Edward Miliband (Doncaster North) (Lab): I rise to support the Government motion concerning military action against ISIL in Iraq. It is right that the Prime Minister has brought this issue to the House and committed to bringing future decisions to the House

too. Let me start by saying that all of us, whatever side of the debate we are on, will be conducting it with huge admiration for the bravery, spirit and duty displayed by our armed forces, who act on the decisions that this House makes.

Let us be clear at the outset what the proposition is today. It is about air strikes against ISIL in Iraq. It is not about ground troops from the United Kingdom, or about UK military action elsewhere. It is a mission specifically aimed at ISIL. As we debate this issue today, I understand the qualms and, for some, deep unease that there will be about that undertaking, both in the House and in the country. Those who advocate military action today have to persuade Members of the House not just that ISIL is an evil organisation but that it is we, Britain, who should take military action in Iraq. I want to do so by first setting out the particular nature of the ISIL threat, by secondly talking about the criteria that we should apply to judging the case for military action, and by thirdly saying something about the role of our country in the world, which for me is directly relevant to this decision.

Mr Baron: Will the right hon. Gentleman also clarify Labour's position with regard to the politics? Many of us are concerned that there is no clear exit strategy militarily, but what about the politics? There is no point in military intervention if the politics are not right—and they are not. Many of those who served under al-Maliki are still in place, and many Sunnis still feel alienated. Without the hearts and minds policy being right, military intervention will not be enduring.

Edward Miliband: I understand the hon. Gentleman's long-held caution on these issues, but the point I will make is that there needs to be a comprehensive strategy.

26 Sep 2014 : Column 1269

We are not talking about a military-only solution. It is about political action, humanitarian action and wider strategic action, and I will come to that later in my remarks.

First I want to say something about the nature of ISIL. As the Prime Minister said, ISIL is not simply another terrorist organisation. We have seen, of course, its hostage-taking of innocent British citizens, and it is not just British citizens whom ISIL is threatening but Christians, Yazidis and fellow Muslims, Sunni and Shi'a, from many different countries and backgrounds—anyone who does not subscribe to its deeply perverted ideology.

If the House will allow me, I want to give one hideous example recently gathered by Amnesty International, because it is directly relevant to the decisions that we make today. On the morning of Friday 15 August, ISIL fighters assembled the residents of Kocho village in northern Iraq at the secondary school, where they separated men and boys from women and younger children. The men were then driven away to different nearby locations, where they were shot and killed. The women and children of the village were abducted and continue to be held by ISIL.

Let us be clear about what this is: ISIL is murdering Muslims. So to those who say that military action against ISIL is somehow an attack on Islam, let me just say this: I understand the anxiety, including in communities in Britain, but the truth is entirely different. It is Muslims themselves who are saying it—leading British Muslim scholars and imams recently wrote of ISIL:

“They are perpetrating the worst crimes against humanity...it is a war against all humanity.”

ISIL’s ideology has nothing to do with the peaceful religion practised by billions of people across the world and by millions of our fellow citizens, who are appalled by their actions.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): The Leader of the Opposition mentioned hostages. David Haines was brought up and educated in Perth, and some of his family are constituents of mine. To the people of Perth, David Haines was simply a hero, and the more we find out about his remarkable life, the more appalled we are by his brutal and barbaric murder. The people of Perth are planning a commemoration of his life, and I am sure that the Leader of the Opposition and the Prime Minister will want to join them and congratulate them on their efforts to ensure that this man is properly remembered.

Edward Miliband: The hon. Gentleman spoke with great eloquence on this issue. In a way, it tells us all we need to know about this organisation that it would take hostage people who exist simply to try to help the innocent victims of conflict all around the world.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way and for his support—this time—for the Government motion for intervention. Given what he has said about the horrors of ISIL, if it is necessary for us to come back to the House and debate a motion to intervene against ISIL in Syria, will he support it?

26 Sep 2014 : Column 1270

Edward Miliband: I want to deal with this very directly, if the House will give me permission. I want to be very clear about this. We will obviously consider any further proposition if the Prime Minister chooses to come back with one. Let me mention three issues that concern me about the difference between Iraq and Syria.

First of all, there is the question of legitimacy. There is a strong argument about the legal base for action in Syria under article 51. The point that I have been making in the last few days is that, in my view, when we are not talking about being invited in by a democratic state, it would be better—I put it no higher than that—to seek a UN Security Council resolution. Why? Because that is the highest multilateral institution of the world and therefore it would be better to seek authorisation on the basis of that.

There are two other issues in play in relation to Syria. One, there is the question of ground forces. The point that a number of hon. Members have made is that we cannot defeat ISIL by air power alone. In the case of Iraq, the Iraqi army and the Kurds can

conduct those operations; there is—I put it no higher than this—an outstanding question about who will perform that function in Syria. Secondly, as the Prime Minister himself made reference to, there is a big outstanding question about the overall outcome that we are seeking in Syria. The Prime Minister said that there is a clear strategy and plan in relation to that; personally, I think that a lot more work needs to be done on what exactly the route map is in Syria. Those are the particular issues that I raise in relation to Syria.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Edward Miliband: I want to make some progress with my argument, if the House will allow me.

ISIL is not simply a murderous organisation. As the Prime Minister said, it has ambitions for a state of its own—a caliphate across the middle east, run according to its horrific norms and values. That is why I believe, and established in the first part of my remarks, that we cannot simply stand by against the threat of ISIL. But as I said in response to the hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron), in acting against it we need to learn the lessons from the past. We should be clear about this with the British people. That means a comprehensive strategy—humanitarian and political, as well as military, and, crucially, rooted in the region. Some of that work is under way, but I believe that much more needs to be done.

There is a reality that the House must face up to: to make this alliance work, there is the need for military action as well to contain and help counter the threat of ISIL in Iraq. That is why we are meeting today.

In the second part of my remarks, to make the case for military action by the UK, I want to return to the criteria that I have previously set out—criteria that learn from the past and judge whether military action can be justified. First, in any action that we take there must be just cause. I believe that ISIL does establish just cause: on humanitarian grounds, which I have set out, and on grounds of national interest. On this point, the international instability created by the undermining and potential overthrow of the democratic Iraqi state would clearly have implications for the stability of the region and therefore for us and our national interest. It

26 Sep 2014 : Column 1271

would make it more likely that Iraq would become a haven and training ground for terrorism directed against the UK.

Secondly, military action must always be a last resort; again, I believe that this criterion is met. ISIL has shown that it is not an organisation that could or should be negotiated with. Thirdly, there must be a clear legal base, to provide legitimacy and legal force for our actions. I support the motion today because we are responding to the request from the democratic Iraqi state, and that is recognised in the UN charter.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): As one who voted on 18 March 2003 against the war in Iraq, may I ask whether my right hon. Friend agrees that we bear a particular responsibility for subsequent events, and, therefore, a particular responsibility towards the Government and people of Iraq?

Edward Miliband: That is an important point. I shall come to it later, but let me say now that, while some people would say that our intervention in Iraq means that we should not intervene in this case, I think that there is a heightened responsibility for us precisely because we did intervene in Iraq, and—with all kinds of implications—the Iraqi state that has emerged is partly our responsibility.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that the Government have a moral obligation to help the Iraqi people in their hour of need—an obligation which, like the deficit, this Government did not create, but has to deal with? *[Interruption.]*

Edward Miliband: If I may say so, I think the hon. Gentleman did himself no credit with that intervention.

Let me turn to the fourth test. This is important, because it is the hardest test of all, and we need to level with the House about it. We must believe that there is a reasonable prospect of success before we take the grave step of committing our forces. The aim is clear: it is to reinforce the democratic Government of Iraq and prevent the advance of ISIL, at the invitation of that Government, and it is to do so by using international military air power while the Iraqi army and Kurdish peshmerga conduct a ground campaign.

No one should be in any doubt that this is a difficult mission and that it will take time, but there is already evidence that the US action is having the effect of holding back ISIL. Prior to that action, ISIL was advancing, with catastrophic consequences for the Iraqi people. This is where there is a choice: to act or not to act. Both have implications, and both have consequences. In June, ISIL took Mosul. Failure to act would mean more Mosuls, and more killing of the sort that I described earlier.

Ms Gisela Stuart (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend agree that, if the outcome is to be greater stability, and if it requires the intervention and the support of neighbouring countries, it would have been quite good to hear more about Turkey's attitude and, in particular, its attitude to arming the Kurds?

26 Sep 2014 : Column 1272

Edward Miliband: My hon. Friend has made a really important point. It is incredibly important that we mobilise all countries in the region, and Turkey is primary among them. We need to learn the whole lesson—namely that there can be no solution without our engaging not just the people of Iraq and an inclusive Government in Iraq, but the wider neighbourhood.

Let me now turn to my fifth criterion. There must be broad support in the region for reasons of legitimacy—because this action must not be seen as some new form of imperialism—and of effectiveness, because regional support is essential to the long-term success of the mission. At the end of August, the Arab League made a statement calling for comprehensive measures to combat ISIL, and we now see a regional coalition consisting of Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia and Qatar, as well as other countries.

Sixthly and finally, the proposed action must be proportionate. We must make sure that innocent civilians are protected. I know that strict conditions are in place to ensure that there is proper targeting, and that everything possible is done to avoid civilian casualties.

Having scrutinised those six conditions—just cause, last resort, legal base, reasonable prospects, regional support and proportionality—I believe that they are met.

Rehman Chishti: The right hon. Gentleman has referred to a broader coalition. Does he, like me, welcome the fact that 120 clerics and imams from around the world are setting out sections of the Koran, making it quite clear that ISIL has nothing to do with Islam and is an evil organisation which everyone around the world, including the Muslim world, has a duty to tackle?

Edward Miliband: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. This is not a clash of civilisations. The vast, vast majority of Muslims all around the world abhor ISIL and its activities.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): I congratulate my right hon. Friend and the Prime Minister on what has been said so far today. It is vital for the sense to be felt that the entire House is behind our troops when they are out performing in this way.

My right hon. Friend has spoken powerfully about the fact that this is not a war on Islam, and we are all very conscious of the scars that remain from the past. Will he say a little more about what he, as Leader of the Opposition, will do to ensure that our Muslim communities here recognise that this is not a war on them, and that it is absolutely about protecting Muslims as well as people back here in the United Kingdom?

Edward Miliband: My hon. Friend makes an incredibly important point. I will play my part—as I am sure will he and other Members across the House—in setting out the case and explaining the basis of action, which is to protect innocent Muslims in Iraq who are under terrible threat from ISIL day after day. That is why there is such urgency in this case.

Mr Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): The Prime Minister argued that this was a generational struggle, but only last year in this House, he passionately argued for action in Syria. Had he got

26 Sep 2014 : Column 1273

his way then, what would the position of ISIL be today? Would ISIL not be stronger? If the consequences were unforeseen over the space of a year, does that not show that our commitment should not be open-ended, but should be back to be scrutinised by this House?

Edward Miliband: As we are, on this occasion, seeking the unity of the House, it is incredibly important that we do everything we can to make that happen. The proposition last year was about chemical weapons in relation to President Assad. That matter was dealt with by others. Of course, the situation in Syria remains very dire. I believe that we made the right decision last summer, but today is about trying to get the whole House supporting the motion before it.

Mr Tom Clarke (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend recall that, fairly recently, this House and the international community were condemned for tolerating genocide in Rwanda and then for tolerating genocide in Sudan? Given the evidence today of genocide, particularly against the Kurds in Iraq, it is no wonder that the British people are in support not just of him but of the motion before the House.

Edward Miliband: My right hon. Friend speaks incredibly powerfully. In the examples he cited, many of us may feel that there was a case for intervention that was not taken up. These decisions are always incredibly difficult, but if we can help innocent people who are under threat of persecution, it is right to do so.

Jim Sheridan (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (Lab): My right hon. Friend is absolutely right in supporting this motion, but may I press him on our role in the world and how it is perceived by people outside? This hokey-cokey approach to international conflicts concerns many people who have just seen thousands of innocent Palestinians murdered while we stood on the sidelines. Will he confirm to the House that he will show the same commitment, and push for resources, to get a satisfactory conclusion in Palestine?

Edward Miliband: I agree that it is right to speak out on these issues—and to speak out without fear or favour—and to pursue the two-state solution that we need.

Mr James Arbuthnot (North East Hampshire) (Con) rose—

Edward Miliband: I want to move on if I may to the third part of my remarks.

Some people might accept the criteria that I have set out, but say that it is not our job to intervene because western intervention always makes things worse—we must confront this issue, because it will concern not just Members in this House but people in the country. I understand that argument, but I do not agree with it. Intervention always has risks, but a dismembered Iraq would be more dangerous for Britain. ISIL unchecked means more persecution of the innocent. If we say to people that we will pass by on this one, it makes it far harder to persuade other Arab countries to play their

part. Members across the House have been saying that this must be resolved in the neighbourhood and that we must engage the region. We would have less moral authority to say that we want the Arab states to play their part, if we say, “I’m sorry, but this has nothing to do with us. We won’t intervene.” Finally, we should pride ourselves on our traditions of internationalism. Being internationalist and not withdrawing from the concerns of the world is when Britain is at its best.

I want to speak now about the underlying reasons for wariness over action. I am talking here about the 2003 war in Iraq. I understand why some who were in the House at the time will wonder whether this is a repeat of that experience. In my view, it is not, and it is worth setting out why.

First, as the Prime Minister said, this case is about supporting a democratic state. It is not about overturning an existing regime and seeking to build a new one from the rubble, which is a much harder undertaking. Secondly, there is no debate about the legal base for action in Iraq, as there was in 2003. Thirdly, there is no argument over whether military action is a last resort. Whatever side of the debate we are on, no one is saying, “Let’s negotiate with ISIL.” They are not people with whom we can negotiate. Fourthly, there is broad international support, not a divided world, with all 28 EU member states and the Arab League providing support, and five Arab states taking part in action. Fifthly, there is no question of British ground troops being deployed. I understand the wariness there will be in the House and in the country about whether this is a repeat of 2003, but on those five grounds it is not, and it is demonstrably not.

John Woodcock: Does my right hon. Friend agree that our failure to reconstruct Iraq properly after the war actually increases our responsibility to act responsibly and engage other partners in the region to create a more stable country for the future than we have seen over the past 10 years?

Edward Miliband: I completely agree with my hon. Friend about our responsibilities, and indeed our responsibilities to the people of Iraq.

Mr Arbuthnot *rose—*

Caroline Lucas *rose—*

Mr Ian Davidson (Glasgow South West) (Lab/Co-op) *rose—*

Edward Miliband: I will not give way again.

The late Robin Cook said this in his resignation speech on the eve of the Iraq war:

“Our interests are best protected not by unilateral action but by multilateral agreement and a world order governed by rules.”—[*Official Report*, 17 March 2003; Vol. 401, c. 726.]

This is multilateral action, prompted by a legitimate democratic state; and a world order governed by rules, if it is about anything, must be about protecting a democratic state, which is what the motion before us is about. I believe that, although this is difficult, it is the

right thing to do. There is no graver decision for our Parliament and our country, but protecting our national interest, security and the values for which we stand is why I will be supporting the motion this afternoon.

26 Sep 2014 : Column 1275

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You will have noticed that the House is very full. My constituents expect me to be able to get into the Chamber and hear my Prime Minister. No such obligation rests on this poor man behind me. Will you find a safe place for this camera crew, so that he can film without getting in our way?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. As far as I can see, the camera crew is certainly not interfering with the business of the House, and everybody is safe. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order, to which I have responded.

May I point out to the House that no fewer than 77 hon. and right hon. Members are seeking to catch my eye, in consequence of which colleagues will understand my decision to impose, with immediate effect, a five-minute limit on Back-Bench speeches.

11.37 am

Sir Richard Ottaway (Croydon South) (Con): I congratulate the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition on the constructive and measured way in which they introduced today's debate.

This intervention is different in two respects. For the first time, war is fought using social media as a tool. The power of the internet is becoming increasingly apparent. We have all been shocked by the slick propaganda. For most of us, the first we heard of ISIL was through YouTube. This is the world that we live in today. The second is the young age and radicalism of our opponents. Albert Einstein once said that old men start wars but younger men fight them. Well, not any longer. The ISIL and al-Qaeda commanders are in their 30s and the old men are the refugees.

Alok Sharma (Reading West) (Con): My right hon. Friend makes an important point. One of the most powerful weapons that IS has been using is social media. What should Governments around the world, like ours and like that of the US, be doing to ensure that social media are not used, that sites are blocked and that IS is stopped from getting its publicity out into the public domain?

Sir Richard Ottaway: I agree with my hon. Friend. I think he has answered his own intervention. I think the Government should be addressing that and recognising that soft power is now a tool of war, and should be addressed very seriously indeed.

I was saying that our opponents are young and radical. Up against them are the slow, clunking democracies of the west and the civilised world. But these democracies are our strength. This building and our electoral mandate—they give us a legitimacy that ISIL and similar rebel groups will never have, and that is what will ultimately undermine them.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): The right hon. Gentleman makes a very important point. An important part of all this, alongside the military action that I hope we will endorse today, is the soft approach—the diplomatic record of the United Kingdom in relation to many of the Sunni tribes in the area over

26 Sep 2014 : Column 1276

which ISIL has control. Is it not important to recognise that ISIL, with its use of social media and its very strong media operation, is effectively an opportunist front for what has been a civil war? We cannot negotiate with ISIL, but we must make sure that we negotiate with and talk to the people in the Sunni community within the tribes in that area.

Sir Richard Ottaway: I agree with the hon. Gentleman; indeed, he anticipates what I am coming to in my speech.

The western world agonises about how to respond intelligently and responsibly to these violent threats. I congratulate the Prime Minister on the rational and measured way in which he has assessed the situation and on the leadership that he has shown. A coalition of the willing has been assembled. The response has been prepared. Our thoughts are now with the men and women of the armed forces. This is not going to be an easy campaign. It is going to be messy, it is going to be untidy, and there will, I fear, be fatalities. But this intervention is the very least that a country such as Britain and the United Kingdom should be doing. We are a world leader in the EU, in NATO, and in the G8. We hold down a permanent seat in the Security Council in the United Nations. We derive benefit from all these positions, but they also give us responsibilities, and we have a duty to act.

I have to say, however, that it is of some regret to me, while I recognise the politics, that, we are not authorising action in Syria today. The border between Syria and Iraq has virtually disappeared. It is a sea of human misery. There is open, cross-border movement of people both legal and illegal, military organisations, innocent citizens, and homeless, terrified refugees. It is a seamless conflict over two countries covering thousands of miles and presenting a vulnerability in ISIL's stretched resources that we are not capitalising on.

Andrew Bridgen: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Sir Richard Ottaway: I will not, if my hon. Friend does not mind.

We have long encouraged the Arab states to get involved. Now they are, and the irony is that we are pulling our punches as they do. This is the first time that there has been an international coalition in Syria, and we should be a part of it. The Leader of the Opposition said that it would be better if a resolution was tabled at the United Nations before

intervening. Given that Russia has already said it will veto such a resolution, it is incumbent on him to say what his position would then be. Why the hesitation over Syria? We will never end this conflict by turning back at the border. Perhaps when the Deputy Prime Minister winds up the debate, he could say what is the role for the Free Syrian Army, which has just been given half a billion dollars by the US Congress to equip its fight. It has been fighting ISIS for months, and, like the peshmerga in northern Iraq, it is fighting for its homeland.

We are all agreed that air attacks alone are not going to bring this war to an end. ISIS will clearly go underground, and we will need forces on the ground to ram home the advantage that air cover provides. We all accept that there are not going to be British or American boots on

26 Sep 2014 : Column 1277

the ground, but the peshmerga and the Free Syrian Army are willing. They have strong contacts with each other and stand shoulder to shoulder in their exchanges.

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Richard Ottaway: I will not, if the hon. Gentleman does not mind.

Strategically, it makes sense to bolster moderate forces to take the fight to ISIL. This means supplying funds and equipment to the Free Syrian Army, which has shown itself to be a reliable partner over a sustained period. In the longer term, this will strengthen its anti-Assad capability and bring him to the negotiating table—something that we have been talking about for over three years. No one should be under any illusion that the attacks on innocent citizens in Syria remain 99% the work of the Syrian regime, which has now killed an estimated 170,000 of its own people, as against just a few hundred killed by ISIL.

Mr. Speaker, war is a terrifying business, particularly for those who have experienced it. On occasions it is a necessary evil, but no matter how necessary, it is always ghastly and horrendous. It is with a feeling of depression and trepidation that I will be supporting the Government tonight.

11.45 am

Mr Peter Hain (Neath) (Lab): Although I support the motion authorising military strikes on ISIL in Iraq, and although I fully support my party leader's caution over extending it to Syria without UN backing, the blunt truth is that simply allowing ISIL to retreat across what if regards an invisible border that it controls into Syria to regroup is no answer.

First, why British military action against ISIL's barbarity but not Assad's butchery? Should not the haunting and ill-fated legacy of invading Iraq instruct us to stay well clear? In the Cabinet in 2003, I backed Tony Blair over Iraq because I honestly believed that Saddam

had weapons of mass destruction. I was wrong. He did not. We went to war on a lie, and the aftermath was disastrous. That has made me deeply allergic to anything similar in the region and certainly anything remotely hinting at cowboy western intervention.

Meg Munn (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab/Co-op): Does my right hon. Friend also accept that the intervention in 2003 was welcomed by a lot of the people of Iraq, particularly by the Kurds?

Mr Hain: I agree absolutely.

Even Libya, supposedly a surgical operation consented to by this House in 2011, is hardly a good advertisement for us, with chaos now in the country.

Mr Stephen O'Brien (Eddisbury) (Con): In supporting the motion, as I think broadly we are across the House, does the right hon. Gentleman agree that one of the lessons from the 2003 intervention in Iraq is that we should have designed in the reconstruction of Iraq as a democratic state from the outset, rather than leaving it till after we had achieved some military effect?

26 Sep 2014 : Column 1278

Mr Hain: Indeed. We tried to, but the Americans took no notice, frankly.

In the Syrian horror from which ISIL has sprung, of course Assad's forces have unleashed waves of terror, but his jihadist opponents too have committed terrible atrocities. That is the context that has given birth to ISIL; not because the House prevented the Prime Minister from armouring moderate rebels in the Free Syrian Army. Had the Prime Minister got his way last August, where might those British arms have ended up? Probably with ISIL. Instead of trying to bounce Parliament into backing military strikes in Syria last August, we should have been promoting a negotiated solution right from the beginning. That was always going to be the only way to get Assad and, more importantly, his backers to shift towards compromise.

Syria never was some simplistic battle between evil and good; between a barbaric dictator and his repressed people. It is a civil war; a quagmire into which Britain should tread at dire peril. At its heart are the incendiary internal Islamic conflicts—Sunni versus Shi'a, and their chief protagonists and sponsors Saudi Arabia versus Iran. There is also a cold war hangover, of the US—with all its considerable military and intelligence assets in the region—versus Russia, with its only Mediterranean port and intelligence capability in Syria.

Even more crucially, Assad is backed by 40% of his population. His ruling Shi'a-aligned Alawites, fearful of being oppressed by the Sunni majority, along with the Kurds, Christians and other minorities do not like his repressive Ba'athist rule very much. They fear the alternative even more; becoming victims of genocide, jihadism or sharia extremism. Assad was never going to be defeated militarily and he is not now. That is the truth. If western military intervention had somehow toppled him without a settlement in

place, violent chaos on the Syrian quicksand would still have ensued. The Arab League envoy Lakhdar Brahimi, along with the UN, set out a political solution, which should always have been the imperative. That means negotiating with Assad's regime, along with the Russians and Iranians standing behind him.

Our failure to undertake that is a major reason why the civil war, in my view, has been so prolonged and why ISIL has been allowed to flourish. Mediaeval in its barbarism and its fanatical religious zeal, which views its own narrow Wahhabi sect, dating from the 18th century, as possessing the sole truth, it uses that as the justification for exterminating both all its opponents and any other religious group blocking its way to establishing a caliphate. It has to be stopped and Britain has the military surveillance and intelligence capabilities that those on the front line fighting ISIL do not. In northern Iraq, only US air power—at the request of the Iraqi Government, the Kurds and the minorities facing genocide by ISIL's remorseless advance, and very significantly, with the military participation of half a dozen nearby Arab countries—has knocked back ISIL's well-equipped army. It would not have happened otherwise. That Iran gave its de facto if covert blessing is of significance, opening an opportunity for future engagement and collaboration which could be transformative for the whole region, Israel-Palestine included. Britain should also help local Iraqi and Kurdish forces fighting ISIL with air strikes, drones, military equipment and other support, but not with troops on the ground. Countries in the region have to take ownership of this battle because ISIL threatens them all.

26 Sep 2014 : Column 1279

The elephant in the room, for me, remains Syria. ISIL will never be defeated if it is constantly allowed to regroup from its Syrian bases. Without either UN or Syrian Government authorisation, air strikes in Syria may be illegal, although there could well be justification under international law for such strikes, even without UN agreement. And UN authority for air strikes in Syria will not be granted without Assad's and Putin's agreement—maybe President Rouhani's too. That is very difficult—to many, very distasteful—but very necessary. What is the alternative? Although Syria's Russian-supplied air defences have been hit by the fighting, they are quite sophisticated. Even the US had to pre-inform Damascus about the timing and location of its air strikes this past week or so.

Yet engaging does not mean befriending. Rather, it is akin to what Churchill said in 1941: "If Hitler invaded hell", he told his private secretary as Germany readied to invade Stalin's Russia,

"I would at least make a favourable reference to the devil in the House of Commons."

Handled sensitively this could be an opportunity—and I urge the Prime Minister to take it—to kick-start a proper Syrian peace process and to defuse the long-standing, deep and inflammatory divisions among Muslims in the middle east: Iranians as Shi'ites sponsoring

Hezbollah and other militias; Saudis and Qataris as Sunnis sponsoring al-Qaeda and other jihadists—including ISIL, where they have helped to unleash a monster that threatens to devour them all.

By acting carefully, not bombastically, and by making common cause with both Saudi Arabia and Iran to confront a common ISIL enemy, Britain could even help realign middle east politics to overcome the bitter and violently corrosive Sunni-Shi'a fault line in the region. It is a big ask, and an even bigger task, but an immensely valuable one.

11.52 am

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): I do not think there is any significant controversy about the moral and legal case for what is proposed, and in five minutes I will not set it out. The world would be a better place if ISIS was destroyed, and Britain would be a safer country without doubt. The legal case for intervention in Iraq is clear with its Government's inviting us, and I think it is pretty clear in Syria because of the genocide and the humanitarian disasters being inflicted on that country. I do agree that it is artificial to divide the two problems: the Sykes-Picot line is a theoretical line on the map now, and there is absolutely no doubt that ISIS has to be defeated in both countries.

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): Given that one of the principles of counter-insurgency is to deny the enemy a home base, is it not absolutely essential that we back the American efforts in Syria? Otherwise, we will never defeat ISIS in Iraq. For people to suggest that we cannot go to Syria is actually tying our hands behind our backs.

Mr Clarke: I a