

**A speech given by The Right Reverend Dr. Christopher Cocksworth, Lord Bishop of Coventry, in the House of Lords on Tuesday 2<sup>nd</sup> December 2015**

**The extension of airstrikes into Syria**

My Lords, coming from Coventry, a city bound in solidarity of suffering with bombed cities in Europe, I am kept in daily remembrance of the costs of military action, especially to civilians. Against such costs, the benefits must be clear, and the chances of success especially high. We all agree the evil of Daesh needs to be stopped; but of course the key question is, will extending strikes from Iraq into Syria do it?

We have heard much about the arbitrary nature of the Sykes-Picot border. But during last year's debate on intervention in Iraq, the Government recognised that the factors increasing the chances of success on one side of this border did not apply to the other. To my eye, untrained as I admit it is, they still don't.

We know that wars are not won from the air. Yes, our operations in Iraq have had some success in stopping the spread of Daesh, but this has been thanks to the close collaboration with the Iraqi government and armed forces. This won't be the case in Syria. No one doubts that the best partner would be an inclusive Syrian Government and Army, honouring a ceasefire with moderate groups, and able to participate in long-term reconstruction and reconciliation.

Such a political process would be wishful thinking without the plan and timetable from Vienna that would make it a reality. However, the Vienna process has not been given the chance to bear the fruit of the transitional Government. Without waiting for its results, are we not at risk of being perceived as the unwitting allies of the Assad regime?

Military action has unintended consequences. It will cause collateral damage, both physical and ideological, in the region and beyond. I don't doubt the military skill and highest standards of our pilots and equipment. But there is no such thing as a perfectly surgical strike from the air; and we will be implicated by the less precise bombing of other forces, Russian included. Do we not risk handing Daesh further propaganda victories in the form of civilian casualties?

Furthermore, in what is fundamentally an ideological conflict, we must be keenly aware that collateral damage also takes ideological forms. Any Western action will only reinforce Daesh's apocalyptic narrative of Western aggression. How will UK airstrikes be viewed by millions of Sunni Muslims, regionally and in Britain itself? Daesh prospers because it champions the perceived grievances of Sunni Arabs against other groups in Syria and Iraq. How will the Government seek to address these grievances legitimately, and counter Daesh's narrative, so that tactical victories in Syria do not come at the cost of fuelling their perverted cause?

I began with reference to the chances of success, which must be high to offset the virtual certainty of collateral damage from military action. My Lords, I don't

believe that the necessarily high threshold for this prospect of success has been met. Yet if, as seems probable, we are to intervene, our attention must turn to the minimising of collateral damage in the widest sense that will result as the battles rage.

Therefore I conclude by asking the Noble Earl, the Minister, how the Government's review of progress will ensure that the success of our action is measured not only in victories against Daesh's military capacity, but also in the victories of political settlement and peace that will ensure that their poisonous ideology, contrary to their own strategy, will not endure and expand?