

## Written Evidence Submitted by Rethink Rebuild Society (ISI0008)

The writing of this evidence is underpinned by our policy document 'Syria Between Dictatorship and ISIS: What can the United Kingdom Do?'<sup>1</sup> which has been endorsed by seven Syrian community organisations across the UK.

### Executive Summary

- An end to the Syrian conflict and its symptoms – Islamic State's (IS) extremism and the Syrian refugee crisis – can only come about through protecting civilians from Assad's killing machine. The Assad regime remains the biggest obstacle to civilian protection in Syria,<sup>2</sup> responsible for 85% of total casualties.<sup>3</sup> Aerial bombardment is responsible for the majority of these casualties.<sup>4</sup>
- Assad is perpetuating terrorism and extremism rather than fighting it. To defeat IS, the United Kingdom and its allies should support a comprehensive approach that focuses on tackling the extremist threat at its roots, namely Assad's indiscriminate violence against civilians and civilian objects.
- As currently conceived, US anti-IS strikes are not sufficient either to defeat IS or to stop the suffering across Syria.
- Any military intervention in Syria should be conducted with the primary purpose of civilian protection and adhere to 'just war' criteria. It follows that the main cause of civilian deaths, namely Assad's aerial bombardment, must be addressed. A no-bombing zone in Syria would protect civilians, remove their need to seek refuge abroad, and make the fight against IS more effective.

### About *Rethink Rebuild*

1. *Rethink Rebuild Society* is a Manchester-based non-profit organisation established in 2013 to campaign for Syrian issues within the British landscape. We have established ourselves as the leading Syrian advocacy group within the UK, working with policy makers and the media to try to secure decisions that are in the best interests of both Syrians and Britain.<sup>5</sup>
2. *Rethink Rebuild Society* works with policy makers at the local and national levels to address pertinent issues facing British Syrians. We approached the UK and European Parliaments to establish accountability for HSBC bank for its arbitrary closure of Syrians' bank accounts.<sup>6</sup> We also worked with local authorities to address police visits to Syrians' homes as well as airport stops of Syrian UK-residents upon their return to the country.<sup>7</sup> We have also called for speedier processing times for asylum applications of Syrian nationals. On a more general policy level, we have issued Parliamentary briefings on key issues pertaining to Syria, including on the UK's potential involvement in the US-led coalition against IS.<sup>8</sup>

3. We also serve as a critical source of information on Syria for journalists and reporters. We issue press releases that are regularly picked up by media outlets, thereby shaping the news agenda on Syria.<sup>9</sup> We have been hosted on both television and radio programmes and have been quoted in local, national, and international press.<sup>10</sup>

### **Reason for Submitting Evidence**

4. We maintain strong stances against the oppression and killing perpetrated by the Assad regime as well as the terror of extremist groups operating within Syria such as IS.<sup>11</sup>
5. With respect to the IS, we issued a statement as early as March 2014 advising British nationals not to travel to Syria to fight (with any group).<sup>12</sup> We have since maintained a consistent position that terrorist groups such as IS pose a threat to Syrian civilians in a similar manner to the regime and therefore have no place in a post-Assad Syria.

### **Assad is the main driver of Civilian Deaths, Terrorism, Extremism and the Refugee Crisis**

6. Assad is *not* the least worst alternative but rather the root cause of the conflict in Syria. The regime has, since 2011, violently suppressed its civilian population, destroying entire cities and neighbourhoods,<sup>13</sup> employing barrel bombs and chemical weapons,<sup>14</sup> using starvation as a method of war,<sup>15</sup> and inviting foreign militias to wreak havoc upon civilians.<sup>16</sup> The instability, chaos, and desperation that resulted as a consequence of this brutality provided fertile grounds for criminal groups such as IS to take root within Syria.<sup>17</sup>
7. The Assad regime was instrumental in the creation and expansion of IS. At the beginning of the conflict in March 2011, it released known militant and extremist individuals from prison through a series of amnesties (allegedly in response to protesters' demands) with the knowledge that they would contribute to the militarisation of the conflict.<sup>18</sup> Many of these individuals can now be found among the leadership of IS.<sup>19</sup>
8. The Assad regime has failed to combat IS directly or to take effective measures to weaken it. Most notably, it failed to control IS's spread to cities such as al-Raqqa in northern Syria and Palmyra in central Syria. Even when it conducted airstrikes in these cities, it largely targeted civilian areas rather than IS military strongholds as affirmed in a March 2015 Amnesty International report detailing the regime's offensive on al-Raqqa.<sup>20</sup>
9. Assad's aerial bombardment makes Syrians desperate for protection, even if it is coming from IS. Aerial bombardment is also the number one reason that Syrians are fleeing the country to neighbouring states and the EU.
10. Russian airstrikes have emboldened the regime and have caused more civilian deaths. Since 30 September, Russian airstrikes have killed at least 127 civilians including 36 children.<sup>21</sup> The combination of Russian airstrikes and Assad barrel bombs will exacerbate the crisis even further. We can expect higher death tolls, more refugees attempting the

perilous journey abroad, and more IS recruits. Hence, immediate civilian protection – through a no-bombing zone – must constitute the basis of any UK policy towards Syria.

11. The ending of aerial bombardment will slow the refugee exodus and free up moderate forces to combat IS more effectively.

### **General Recommendations**

12. The solution to the IS threat must begin with civilian protection, namely putting a stop to the Assad regime's aerial bombardment through a no-bombing zone. The bottom line is that if Syrians are protected, they will have less incentive to join groups such as IS, thus allowing moderate opposition groups to more effectively fight extremism. In ensuring civilian protection, Syrians will also not need to risk their lives to seek refuge in neighbouring and European countries.
13. Syrians inside Syria and across the world are calling for the establishment of a no-bombing zone over the entirety of the Syrian territory. This constitutes the main policy recommendation in our policy document endorsed by Syrian community organisations across the UK.<sup>22</sup> This policy demand has also been called for by Planet Syria which represents over one hundred Syrian civil society organisations.<sup>23</sup>

### **Policy Incentives for the UK**

14. Efforts to protect civilians in Syria through a no-bombing zone will serve the following core advantages for the United Kingdom:
  - i. ***Stem the flow of Syrian refugees:*** If Syrians are protected within their own country, they will have less incentive to seek refuge in Europe.
  - ii. ***Reduce the outflux of foreign fighters to Syria:*** A primary motive cited by foreign fighters who travel to Syria is that they are coming to the aid of an oppressed people to whom the international community has turned a blind eye.<sup>24</sup> Robust, narrowly tailored, and calculated action to protect civilians from the Assad regime will demonstrate the UK's commitment to Syrians and will thus remove the incentive of those intending to go abroad and fight.
  - iii. ***Free up moderate fighters to combat IS.*** Without being continuously hit by regime and Russian airstrikes, moderate fighters will have greater capacity to fight IS.
  - iv. ***Maintain the UK's image internationally:*** The UK's proven commitment to saving Syrian lives will put it in a better position to help shape Syria's post-conflict political and economic environments. The UK's active involvement in the protection of Syrian civilians will reinforce its image as a staunch advocate of human rights.
  - v. ***Economic advantage:*** Civilian protection will substantially decrease the amount of humanitarian aid required on the ground in Syria, thus alleviating economic pressure in the long term upon donor countries such as the UK. The UK is

currently the second largest single donor to humanitarian efforts in Syria with an estimated total of £1.1 billion in contributions as of September 2015.<sup>25</sup>

15. As the largest Syrian advocacy and community organisation in the UK, would be honoured to present this evidence orally to the Foreign Affairs Committee as part of its upcoming inquiry on the “The Fight Against ISIL: the UK’s Role”.

October 2015

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<sup>1</sup> 'Syria Between Dictatorship and ISIS: What can the United Kingdom Do?'. Rethink Rebuild Society, September 2015. <http://rrsoc.org/node/313>.

<sup>2</sup> Kenneth Roth. 'Barrel Bombs, not ISIS, are the Greatest Threat to Syrians'. The New York Times, 5 August 2015. <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/06/opinion/barrel-bombs-not-isis-are-the-greatest-threat-to-syrians.html>.

<sup>3</sup> As of July 2015, there are between 230,000 to 320,000 people dead, over 4 million refugees and 7.6 million internally displaced people (collectively amounting to over half of the entire Syrian population), and tens of thousands of Syrians who are facing or died under torture in regime prisons. This is not including infrastructural damage: over 35% of the country's hospitals, 4,000 schools, and 290 heritage sites have been destroyed. '320,000 people killed since the beginning of the Syrian Revolution'. Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, 9 June 2015. <http://www.syriahr.com/en/2015/06/320000-people-killed-since-the-beginning-of-the-syrian-revolution/>; Diana Al-Rifai and Mohammed Haddad. 'What's Left of Syria?'. Aljazeera, 17 March 2015. <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/interactive/2015/03/left-syria-150317133753354.html>; '2015 UNHCR country operations profile - Syrian Arab Republic'. UNHCR, March 2015. <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49e486a76.html>; Daa Hadid. 'Syrian Rebels and Government Reach Truce in Besieged Area'. The Huffington Post, 15 January 2015. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/01/15/syria-rebel-truce\\_n\\_6478226.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/01/15/syria-rebel-truce_n_6478226.html); 'Syria Regional Refugee Response'. UNHCR, March 2015. <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>; 'Syrian Children under Siege'. UNICEF, 2015. <http://www.unicefusa.org/mission/emergencies/conflict/syria>; Diana Al-Rifai. 'Tracking Syria's deadly toxic chemical attacks'. Aljazeera, 18 April 2015. <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/04/tracking-syria-deadly-toxic-chemical-attacks-150417065804006.html>; Daryl Kimbal and Kelsey Davenport. 'Timeline of Syrian Chemical Weapons Activity, 2012-2015'. Arms Control Association, 19 August 2014. <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/Timeline-of-Syrian-Chemical-Weapons-Activity>; 'Syria: New Spate of Barrel Bomb Attacks'. Human Rights Watch, 24 February 2015. <http://www.hrw.org/news/2015/02/24/syria-new-spate-barrel-bomb-attacks>; Alessandria Masi, 'Assad's government still kills way more civilians than ISIS'. Business Insider, 2 February 2015. <http://www.businessinsider.com/assads-government-still-kills-way-more-civilians-than-isis-2015-2?IR=T>; Adam Entous and Dion Nissenbaum. '10,000 Bodies: Inside Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad's Crackdown'. The Wall Street Journal, 25 July 2014. <http://www.wsj.com/articles/10-000-bodies-inside-syrian-president-bashar-al-assads-crackdown-1406315472>; 'UNHCR: Syrian Refugees Cross Four Million Mark'. Aljazeera, 9 July 2015. <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/07/unhcr-syrian-refugees-4-million-150709033023489.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Lucy Westcott, 'United Nations: Assad's Barrel Bombs Continue to Kill Syrian Civilians'. Newsweek, 27 June 2015. <http://www.newsweek.com/united-nations-assads-barrel-bombs-continue-kill-syrian-civilians-347782>

<sup>5</sup> For our media appearances, see 'RR in the Press'. Rethink Rebuild Society. <http://rrsoc.org/rr-in-the-press>.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Maria Tadeo. 'Exclusive: "Shameless" HSBC shuts Syrian refugees' bank accounts in Britain'. The Independent, 8 May 2014. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/business/news/exclusive-shameless-hsbc-shuts-syrian-refugees-bank-accounts-in-britain-9655838.html>; Maria Tadeo. 'MPs to Hold HSBC to Account after Syrian Customers are Turned Away'. The Independent, 8 August 2014. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/business/news/mps-to-hold-hsbc-to-account-after-syrian-customers-are-turned-away-9658350.html>.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, 'Press Release: Syrians Face Unfair Airport Stops'. Rethink Rebuild Society, 11 June 2015. <http://rrsoc.org/node/255>.

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<sup>8</sup> See, for example, 'Syria Between Dictatorship and ISIS: What can the United Kingdom Do?' Rethink Rebuild Society, September 2015. [http://www.rrsoc.org/sites/default/files/pdf/Syria\\_Between\\_Dictatorship&ISIS.pdf](http://www.rrsoc.org/sites/default/files/pdf/Syria_Between_Dictatorship&ISIS.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> See 'Press Releases'. Rethink Rebuild Society. <http://rrsoc.org/press-releases>.

<sup>10</sup> For our media appearances, see 'RR in the Press'. Rethink Rebuild Society. <http://rrsoc.org/rr-in-the-press>

<sup>11</sup> We do not agree with the name 'Islamic State' because, as noted by Prime Minister David Cameron, 'it is not an Islamic state'. We prefer using the abbreviation ISIS, ISIL, or adding so-called before the name. Matt Dahan. "'I wish the BBC would stop calling it Islamic State' – David Cameron unleashes frustration at broadcaster'. The Independent, 29 June 2015. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/i-wish-the-bbc-would-stop-calling-it-islamic-state--davidcameron-unleashes-frustration-on-broadcaster-10351885.html>.

<sup>12</sup> 'A statement regarding joining the fighting in Syria'. Rethink Rebuild Society, 12 March 2014.

[http://rrsoc.org/sites/default/files/pdf/2014-03-12\\_Joining\\_the\\_fighting\\_in\\_Syria.pdf](http://rrsoc.org/sites/default/files/pdf/2014-03-12_Joining_the_fighting_in_Syria.pdf).

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Martin Chulov, 'Syria wiping neighbourhoods off the map to punish residents – rights group'. The Guardian, 30 January 2014. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jan/30/syria-neighbourhoods-residents>.

<sup>14</sup> Diana Al-Rifai. 'Tracking Syria's deadly toxic chemical attacks'. Aljazeera, 18 April 2015.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/04/tracking-syria-deadlytoxic-chemical-attacks-150417065804006.html>;

Daryl Kimbal and Kelsey Davenport. 'Timeline of Syrian Chemical Weapons Activity, 2012-2015'. Arms Control Association, 19 August 2014. <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/Timeline-of-Syrian-Chemical-Weapons-Activity>; 'Syria: New Spate of Barrel Bomb Attacks'. Human Rights Watch, 24 February 2015.

<http://www.hrw.org/news/2015/02/24/syria-new-spate-barrel-bomb-attacks>.

<sup>15</sup> 'Insight: Starvation in Syria: a war tactic'. Reuters, 30 October 2013.

<http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/10/30/us-syria-crisis-hunger-insightidUSBRE99T07I20131030>; 'Syria: Assad forces "using starvation as weapon of war"'. BBC News, 10 March 2014. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middleeast-26481422>.

<sup>16</sup> Phillip Smyth. 'The Shiite Jihad in Syria and its Regional Effects'. The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2015. [http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/PolicyFocus138\\_Smyth-2.pdf](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/PolicyFocus138_Smyth-2.pdf), pgs. 39-40;

'Dearborn Man Accused Of Supporting Terrorist Group Hizballah'. CBS Detroit, 17 March 2014.

<http://detroit.cbslocal.com/2014/03/17/dearborn-man-accused-of-supporting-hezbollah/>; Jeffrey White. 'Assad's Indispensable Foreign Legions'. The Washington Institute, 22 January 2014.

<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/assads-indispensableforeign-legions>.

<sup>17</sup> This is in line with the remarks of British Ambassador to the UN Sir Mark Lyall Grant that 'Al-Assad is not the answer to the terrorist threat; he is the cause of it', and that 'as long as Al-Assad remains in power, there will be no peace in Syria'. UNSC 7222nd Meeting (22 July 2014) UN Doc S/PV.7222; UNSC 7281st Meeting (21 October 2014) UN Doc S/PV.7281.

<sup>18</sup> Simon Speakman Cordall. 'How Syria's Assad Helped Forge ISIS'. Newsweek, 21 June 2014.

<http://www.newsweek.com/how-syrias-assad-helped-forge-isis-255631>.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> 'Syria: Ruthless and unlawful government attacks killed scores of civilians in al-Raqqa'. Amnesty International, 17 March 2015. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2015/03/syria-ruthless-and-unlawful-government-attacks-killed-scores-of-civilians-in-al-raqqa/>

<sup>21</sup> Adam Chandler, 'The Civilian Toll of Russia's Bombing Campaign'. Atlantic, 20 October 2015.

<http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/10/russia-airstrikes-syria-civilians-us/411478/>

<sup>22</sup> 'Syria Between Dictatorship and ISIS: What can the United Kingdom Do?'. Rethink Rebuild Society, September 2015. <http://rrsoc.org/node/313>.

<sup>23</sup> See <https://www.planetsyria.org/en>

<sup>24</sup> See, for example, Bassam Khabieh. 'Statement on Syrian Policy Framework'. International Crisis Group, 27 April 2015. <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/publication-type/media-releases/2015/middle-east-north-africa/statement-on-a-syrian-policy-framework.aspx>.

<sup>25</sup> 'Syria Crisis Response Summary'. DFID, 4 September 2015.