

PM: Our generational struggle against a poisonous ideology

Writing in The Sunday Telegraph, David Cameron warns of terrorist caliphate on the shores of the Mediterranean if Islamic State succeeds

The Prime Minister says the world cannot turn a blind eye to the creation of an extremist caliphate in the heart of Iraq Photo: PA

by Christopher Hope, Senior Political Correspondent, 9:29PM BST 16 Aug 2014

The West is embroiled in a generational struggle against a poisonous brand of Islamic extremism that will bring terror to the streets of Britain unless urgent action is taken to defeat it, David Cameron warns today.

Writing in The Sunday Telegraph, the Prime Minister says the world cannot turn a blind eye to the creation of an extremist caliphate in the heart of Iraq.

Warning that Islamic State fighters already control thousands of square miles of territory, Mr Cameron says that if these “warped and barbaric” extremists are not dealt with now, they will create a “terrorist state” on the shores of the Mediterranean.

He warns that Britain will have to use its “military prowess” to help defeat “this exceptionally dangerous” movement, or else terrorists with “murderous intent” will target people in Britain.

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The Prime Minister says he fears the struggle will last “the rest of my political lifetime”.

“The creation of an extremist caliphate in the heart of Iraq and extending into Syria is not a problem miles away from home. Nor is it a problem that should be defined by a war 10 years ago. It is our concern here and now,” he says.

“Because if we do not act to stem the onslaught of this exceptionally dangerous terrorist movement, it will only grow stronger until it can target us on the streets of Britain. We already know that it has the murderous intent.”

In his article, Mr Cameron says Britain and the West need a firm security response to the crisis in Iraq and that fighters from Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (Isil) cannot simply be removed by air strikes alone.

An Isil fighter stands guard at a checkpoint in Mosul, Iraq (Reuters)

He says this must involve military action to go after the terrorists themselves, but also stresses that the Government must take uncompromising action against extremists in Britain trying to recruit fighters for jihad abroad. The Prime Minister discloses that the Government has already taken down 28,000 pieces of terrorist related material from the web, including 46 Isil videos.

He says he has also discussed the issue with Sir Bernard Hogan-Howe, the Metropolitan Police Commissioner, and pledges that anyone caught trying to recruit people in Britain – or anyone flying the black flag of Islamic State, as happened in east London earlier this month – will be arrested.

“The position is clear. If people are walking around with Isil flags or trying to recruit people to their terrorist cause they will be arrested and their materials will be seized,” he says.

“We are a tolerant people, but no tolerance should allow the room for this sort of poisonous extremism in our country.”

Last night, the Bishop of Leeds released a letter he had sent to Mr Cameron describing British policy on Islamic extremism as not “coherent or comprehensive”.

The Right Rev Nicholas Baines, who claimed to have the support of the Archbishop of Canterbury, said that he remained “very concerned about the government’s response to several issues” and poses questions to the Prime Minister about his policy towards Iraq and Syria. In the letter, published on his blog, the bishop writes of his “serious concern that we do not seem to have a coherent or comprehensive approach” towards groups such as the Islamic State, Boko Haram in Nigeria and other extremist groups.

A Lambeth Palace source told The Sunday Telegraph that while the Archbishop of Canterbury “supports the bishop posing these questions,” he also acknowledged the “major difficulties” faced by the Government in tackling extremism and called on people to pray for the government.

In his article, the Prime Minister lays bare his alarm at how the crisis in Iraq threatens European security, Mr Cameron says the first Isil-inspired terrorist acts on the continent of Europe have already taken place.

“We are in the middle of a generational struggle against a poisonous and extremist ideology which I believe we will be fighting for the rest of my political lifetime,” he says. “We face in Isil a new threat that is single-minded, determined and unflinching in pursuit of its objectives.

“Already it controls not just thousands of minds, but thousands of square miles of territory, sweeping aside much of the boundary between Iraq and Syria to carve out its so-called caliphate. It makes no secret of its expansionist aims.

“Even today it has the ancient city of Aleppo firmly within its sights. And it boasts of its designs on Jordan and Lebanon, and right up to the Turkish border. If it succeeded we would be facing a terrorist state on the shores of the Mediterranean and bordering a Nato member.”

Mr Cameron made his comments as the Ministry of Defence disclosed that Britain had deployed a spy plane as part of humanitarian efforts in Iraq. The MoD confirmed that the intelligence-gathering Rivet Joint aircraft had carried out several flights over areas in the north of country which have been targeted by advancing Islamist extremists.

It emerged last week that Britain was considering joining France and several eastern European countries and arming Kurdish forces in Iraq to help them fight Islamic State militants. In his article, Mr Cameron discloses that he is considering sending body armour and specialist counter-explosive equipment to the Kurds.

Britain will also appoint a British representative to the region who will be based in the country and be able to have daily face-to-face contact with the people there, the Prime Minister says.

He adds that Britain will also use next month's Nato summit in Wales and press for more action in the United Nations to "help rally support across the international community" for the Kurdish people, who have been fighting the Islamic State extremists in northern Iraq. The move to supply arms directly will inevitably be seen as a further risk that Britain will be drawn more into the conflict.

But Mr Cameron rules out deploying troops to Iraq, making clear that the crisis is not "a problem that should be defined by a war 10 years ago". However, while he says this is not the "War on Terror" or a religious war, it is a struggle for "decency" and "tolerance" and Britain's future prosperity.

"I agree that we should avoid sending armies to fight or occupy, but we need to recognise that the brighter future we long for requires a long term plan for our security as well as one for our economy," he says.

"True security will only be achieved if we use all our resources – aid, diplomacy, our military prowess – in helping to achieve a more stable world. In today's world, so immediately interconnected as it is, we cannot turn a blind eye and assume that there will not be a cost for us if we do."

Mr Cameron adds: "This is a clear danger to Europe and to our security. It is a daunting challenge.

"But it is not an invincible one, as long as we are now ready and able to summon up the political will to defend our own values and way of life with the same determination, courage and tenacity as we have faced danger before in our history. That is how much is at stake here: we have no choice but to rise to the challenge."

Mr Cameron also discloses that Britain is looking at leading talks with Iran to control the destabilising threat of Islamic State fighters in the region. He says Britain has to "work with countries like Saudi Arabia and Qatar, the UAE, Egypt and Turkey and perhaps even with Iran" against this "shared threat". "I want Britain to play a leading role in this diplomatic effort," he says.

Yazidi refugees fill bottles at the Newroz camp in the Hasaka province, Syria (AFP)

The crisis in Iraq was highlighted by reports on Saturday that up to 80 Yazidis were killed by Islamic State fighters in the biggest massacre of the Iraqi minority in the jihadists' brutal campaign.

Kurdish and Yazidi sources reported that dozens of people in the village of Kocho, located about 15 miles from Sinjar city, had been summarily executed by jihadists after they refused to “convert to Islam”.

Hoshyar Zebari, a senior Iraqi official who said he had spoken to witnesses from the scene, said that the jihadists had “committed a massacre”.

In his article, Mr Cameron admits that he is sympathetic with people who are wary about Britain becoming more involved in the country.

He says: “After a deep and damaging recession, and our involvement in long and difficult conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, it is hardly surprising that so many people say to me when seeing the tragedies unfolding on their television screens, ‘Yes, let’s help with aid, but let’s not get any more involved.’

“I agree that we should avoid sending armies to fight or occupy. But we need to recognise that the brighter future we long for requires a long-term plan for our security as well as for our economy. True security will only be achieved if we use all our resources – aid, diplomacy, our military prowess – to help bring about a more stable world.

“Today, when every nation is so immediately interconnected, we cannot turn a blind eye and assume that there will not be a cost for us if we do.”

A fresh consignment of British aid was flown to Iraqis fleeing the advance of the extremists amid reports of another massacre of religious minorities late last week.

The US said its drones had destroyed two armoured vehicles reported by Kurdish leaders as being used by Islamic State forces to attack civilians near Sinjar.

Last week, the United Nations Security Council unanimously approved a resolution designed to choke off the terrorists’ funding and recruitment. It also imposed sanctions including a travel ban and an asset freeze on six prominent extremists and warned that action could be taken against anyone held responsible for aiding the cause.

Sir Mark Lyall Grant, Britain’s UN ambassador, said the resolution represented a “comprehensive rejection” of Islamic State.

But he said it was only a first step and urged the international community to be “resolved, active and creative in considering what further measures should be taken to tackle this terrorist scourge”.

Nadhim Zahawi, a Conservative MP who was visiting northern Iraq late last week, said that Islamic State fighters had been caught carrying a season ticket for Liverpool Football Club and a gym card from Ealing.

He said that local forces estimated that between “500 and 750 fighters have joined the Islamic caliphate from the United Kingdom”.

Rory Stewart MP, the Tory chairman of the defence select committee who was also in Iraq, said Islamic State was now a “significant threat”.

He added: “We have been complacent. This has been developing a long time. In some ways these people have been in Mosul for two and a half years and we worked up to it about two and a half months ago.

“We ignored them when they were developing in eastern Syria, we ignored them when they took Fallujah in January.

“This is a huge and growing problem and some of those people are very, very clear in every interview they give that they want to come back and do jihad elsewhere.”