



House of Commons
Foreign Affairs Committee

**The UK's role in the
war against ISIL
following the Cessation
of Hostilities in Syria in
February 2016**

Third Report of Session 2015–16



House of Commons
Foreign Affairs Committee

The UK's role in the war against ISIL following the Cessation of Hostilities in Syria in February 2016

Third Report of Session 2015–16

*Report, together with formal minutes relating
to the report*

*Ordered by the House of Commons to be printed
22 March 2016*

The Foreign Affairs Committee

The Foreign Affairs Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the expenditure, administration, and policy of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and its associated public bodies.

Current membership

[Crispin Blunt MP](#) (*Conservative, Reigate*) (Chair)

[Mr John Baron MP](#) (*Conservative, Basildon and Billericay*)

[Rt Hon Ann Clwyd MP](#) (*Labour, Cynon Valley*)

[Mike Gapes MP](#) (*Labour Co-op, Ilford South*)

[Stephen Gethins MP](#) (*Scottish National Party, North East Fife*)

[Mr Mark Hendrick MP](#) (*Labour Co-op, Preston*)

[Adam Holloway MP](#) (*Conservative, Gravesham*)

[Daniel Kawczynski MP](#) (*Conservative, Shrewsbury and Atcham*)

[Yasmin Qureshi MP](#) (*Labour, Bolton South East*)

[Andrew Rosindell MP](#) (*Conservative, Romford*)

[Nadhim Zahawi MP](#) (*Conservative, Stratford-on-Avon*)

Powers

The Committee is one of the departmental select committees, the powers of which are set out in House of Commons Standing Orders, principally in SO No 152. These are available on the internet via www.parliament.uk.

Publication

Committee reports are published on the Committee's website at www.parliament.uk/facom and in print by Order of the House.

Evidence relating to this report is published on the inquiry page of the Committee's website.

Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee are Kenneth Fox (Clerk), Nick Beech (Second Clerk), Kate Owen (Third Clerk), Ashlee Godwin (Committee Specialist), Dr Ariella Huff (Committee Specialist), Rob Page (Committee Specialist), Nick Wade (Committee Specialist), Clare Genis (Senior Committee Assistant), Rebecca McLoughlin (Committee Assistant), Su Panchanathan (Committee Assistant), and Estelle Currie (Media Officer).

Contacts

All correspondence should be addressed to the Clerk of the Foreign Affairs Committee, House of Commons, London SW1A 0AA. The telephone number for general enquiries is 020 7219 6105; the Committee's email address is fac@parliament.uk.

Contents

Summary	3
1 Preparations for peace talks	5
ISSG Statement and Security Council Resolution	5
Composition of opposition delegation	5
Identifying the terrorists/groups beyond any reconciliation process	6
2 Peace talks: launch, suspension and relaunch	7
Launch and subsequent suspension of talks	7
Cessation of Hostilities and resumption of talks	7
FCO contribution	8
3 Future prospects for the peace process	10
Attitude of regional players	10
Turkey	11
Implications for fight against ISIL	12
Conclusions and recommendations	14
Appendix: International Syria Support Group Statement of 14 November 2015	16
Formal Minutes	18
Witnesses	19
Published written evidence	20
List of Reports from the Committee during the current Parliament	21

Summary

Despite many people's expectations, the Cessation of Hostilities between opposing sides in Syria, which came into force on 27 February 2016, was still holding in late March when we agreed this Report. Secretary of State Kerry and Foreign Minister Lavrov played the leading roles in negotiating the Cessation of Hostilities, but we commend all those, including all members of the International Syria Support Group, who helped to prepare the ground. If the Cessation of Hostilities is truly observed by all sides, it represents a significant step forward in resolving the crisis in Syria.

In its public statements about the conflict, the FCO has tended to focus on the misdeeds of its opponents. Compromise on all sides is going to be required to deliver a successful negotiated outcome, and in concert with our allies the FCO should in practice provide reassurance to the High Negotiations Committee on our collective commitment to their future security and survival so that they can have the confidence to make the necessary compromises. Similar reassurances will need to be offered by all members of the International Syria Support Group to those whose interests they represent or support.

A functioning working relationship between the three key regional powers—Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey—is essential to resolving the crisis in Syria and no doubt many other crises in future, and to providing a source of understanding to deliver regional stability. We recommend that the FCO with our allies does all it can to sponsor working-level engagement between Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey at Political Director level and below, so that a practical dialogue is developed between these key regional powers.

President Erdoğan's increasingly shameful domestic priorities and repressive policies have driven the PYD (Syria's main Kurdish party/grouping) and its associated YPG militia into the arms of the Syrian regime and Russia. Since Syrian Kurdish forces have proved effective allies in the fight against ISIL, this is working directly against shared international priorities. The UK must press Turkey to refrain from taking any further action against YPG forces and to play a constructive role towards shared objectives in the defeat of ISIL. It is not acceptable for the UK, in return for Turkish co-operation on EU migration priorities, to turn a blind eye towards the brutal Turkish government suppression of legitimate Kurdish aspirations at home and in neighbouring states, which is almost certainly illegal and involves a grossly disproportionate use of force. The UK should spearhead raising with Turkey their behaviour on the Kurdish issue, their support for Islamist groups, and the suppression of internal dissent and freedom of speech.

The Syrian peace process is likely to take some considerable time. We do not accept the Government's view that the Syrian Government and opposition forces should be assumed to be unable to focus their attention on ISIL until agreement is reached on a political transition in Syria. The fight against ISIL cannot wait for a comprehensive peace settlement. In the short term it is imperative that the Cessation of Hostilities be maintained, and that all parties arrive at a preliminary political accord, so they can then focus their attention on the fight against ISIL. We recommend that the FCO give greater priority to the immediate fight against ISIL, alongside its longer-term work

towards a comprehensive peace settlement. As we concluded in our Second Report on the extension of British military operations to Syria, we remain unpersuaded that talks involving all parties provide an incentive for people to join ISIL.

If the armed forces of the Syrian Arab Army and the Free Syrian Army on ceasefire are able to agree an early mutual purpose to reclaim Syrian territory jointly from ISIL, they can begin a positive founding narrative of a new Syria, and build trust, which should ultimately allow for the resolution of the hard issues around the future of the leaders of the current Syrian government. We recommend that the FCO and the Ministry of Defence work together to advance the recovery of territory from ISIL control, assist Syrian armed groups which have ceased hostilities to work towards this objective whilst ensuring that civilian protection is also prioritised, and press the regional powers to provide the necessary enabling capability, including action to disrupt ISIL's business and financial activities.

1 Preparations for peace talks

1. This report is based upon oral evidence taken on 12 January 2016 and 26 January 2016 and on written evidence which has been published on our website. We are grateful to Dr Toby Dodge, Associate Professor at the London School of Economics (LSE), for serving as our Specialist Adviser in this inquiry.¹

ISSG Statement and Security Council Resolution

2. On 14 November 2015, the International Syria Support Group (ISSG) agreed a remarkable Statement on the conflict in Syria.² Given the central importance of the Statement to what followed, and given that signatories included Iran, Saudi Arabia, Russia and the USA, the text is attached as an Appendix. It called for the launch of peace talks between the Syrian Government and opposition. The ISSG members also expressed willingness to encourage belligerents to implement “confidence-building measures,” including granting unhindered humanitarian access to besieged areas, to pave the way for an eventual ceasefire.³ UN Security Council Resolution 2254,⁴ adopted on 18 December 2015, echoes the ISSG Statement by requesting that the Secretary-General convene peace talks and by calling for confidence-building measures.

Composition of opposition delegation

3. There was no consensus as to who should represent the Syrian opposition at the talks. In his evidence to us Lord Williams of Baglan, a former specialist adviser to three Foreign Secretaries, summarised the challenges: “Of course the Syrian Government, the Assad regime, has one address, one post-box. The opposition is a more loose formation and has needed some coaxing.”⁵

4. Opposition groups, with the exception of representatives of Syrian Kurds, who apparently at Turkish behest were not invited, met in Riyadh in early December, and agreed to form a High Negotiations Committee (HNC) in preparation for the peace talks. The Riyadh conference did not reach any definitive agreement as to who would represent the opposition, but attendees were reported to have agreed a common negotiating position and signed a declaration expressing support for a “democratic mechanism through a pluralistic regime that represents all sectors of the Syrian people”, without discrimination on grounds of gender, religion or ethnicity.⁶ Representatives of Ahrar al-Sham, one of the more radical rebel groups, attended the conference and signed the declaration, though some members of the group subsequently rejected it.⁷

1 Toby Dodge’s declaration of interests is included in the Committee’s [Formal Minutes 2015–16](#) (see Tuesday 8 September 2015)

2 The members of the ISSG are the Arab League, China, Egypt, the European Union, France, Germany, Iran, Iraq, Italy, Jordan, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom, the United Nations, and the United States of America

3 [Statement of the International Syria Support Group](#) (14 November 2015)

4 UN Security Council, [Resolution 2254](#) (18 December 2015)

5 Q41

6 [“Syria conflict: Opposition agrees framework for peace talks”](#), BBC News, 10 December 2015

7 Q10

5. Writing on the final day of the Riyadh conference, Janine di Giovanni, Middle East Editor of Newsweek, argued:

“Uniting the opposition is crucial. That may involve difficult choices. People such as Robert S Ford, the former US ambassador to Syria, advocate talking to Islamist groups including Ahrar al-Sham and engaging them in the fight against Islamic State. The west has seen Ahrar al-Sham as untouchable, but is that approach sustainable? Jabhat al-Nusra and Isis will never be included in the future of Syria. But Ahrar has demonstrated it can unite disparate rebel forces. As Randa Slim of the Middle East Institute puts it: “Put them into one big tent and then we can see the end of Isis.”⁸

The HNC was formally constituted in late January as the talks began, but the Syrian Kurds, despite efforts from political groups formed to represent their militia remained and remain outside the HNC.

Identifying the terrorists/groups beyond any reconciliation process

6. The ISSG Statement in November 2015 reported that Jordan had “agreed to help develop among intelligence and military community representatives a common understanding of groups and individuals for possible determination as terrorists.”⁹ The mechanism envisaged by the ISSG on 14 November for declaring terrorist groups was flawed and this contributed to the delay in the start of the negotiations. By reportedly naming state actors such as the Iranian Republican Guard, when Iran was party to the ISSG, regional political conflicts were being allowed to interfere with the peace and potential reconciliation process.¹⁰ Reconciliation and justice will become a necessary component of any political agreement in a conflict where there is blood on everybody’s hands, and attempts should be made to incorporate as many groups as possible throughout the negotiations. For every group that is excluded, the challenges for Syrians and the international community are compounded, because excluded groups will require military defeat. ***The UK needs to work within the international community to establish that those who are willing to abide by a ceasefire and accept certain fundamental principles about the future nature of Syria should be welcomed into the negotiation process.***

8 J di Giovanni, “[Without Syrians at the front and centre of talks, there can be no lasting peace](#)”, Guardian, 10 December 2015

9 [Statement of the International Syria Support Group](#) (14 November 2015)

10 “[Jordan’s Syria blacklist blasted by key players](#)”, Al-Monitor, 28 December 2015

2 Peace talks: launch, suspension and relaunch

Launch and subsequent suspension of talks

7. The ISSG agreement anticipated talks beginning on 1 January 2016,¹¹ but on 26 December, it was announced that Staffan de Mistura, the UN Special Envoy for Syria, had set a target of 25 January for the launch of peace talks,¹² to be held in Geneva. On 25 January, de Mistura announced that the continuing disagreements about the composition of the opposition delegation had necessitated a delay. He now expected to send out invitations the following day (26 January), and for the talks to be launched on 29 January. De Mistura also announced that these would be “proximity talks” conducted through mediators, rather than face-to-face talks between opposing sides.¹³ Ultimately the HNC delegation arrived in Geneva on 1 February, but on the same day, the regime and its Russian allies accelerated their aerial bombardment of the rebel-held cities of Aleppo and Homs. This made the atmosphere in Geneva still more difficult. On 2 February, the HNC issued a statement condemning this action;¹⁴ subsequently, on 3 February, de Mistura announced that he was suspending the talks.¹⁵

Cessation of Hostilities and resumption of talks

8. On 11 February, ISSG member countries announced their intention to cease any hostilities and to encourage their allies to do likewise. In practice, this meant that Russia intended to cease its air-strikes on rebel-held areas and persuade its ally (the Assad regime) to do likewise, whilst the US, Saudi Arabia and others intended to persuade their allies—the opposition—to cease its own actions against the regime. The intention of the ISSG member countries was for the Cessation of Hostilities to come into force one week after the statement—namely on 18 February.¹⁶ Prospects looked bleak when hostilities continued beyond the 18 February deadline. On 22 February, however, Russia (in a joint statement with the US) and the HNC both announced that they would cease hostilities at midnight (Damascus time) on 27 February.¹⁷ The Syrian regime made a similar announcement the following day.¹⁸

9. Writing before the Cessation of Hostilities came into force, Patrick Wintour (Diplomatic Editor of the Guardian) identified some of the challenges:

“Diplomats acknowledge that al-Nusra, with a stronghold in Idlib in north-west Syria, is intermingled with forces willing to join the ceasefire. The danger

11 [Statement of the International Syria Support Group](#) (14 November 2015)

12 [“UN envoy sets 25 January as target date to begin intra-Syrian peace talks”](#), UN News Centre, 26 December 2015

13 [Transcript of the press conference given in Geneva by the United Nations Special Envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, on the Intra-Syrian talks](#) (25 January 2016)

14 Syrian Opposition HNC, [Statement on escalation of regime aggression, Russian airstrikes](#) (2 February 2016)

15 [Transcript of the Press Stakeout of the Special Envoy for Syria, Mr. Staffan de Mistura](#) (3 February 2016)

16 [Statement of the International Syria Support Group](#) (11 February 2016)

17 [“Syria war: US and Russia agree new truce ‘to start at weekend’”](#), Telegraph, 22 February 2016; High Negotiations Committee, [“Syrian Opposition HNC agrees to temporary truce”](#), 22 February 2016.

18 [“Syria conflict: Warring parties accept US-Russia truce plan”](#), BBC, 23 February 2016

is that the Russian air force, if it chooses to interpret the terms of the ceasefire inflexibly, could, under the pretext of hitting al-Nusra, attack militia that have joined the ceasefire, and so largely continue the war as at present.”¹⁹

10. Systems have been set in place for breaches of the ceasefire to be notified and redress sought. But it all presumes that there is a tidy division between al-Nusra and other rebel forces that does not in reality exist. Indeed, some argue that a by-product of the terms of the ceasefire is to put pressure on rebel forces to detach themselves from al-Nusra. There have been reports that some al-Nusra forces were evacuating towns in an attempt to prevent civilian areas being classified as a legitimate targets for the Russian air force.²⁰

11. The Cessation of Hostilities came into force as scheduled. UN Security Council Resolution 2268,²¹ adopted on 26 February, requires all parties to whom the Cessation of Hostilities applies to abide by its terms. There have been some allegations of breaches on both sides, but broadly speaking it has held.²² On 14 March, Russia announced the withdrawal of its forces from Syria.²³ On the same day, the Geneva peace talks were relaunched.²⁴ The fragility of the Cessation of Hostilities is self-evident. ***We recommend that the UK support close coalition co-ordination with Russian military forces to minimise the scope for a return to hostilities through misunderstanding and to provide a means to act together to manage a joint response to outbreaks of violence.***

FCO contribution

12. The US and Russia played the leading roles in negotiating the Cessation of Hostilities. This was led personally by Secretary Kerry and by Foreign Minister Lavrov, who was seen to enjoy the engaged support of President Putin.²⁵ It is not clear to what extent the UK has been, or needed to have been, able to exert its own influence in these discussions. This contrasts with the Prime Minister’s rhetoric, which left no room for doubt about his apparent priority for UK policymakers.²⁶ In his oral evidence Daniel Levy, Head of the Middle East and North Africa Programme at the European Council for Foreign Relations, said:

“In responding to [the Committee’s] report [on Syria in November 2015], the Prime Minister said, among other things, that alongside military action he UK would put its full diplomatic weight into this. I really hope that what we’ve seen does not constitute the full diplomatic weight of this country [...] I think our default position is still to do the easy thing of laying more blame on the other side, not wanting to distance ourselves too much—not have too much clear blue sky between ourselves and our regional allies—and letting others

19 P Wintour, “[Syrian militia groups set to reveal intentions over ceasefire](#)”, Guardian, 25 February 2016

20 P Wintour, “[Syrian militia groups set to reveal intentions over ceasefire](#)”, Guardian, 25 February 2016

21 UN Security Council, [Resolution 2268](#) (26 February 2016)

22 “[Syrian war: Russia and opposition allege truce breaches](#)”, BBC, 28 February 2016

23 “[Russia “to pull its forces out of Syria”](#)”, Telegraph, 14 March 2016

24 “[UN’s Syria envoy warns of attempts to derail peace talks](#)”, Guardian, 14 March 2016

25 “[Syria war: US and Russia agree new truce ‘to start at weekend’](#)”, Telegraph, 22 February 2016

26 [Prime Minister’s Response to the Foreign Affairs Select Committee’s Second Report of Session 2015–16](#) (November 2015)

do the heavy diplomatic lifting. I do not want to pretend that we can have a decisive putting our thumb down on one side of this, but I do think that we are punching below our weight.”²⁷

13. In its written evidence (submitted before the resumption of talks), the FCO stated that it would deploy a team of officials to support the talks. It had already sent three members of FCO staff to Geneva to assist with maintaining the Cessation of Hostilities.²⁸

14. It is plain that the Prime Minister’s “full diplomatic weight” does not reflect actual human resources. It is the case that the FCO struggles to have the capacity to deploy properly resourced teams, and it is unlikely to be a priority when the hope will be that the UK’s principal ally will do the work. It is another indication of the FCO stretched beyond sensible limits to support the rhetoric of UK leaders and to support the delivery of key British objectives in a crisis-riddled world. It also reinforces the impression in the mind of our principal ally that the UK is another “free rider”.²⁹ *This further reinforces the case made in our First Report that the FCO’s budget should increase.*

15. The FCO’s public statements about the conflict have been heavily critical of the Assad regime and its Russian ally. These have not always been constructive, and greater engagement with these actors, as well as Iran, at an earlier stage might have brokered an earlier cessation agreement. The FCO has said relatively little about the need for compromise by all sides. On 22 February, for example, the Foreign Secretary said:

[The Cessation of Hostilities] will only succeed if there is a major change of behaviour by the Syrian regime and its backers. Russia, in particular, must honour this agreement by ending its attacks on Syrian civilians and moderate opposition groups, and by using its influence to ensure the Syrian regime does the same.³⁰

16. *We recommend that the FCO maintain a close dialogue with the Russian Government, and especially with Foreign Minister Lavrov. The policy differences between the UK and Russia over Syria are well known, but close dialogue with Russia is a prerequisite if the UK wishes to influence events in the region.*

17. In its public statements about the conflict, the FCO has tended to focus on the misdeeds of its opponents. Members of the ISSG getting their perceived clients to the negotiating table was at the core of the ISSG agreement in Vienna. It would be counter to our interests, and those of the Syrian people, if these talks were not to result in a peaceful settlement of the Syrian conflict, and the UK might bear a share of the responsibility if the HNC were the party responsible for any failure. ***Compromise on all sides is going to be required to deliver a successful negotiated outcome and in concert with our allies the FCO should in practice provide reassurance around our collective commitment to their future security and survival to the HNC so that they can have the confidence to make the necessary compromises.***

27 Q64

28 Foreign & Commonwealth Office ([ISI 0034](#))

29 J Goldberg, “[The Obama Doctrine](#)”, The Atlantic, April 2016 edition

30 [Foreign Secretary statement on Syria Cessation of Hostilities](#) (22 February 2016)

3 Future prospects for the peace process

Attitude of regional players

18. The conflict in Syria has drawn in the key regional powers: Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Iran. Writing in March 2015, Syria analyst Abdulrahman al-Masri argued:

The conflict in Syria is a multi-proxy war in which international, competing interests carry out their battles in Syria, demolishing the country's hope of establishing a democratic state free of dictatorship.³¹

This conflict is plainly of vastly greater relative national interest to these powers than the west.

19. In his oral evidence, Chris Phillips, Associate Fellow at Chatham House, argued that the UK has limited leverage over the combatants and should instead focus on influencing its regional allies:

We need to be realistic about how much leverage the UK and the west in general has over the situation. If you are looking specifically at the Syrian civil war, effectively you have four actors: the regime, ISIS, the Kurds and the various rebel groups. Within that, the west's leverage extends to some of the rebel groups and, to an extent now, to the leading Kurdish groups, but is only limited. [...] the role of the western actors and the UK needs to be much more nuanced in leveraging the pressure it has over its key allies, and not just Saudi Arabia, by the way, but Turkey. [...] A lot of UK diplomatic pressure should be on its allies in Turkey to get more involved in the fight against ISIS and, of course, to play a more constructive role in the Syrian peace talks.³²

20. Saudi Arabia and Iran had a major diplomatic fallout in January 2016, which appeared as though it might derail the Syrian peace process. On 2 January, Saudi Arabia executed the prominent Shia cleric Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr, along with 46 others, for terror offences. This led to large-scale protests in Shia-dominated Iran, where Sheikh Nimr's execution was seen as a sectarian act by the Sunni regime in Saudi Arabia. In the early hours of 3 January, the Saudi Embassy in Tehran was set on fire. In response, Saudi Arabia broke off all diplomatic relations with Iran on 4 January.³³

21. On its visit to the region in November 2015, the Committee heard the diametrically opposed parallel narratives in Tehran and Riyadh, with each blaming the other as the source of the region's instability, constituting a significant obstacle to necessary co-operation. A functioning working relationship between the three key regional powers, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, is essential to resolving this and no doubt many future crises and to

31 A al-Masri, "[Syria: Proxy war, not civil war](#)", Middle East Monitor, 14 March 2015

32 Q18

33 "[Saudi Arabia breaks off ties with Iran after al-Nimr execution](#)", BBC, 4 January 2016

providing a source of understanding to deliver regional stability. *We recommend that the FCO with our allies does all it can to sponsor working-level engagement between Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey at Political Director level and below, so that a practical dialogue is developed between these key regional powers.*

Turkey

22. The Turkish government has fought a lengthy insurgency within its own borders, principally with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), and had agreed a hard-won ceasefire in 2013. However, Turkey resumed military repression in July 2015 following the deaths of two police officers in attacks by supporters of the PKK who were enraged by Turkey's apparent complicity in a bomb massacre against Kurds claimed by ISIL in Suruc.³⁴

23. Reliable attribution for the recent upsurge in terrorist attacks in Turkey is difficult. This is because at least two groups, ISIL and the PKK, have been blamed for separate attacks. This confusion has not been helped by the speed with which sections of the Turkish government have sought to attribute blame, sometimes hours after the attacks themselves, in advance of reliable claims of responsibility being made.³⁵

24. The Turkish Government's motive for resuming military repression appears to have been electoral, following the governing AKP's loss of a majority government at the June 2015 election.³⁶ Distressingly, this disgraceful policy, delivered at the reported cost of at least 3,000 dead in the reignited insurgency,³⁷ worked, with the AKP recovering its majority at the November 2015 election at the apparent expense of the nationalist MHP party. Turkey has long argued that the Democratic Union Party or PYD (Syria's main Kurdish party) is allied to both the PKK and the Assad regime.³⁸ In the latter case the High Negotiations Committee agrees. However the PYD, and the associated People's Protection Units or YPG militia, have proved effective allies in the fight against ISIL. The Syrian Kurds have been supported and equipped by the US.³⁹ Nevertheless, in February, with talks on the brink, Turkey conducted artillery barrages and airstrikes on YPG forces in northern Syria.⁴⁰

25. President Erdoğan's increasingly shameful domestic priorities and repressive policies have driven the PYD (Syria's main Kurdish party/grouping) into the arms of the Syrian regime and Russia. Since Syrian Kurdish forces have until now been the most effective Syrian party in combating ISIL on the ground, this is working directly against shared international priorities. *The UK must press Turkey to refrain from taking any further action against YPG forces and play a constructive role towards shared objectives in the defeat of ISIL. It is not acceptable for the UK, in return for Turkish co-operation on EU migration priorities as per the deal agreed on 18 March, to turn a blind eye towards*

34 *"Car bomb kills two Turkish soldiers in attacks blamed on Kurdish rebels"*, Guardian, 26 July 2015

35 *"Turkey blames 24-year-old PKK member for Ankara bombing"*, Middle East Eye, 15 March 2016; *"Turkey 'identifies Suruc suicide bombing suspect'"*, Al Jazeera, 21 July 2015

36 Qq73-75

37 Amnesty International, 'Turkey 2015–16', accessed 14 March 2016

38 *"Refugee intake 'should give Turkey major influence over peace talks'"*, Guardian, 19 January 2016

39 J Steele, *"The Syrian Kurds Are Winning!"*, New York Review of Books, 3 December 2015

40 *"Turkey's Erdogan: No intent to stop retaliatory shelling against Syrian Kurdish YPG"*, Reuters, 17 February 2016; *"Russia takes Turkey to UN over Syria"*, Al Jazeera, 19 February 2016

the brutal Turkish government suppression of legitimate Kurdish aspirations at home and in neighbouring states, which is almost certainly illegal and involves a grossly disproportionate use of force.

26. The Committee is concerned that the EU's relations with Turkey are being dominated by the issue of refugees, one of the results of the conflict, while avoiding the more difficult issues of Turkey's direct role in the conflict. ***The UK should spearhead raising with Turkey their behaviour on the Kurdish issue, their support for Islamist groups, playing a destructive role overall in the political process and the suppression of internal dissent and freedom of speech.*** The UK also needs to encourage its European allies in lobbying Turkey in order to put the full weight of the European Union behind efforts to address both the consequences and the causes of the conflict. We welcome Donald Tusk's comments about press freedoms in Turkey but we do not consider that they begin to go far enough in properly addressing the Committee's concerns.⁴¹

Implications for fight against ISIL

27. As well as calling for peace talks, the ISSG's original Statement from November 2015 called for a transitional government to be established, and a timetable to be agreed for drafting a new constitution, within six months. It also called for elections to take place in Syria within eighteen months.⁴² In her oral evidence Lina Khatib, Senior Research Associate at the Arab Reform Initiative, suggested that this timetable was over-optimistic:

I don't think that we can hope for a constitution to be written in six months. All we can hope for realistically is that this can be the start of a process that will probably take a lot longer than we hope and that will eventually lead to the conflict ending. This is the best we can hope for. Anything more concrete than that in terms of the constitution is too premature.⁴³

Evidence we have taken in the course of our Libya inquiry offers cautionary tales about the consequences of a rush to elections.⁴⁴

28. In his response to our previous report on Syria, the Prime Minister appeared to suggest that the Syrian Government and opposition forces would be unable to focus their attentions on ISIL until agreement was reached on a political transition:

In the medium-term, we will work through the political negotiations towards a ceasefire between the Syrian armed forces and moderate opposition, which would create the conditions to allow both sides to focus their military efforts on ISIL. In such circumstances, ground taken from ISIL in Syria could be administered effectively by one or other of those forces. While Assad's forces as currently constituted and led would be unlikely to make an intense effort to take on ISIL, a political transition in Syria would allow new leadership

⁴¹ [Remarks by President Donald Tusk after the meeting of the EU heads of state or government with Turkey](#) (7 March 2016)

⁴² [Statement of the International Syria Support Group](#) (14 November 2015)

⁴³ Q26

⁴⁴ Oral evidence taken on [13 October 2015](#), HC 520, Qq40, 44

and reform of the Syrian Arab Army to enable it to tackle terrorist groups in defence of the Syrian Nation. Without transition, it will continue to be difficult to generate a Sunni force able to fight ISIL and hold ground in Eastern Syria.⁴⁵

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State made similar comments in his oral evidence, arguing that: “The order in which things will move forward is to ensure that we get that political transition, which then allows a united capability to take on Daesh itself.”⁴⁶

29. The Syrian peace process is likely to take some considerable time. We do not accept the Government’s view that the Syrian Government and opposition forces should be assumed to be unable to focus their attention on ISIL until agreement is reached on all aspects of a political transition in Syria. The fight against ISIL cannot wait for a comprehensive peace settlement. In the short term it is imperative that the Cessation of Hostilities be maintained, and that all parties arrive at a preliminary political accord, so they can then focus their attention on the fight against ISIL. ***We recommend that the FCO give greater priority to the immediate fight against ISIL, alongside its longer-term work towards a comprehensive peace settlement. As we concluded in our Second Report on the extension of British military operations to Syria,⁴⁷ we remain unpersuaded that talks involving all parties provide an incentive for people to join ISIL.***

30. This will require military co-ordination of the formerly warring parties, and practical support from the regional powers. The emerging military-to-military co-ordination between the US-led coalition and Russia appears to offer the best available environment in which to have these conversations. If the armed forces of the Syrian Arab Army and the Free Syrian Army on ceasefire are able to agree an early mutual purpose to reclaim Syrian territory jointly from ISIL, they can begin a positive founding narrative of a new Syria, and build trust, which should ultimately allow for the resolution of the hard issues around the future of the leaders of the current Syrian government. ***We recommend that the FCO and the Ministry of Defence work together to advance the recovery of territory from ISIL control, assist Syrian armed groups which have ceased hostilities to work towards this objective whilst ensuring that civilian protection is also prioritised, and press the regional powers to provide the necessary enabling capability, including action to disrupt ISIL’s business and financial activities.***

45 [Prime Minister’s Response to the Foreign Affairs Select Committee’s Second Report of Session 2015–16](#) (November 2015)

46 Oral evidence taken by the Foreign Affairs Sub-Committee on [2 March 2016](#), HC 783, Q128

47 Foreign Affairs Committee, Second Report of Session 2015–16, [The extension of offensive British military operations to Syria](#), HC 457, para 34

Conclusions and recommendations

Identifying the terrorists/groups beyond any reconciliation process

1. *The UK needs to work within the international community to establish that those who are willing to abide by a ceasefire and accept certain fundamental principles about the future nature of Syria should be welcomed into the negotiation process. (Paragraph 6)*

Cessation of Hostilities and resumption of talks

2. *We recommend that the UK support close coalition co-ordination with Russian military forces to minimise the scope for a return to hostilities through misunderstanding and to provide a means to act together to manage a joint response to outbreaks of violence. (Paragraph 11)*

FCO contribution

3. *It is plain that the Prime Minister’s “full diplomatic weight” does not reflect actual human resources. It is the case that the FCO struggles to have the capacity to deploy properly resourced teams, and it is unlikely to be a priority when the hope will be that the UK’s principal ally will do the work. It is another indication of the FCO stretched beyond sensible limits to support the rhetoric of UK leaders and to support the delivery of key British objectives in a crisis-riddled world. It also reinforces the impression in the mind of our principal ally that the UK is another “free rider”. This further reinforces the case made in our First Report that the FCO’s budget should increase. (Paragraph 14)*
4. *We recommend that the FCO maintain a close dialogue with the Russian Government, and especially with Foreign Minister Lavrov. The policy differences between the UK and Russia over Syria are well known, but close dialogue with Russia is a prerequisite if the UK wishes to influence events in the region. (Paragraph 16)*
5. *Compromise on all sides is going to be required to deliver a successful negotiated outcome and in concert with our allies the FCO should in practice provide reassurance around our collective commitment to their future security and survival to the HNC so that they can have the confidence to make the necessary compromises. (Paragraph 17)*

Attitude of regional players

6. *We recommend that the FCO with our allies does all it can to sponsor working-level engagement between Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey at Political Director level and below, so that a practical dialogue is developed between these key regional powers. (Paragraph 21)*

Turkey

7. *The UK must press Turkey to refrain from taking any further action against YPG forces and play a constructive role towards shared objectives in the defeat of ISIL.*

It is not acceptable for the UK, in return for Turkish co-operation on EU migration priorities as per the deal agreed on 18 March, to turn a blind eye towards the brutal Turkish government suppression of legitimate Kurdish aspirations at home and in neighbouring states, which is almost certainly illegal and involves a grossly disproportionate use of force. (Paragraph 25)

8. *The UK should spearhead raising with Turkey their behaviour on the Kurdish issue, their support for Islamist groups, playing a destructive role overall in the political process and the suppression of internal dissent and freedom of speech. (Paragraph 26)*

Implications for fight against ISIL

9. *We recommend that the FCO give greater priority to the immediate fight against ISIL, alongside its longer-term work towards a comprehensive peace settlement. As we concluded in our Second Report on the extension of British military operations to Syria, we remain unpersuaded that talks involving all parties provide an incentive for people to join ISIL. (Paragraph 29)*
10. *We recommend that the FCO and the Ministry of Defence work together to advance the recovery of territory from ISIL control, assist Syrian armed groups which have ceased hostilities to work towards this objective whilst ensuring that civilian protection is also prioritised, and press the regional powers to provide the necessary enabling capability, including action to disrupt ISIL's business and financial activities. (Paragraph 30)*

Appendix: International Syria Support Group Statement of 14 November 2015

On 14 November 2015, the United Nations issued the following Note to Correspondents, on the Statement of the International Syria Support Group:

Meeting in Vienna on November 14, 2015 as the International Syria Support Group (ISSG), the Arab League, China, Egypt, the EU, France, Germany, Iran, Iraq, Italy, Jordan, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom, the United Nations, and the United States to discuss how to accelerate an end to the Syrian conflict. The participants began with a moment of silence for the victims of the heinous terrorist attacks of November 13 in Paris and the recent attacks in Beirut, Iraq, Ankara, and Egypt. The members unanimously condemned in the strongest terms these brutal attacks against innocent civilians and stood with the people of France.

Subsequently, the participants engaged in a constructive dialogue to build upon the progress made in the October 30 gathering. The members of the ISSG expressed a unanimous sense of urgency to end the suffering of the Syrian people, the physical destruction of Syria, the destabilization of the region, and the resulting increase in terrorists drawn to the fighting in Syria.

The ISSG acknowledged the close linkage between a ceasefire and a parallel political process pursuant to the 2012 Geneva Communiqué, and that both initiatives should move ahead expeditiously. They stated their commitment to ensure a Syrian-led and Syrian-owned political transition based on the Geneva Communiqué in its entirety. The group reached a common understanding on several key issues.

The group agreed to support and work to implement a nationwide ceasefire in Syria to come into effect as soon as the representatives of the Syrian government and the opposition have begun initial steps towards the transition under UN auspices on the basis of the Geneva Communiqué. The five Permanent Members of the UN Security Council pledged to support a UNSC resolution to empower a UN-endorsed ceasefire monitoring mission in those parts of the country where monitors would not come under threat of attacks from terrorists, and to support a political transition process in accordance with the Geneva Communiqué.

All members of the ISSG also pledged as individual countries and supporters of various belligerents to take all possible steps to require adherence to the ceasefire by these groups or individuals they support, supply or influence. The ceasefire would not apply to offensive or defensive actions against Da'esh or Nusra or any other group the ISSG agrees to deem terrorist.

The participants welcomed UN Secretary General Ban's statement that he has ordered the UN to accelerate planning for supporting the implementation of a nationwide ceasefire. The group agreed that the UN should lead the effort, in consultation with interested parties, to determine the requirements and modalities of a ceasefire.

The ISSG expressed willingness to take immediate steps to encourage confidence-building measures that would contribute to the viability of the political process and to pave the way for the nationwide ceasefire. In this context, and pursuant to clause 5 of the

Vienna Communique, the ISSG discussed the need to take steps to ensure expeditious humanitarian access throughout the territory of Syria pursuant to UNSCR 2165 and called for the granting of the UN's pending requests for humanitarian deliveries. The ISSG expressed concern for the plight of refugees and internally displaced persons and the imperative of building conditions for their safe return in accordance with the norms of international humanitarian law and taking into account the interests of host countries. The resolution of the refugee issue is important to the final settlement of the Syrian conflict. The ISSG also reaffirmed the devastating effects of the use of indiscriminate weapons on the civilian population and humanitarian access, as stated in UNSCR 2139. The ISSG agreed to press the parties to end immediately any use of such indiscriminate weapons.

The ISSG reaffirmed the importance of abiding by all relevant UN Security Council resolutions, including UNSCR 2199 on stopping the illegal trade in oil, antiquities and hostages, from which terrorists benefit.

Pursuant to the 2012 Geneva Communique, incorporated by reference in the Vienna statement of October 30, and in U.N. Security Council Resolution 2118, the ISSG agreed on the need to convene Syrian government and opposition representatives in formal negotiations under UN auspices, as soon as possible, with a target date of January 1. The group welcomed efforts, working with United Nations Special Envoy for Syria Staffan de Mistura and others, to bring together the broadest possible spectrum of the opposition, chosen by Syrians, who will decide their negotiating representatives and define their negotiating positions, so as to enable the political process to begin. All the parties to the political process should adhere to the guiding principles identified at the October 30 meeting, including a commitment to Syria's unity, independence, territorial integrity, and non-sectarian character; to ensuring that State institutions remain intact; and to protecting the rights of all Syrians, regardless of ethnicity or religious denomination. ISSG members agreed that these principles are fundamental.

The ISSG members reaffirmed their support for the transition process contained in the 2012 Geneva Communique. In this respect they affirmed their support for a ceasefire as described above and for a Syrian-led process that will, within a target of six months, establish credible, inclusive and non-sectarian governance, and set a schedule and process for drafting a new constitution. Free and fair elections would be held pursuant to the new constitution within 18 months. These elections must be administered under UN supervision to the satisfaction of the governance and to the highest international standards of transparency and accountability, with all Syrians, including the diaspora, eligible to participate.

Regarding the fight against terrorism, and pursuant to clause 6 of the Vienna Communique, the ISSG reiterated that Da'esh, Nusra, and other terrorist groups, as designated by the UN Security Council, and further, as agreed by the participants and endorsed by the UN Security Council, must be defeated. The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan agreed to help develop among intelligence and military community representatives a common understanding of groups and individuals for possible determination as terrorists, with a target of completion by the beginning of the political process under UN auspices.

The participants expect to meet in approximately one month in order to review progress towards implementation of a ceasefire and the beginning of the political process.

Formal Minutes

Tuesday 22 March 2016

Members present:

Crispin Blunt, in the Chair

Ann Clwyd

Daniel Kawczynski

Mike Gapes

Yasmin Qureshi

Stephen Gethins

Andrew Rosindell

Mark Hendrick

Nadhim Zahawi

Adam Holloway

Draft Report (*The UK's role in the war against ISIL following the Cessation of Hostilities in Syria in February 2016*), proposed by the Chair, brought up and read.

Ordered, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 30 read and agreed to.

Summary read and agreed to.

A Paper (International Syria Support Group Statement of 14 November 2015) was appended to the Report.

Resolved, That the Report be the Third Report of the Committee to the House.

Ordered, That the Chair make the Report to the House.

Ordered, That embargoed copies of the Report be made available, in accordance with the provisions of Standing Order No. 134.

[Adjourned till Tuesday 12 April at 2.30 pm

Witnesses

The following witnesses gave evidence. Transcripts can be viewed on the [inquiry publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

Tuesday 12 January 2016

Question number

Lina Khatib, Senior Research Associate, Arab Reform Initiative, **Chris Phillips**, Associate Fellow, Chatham House, **Neil Quilliam**, Acting Head, Middle East and North Africa Programme, Chatham House, and **Michael Stephens**, Research Fellow for Middle East Studies, Royal United Services Institute,

[Q1–40](#)

Tuesday 26 January 2016

Daniel Levy, Head of Middle East and North Africa Programme, European Council on Foreign Relations, and **Lord Williams of Baglan**, Distinguished Visiting Fellow, Chatham House

[Q41–64](#)

Gareth Stansfield, Senior Associate Fellow, Royal United Services Institute, **Zeynep Kaya**, Fellow, London School of Economics, and **Güney Yıldız**, Turkish and Kurdish Affairs Analyst

[Q65–77](#)

Published written evidence

The following written evidence was received and can be viewed on the [inquiry publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

ISI numbers are generated by the evidence processing system and so may not be complete.

- 1 Averroes ([ISI0018](#))
- 2 Bicom ([ISI0028](#))
- 3 British Council ([ISI0015](#))
- 4 Community Security Trust (CST) ([ISI0014](#))
- 5 Dawlaty ([ISI0013](#))
- 6 Dr Andrew Watt ([ISI0030](#))
- 7 Dr Sajjan Gohel ([ISI0020](#))
- 8 Dr Zeynep Kaya ([ISI0032](#))
- 9 Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([ISI0005](#))
- 10 Foreign and Commonwealth Office ([ISI0034](#))
- 11 Güney Yıldız ([ISI0031](#))
- 12 Karwan Jamal Tahir ([ISI0027](#))
- 13 Lina Khatib ([ISI0029](#))
- 14 Mr Gary Kent ([ISI0026](#))
- 15 Mr Ronald Sandee ([ISI0033](#))
- 16 National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces ([ISI0009](#))
- 17 Quilliam ([ISI0023](#))
- 18 Rethink Rebuild Society ([ISI0008](#))
- 19 Royal United Services Institute ([ISI0012](#))
- 20 Southern Front ([ISI0006](#))
- 21 Syria Civil Defence (The White Helmets) ([ISI0016](#))
- 22 Syria Civil Society Alliance ([ISI0011](#))
- 23 Syria NGO Alliance ([ISI0021](#))
- 24 Syria Solidarity Movement UK ([ISI0022](#))
- 25 Syrian Emergency Task Force ([ISI0017](#))
- 26 Tony Blair Faith Foundation ([ISI0007](#))

List of Reports from the Committee during the current Parliament

All publications from the Committee are available on the [publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

The reference number of the Government's response to each Report is printed in brackets after the HC printing number.

Session 2015–16

First Report	The FCO and the 2015 Spending Review	HC 467 (HC 816)
Second Report	The extension of offensive British military operations to Syria	HC 457