

SYRIA: THE WORST WESTERN FOREIGN POLICY CATASTROPHE OF RECENT TIMES? (draft)

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The Syrian horror has been unfolding since March 2011, and it is estimated that there have been more fatalities per head of population than any recent conflict in the region, with a death count averaging a colossal 117 per day. Government forces have unleashed waves of terror, while their Jihadist opponents, affiliates of Al Qaeda, have imposed their own medieval barbarity.

The death toll is widely believed to be well over 100,000 (the last figure the UN released in July 2013 before conditions made further accurate estimates impossible). The Oxford Research group has reported 764 cases of summary execution of children. In the Damascus suburbs that were hit by chemical attacks, people died – and still are dying – from hunger. The number of Syrians in need of food aid is estimated to be as high as 10.5 million which is almost half the population.

The murder and torture of thirteen year old Hamza Al-Khatib by government forces early on in the conflict showed Syrians and the world that no-one was safe, whatever their age, gender or religion. The names of cities like Homs – partly evacuated by the UN after being under siege for over 600 days – have joined some of the world's worst atrocities: evacuees described the situation inside as 'genocidal'.

In February 2012 the entire Baba Amr district of Homs was destroyed, and very little is known of the fate of those who lived there. The regime has demonstrated again and again how disposable they consider their population to be. Armed rebels as well as their women and children are dispatched by the hundreds: 300 dead at the Ramadan Massacre in Hama, 100 dead in one day during the shelling of Jabal al-Zawiya.

Houla is another name that will be remembered for the May 2012 slaughter under cover of darkness of 108 people, including 49 children. These were Sunni deaths and the perpetrators almost certainly Alawite or at least Shia gunmen. Indeed, this has largely been a war between Muslims of the Sunni and Shia faiths: which is a deepening, embittered fault line and source of conflict in the region and across the world.

But the actions of Jihadist followers of the Sunni Muslim faith fighting against the regime have made it harder for analysts to draw lines between a 'bad' regime and 'good' rebels. Two Jihadist groups murdered 190 Alawite civilians in August 2013. Last year footage of a 'rebel' Free Syrian Army fighter eating the part of the heart of a dead Jihadist fighter made the rounds, Russia quick to exploit it as an example of why the rebels must not benefit from arms and money from Western backers: in fact it symbolised a complete collapse of any sense of common humanity in the conflict.

Although it is hard to tell from outside Syria whether the Jihadist rebels now represent a third side in the civil war or are part of the wider rebel movement, increasing testimony indicates that these extremists are taking over the rebel cause, pushing out the moderates.

On 10 February 2014 news emerged that British jihadi fighters in Syria had been filmed torturing a moderate rebel fighter; he was beaten so hard that the metal bar used by the British jihadist broke in two. The victim was alleged to have insulted or mocked the prophet.

But it isn't just young British men heading to the troubled region to fight: the presence of Belgians, Americans and Latvian fighters has also been reported. This muddies the waters in a way that sits uncomfortably with Western interest groups who fell over themselves to back the rebels soon after the conflict broke out.

The fact is that international Jihadists have been committing atrocities in Syria as bad as, though on a smaller scale than, those committed by the utterly barbaric government. According to Amnesty, the Jihadist rebels have set up secret prisons in and around Aleppo where children as young as eight are detained for infringements of Sharia law, and public floggings and killings are also commonplace. Many of those inflicting tortures are reported as being Moroccan, Chechen or Turkish rather than locals.

It's estimated that there may be almost 100,000 Islamist fighters in Syria fighting outside of the Western-backed Syrian Free Army which in turn has its own Sunni factions. In addition there are an estimated 10,000 overtly jihadist fighters who are highly trained and reportedly ruthless. A democratic free Syria is of no interest to these fundamentalist religious fighters who have been responsible for a number of suicide bombings.

How, then, did we get into this murderous morass?

Quite by chance, I was the first Western Foreign Minister to have a one-to-one meeting in Damascus with Bashar al-Assad days before his father's death in June 2000, and his succession as Syrian President. His elder brother Bassel al-Assad had been the favoured successor to

maintain the family dynasty and the Stalinist grip of Syria's Baathist regime. But in 1994, aged 31, he was killed in a car crash and Bashar was lined up to succeed his father instead.

Bashar was a London-based trainee-ophthalmologist, well accustomed to a Western lifestyle and culture. He married Asma Akhras, a London born investment banking analyst and alumna of Queen's College School and King's College London. He was known as the quietest of the three brothers and the least interested in politics. Having been summoned back to Damascus, he was the heir in waiting.

In our conversation, he seemed decent, even sensitive – if rather naïve. What a brutal contrast with the callous butcher he was to become: driving his people into carnage and chaos instead of responding positively to non-violent protests when the Arab Spring reached Syria in March 2011.

But the horror in Syria has not simply been the result of the regime's brutality and unspeakable indifference to suffering as it has crushed resistance and clung on to power at all costs. It is also the product of a monumental foreign policy misjudgement which reached its nadir in the British Prime Minister's humiliation when trying – and failing – to bounce Parliament into backing a military strike in late August 2013. Current and former Foreign Office officials were in despair at the damage done to British credibility on the international stage: never before had a British Prime Minister been so damningly rebuffed in seeking to assert British power.

Just six weeks before that, a motion tabled by backbench MPs of all parties including myself sought prior parliamentary consent before sending UK arms to Syria. On 11 July 2013 it was overwhelmingly passed by 114 to 1, and should have been an ominous signal to a Prime Minister seemingly intent on dramatic military intervention and whose rhetoric had become increasingly bombastic.

That July vote was also very important for a quite different reason, because, despite the decision to allow Parliament a vote before military action in Iraq in 2003 and which set a political precedent, that was not constitutionally binding.

Parliament still has no legally established right either to give or to deny advance sanction to UK participation in military action. The commitment of British forces in Afghanistan was never subject to a vote on a Government-tabled motion. On Libya only retrospective approval for the deployment of forces was sought on 21 March 2011, three days after the announcement of British participation. The deployment of British military assets in Mali in January 2013 in support of a French

attack on terrorists was neither the subject of a debate, nor a vote in Parliament.

That is because by historical precedent in Britain, military action or defence has long been determined by the Government on behalf of the Crown under the Royal Prerogative. In constitutional terms therefore, the Government has complete freedom of action, and Parliament has no formal role in the deployment of the Armed Forces or the supply of UK military equipment. The Government retains the initiative: and in some situations requiring an urgent response, or even pre-emptive action, that is sensible, indeed essential. The UK could come under attack or our key interests could be threatened abroad – in which case convening Parliament for a vote might not be practical, and there would be broad parliamentary and public consent for military defence or action anyway.

But on British military action in Syria there was no such consent, as opinion polls as well as repeated warnings to Ministers from MPs of all parties had demonstrated. The government were caught: having expressed a wish to supply British arms to opposition forces but aware that if there were to be a vote on a substantive motion, it would almost certainly have been lost.

I have never been a pacifist. I was a Cabinet Minister when the decision was made to join the invasion of Iraq in 2003. I was Africa Minister when we sent troops to save Sierra Leone from savagery in 2000. As a Government minister I backed the 1999 intervention in Kosovo to prevent genocide of Muslims. If I had been a young man like my father when the Second World War broke out, I would like him have fought against the Nazis.

But as a former Foreign Office Minister responsible for the Middle East policy, including Syria, I was from the outset vehemently opposed to British military intervention of any kind in Syria. Even well intentioned humanitarian interventions can cost enormous numbers of lives. As for the counter argument that over Syria that British military intervention could surely not have made things worse than they already were, remember that French intervention in Algeria led to ten years of conflict and 100,000 dead; in Lebanon there was 15 years of conflict and 170,000 deaths; in the Democratic Republic of Congo a continuing conflict has left five million dead; eleven years after western military intervention in Iraq, the conflict shows no sign of ending and up to a million have died.

We all shared the Prime Minister's genuine anger at the humanitarian disaster in Syria and the tyrannical stance of Bashar al-Assad.

But Britain shares the blame too, with a stumbling, strident and in the end abortive strategy.

With the US, the British Government began in 2011 with a strident demand for Assad's unconditional departure. That didn't work – and was never going to, given his powerful allies, Russia and Iran, and his significant domestic support base. So Ministers turned to provide rebel forces with 'communications equipment' and other resources – which failed too. That was the worst of all worlds. The support was so limited it made no material difference to the balance of power, yet it fed rebel belief that West would eventually ride in militarily behind them. Then the British government persuaded the EU to lift its arms embargo and tried to arm the rebels – until cross-party opposition in Parliament blocked that with the vote on 11 July 2013. Finally the Prime Minister tried to launch an attack in August 2013 – until Parliament blocked that too.

The pretext for that planned attack was the regime's use of chemical weapons against its own people. And, unspeakably abhorrent though chemical weapons are, experts estimated by 2013 they had accounted for just 1 per cent of all the terrible casualties in Syria.

The subsequent agreement by the regime to surrender its chemical weapons to the international community demonstrated the value of a robust negotiating stance. It showed how international actors can work together in a manner that actually delivers results. It was also in stark contrast to the kind of headline grabbing posturing to the gallery that our Government had practised. The Prime Minister never made any coherent case as to how bombing would make a positive difference, either on chemical weapons or in terms of the broader fight for peace – instead it gave a sense of the West just wanting to do 'something' – and for that 'something' to be as dramatic as possible.

Most of Syria's chemical weapons existed as separate components or substances, some illegal and some not, and due to be handed over by June 2014 according to a deal brokered by the UN.

It goes without saying that, in backing Assad, his main allies Russia and Iran have been culpable in the unfolding horror. But Britain, too, is culpable.

I had warned, both repeatedly in Parliament and in the *Guardian* on 21 October 2012, that there could be no military victory for either side in Syria. Others issued similar warnings, but none of these were heeded.

Mercifully from autumn 2013 there has at least been an attempt to progress a negotiation, with the two sides grudgingly participating, although a big obstacle has been getting all factions on the rebel side to agree to talks: the Syrian Free Army and certain Islamist factions have been present but not the hardcore Jihadists. The West has always looked to the Syrian National Council which has unfortunately been unrepresentative and increasingly self-interested.

The United Nations-backed 'Geneva II' talks at Montreux convened on 22nd January 2014. Considering that this was the first time that representatives from the Syrian government and from a number of rebel factions had met, three years into the crisis, these talks were a milestone.

But they stalled because of entrenched divisions and an almost complete lack of trust. Assad's representatives repeatedly emphasised that they entered talks in order to deal with the problem of terrorism inside Syria – a deliberate misinterpretation of the talks' stated intention of finding a political resolution to the conflict: ideally to birth a power-sharing arrangement.

Nevertheless, despite bitter and deep hostility between regime and opposition, there were no walk-outs. And, although no direct discussions between the parties took place, at least they did not spend weeks debating the size of the table as the Americans and Vietnamese did at the Paris peace talks of 1968.

The leader of the Syrian National Council (SNC), Ahmad Jarba managed to hold together the different groups present against all expectations. Perhaps even more important, within days of the talks concluding, the Russian foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, invited Jarba to come to Moscow immediately for talks. That had never happened before, and was equally disconcerting to Western diplomats and Damascus. All these developments, albeit modest, have helped lay the foundations for future negotiations.

Very little change on the ground has resulted except for a limited but welcome agreement to evacuate civilians out of the besieged old-city of Homs. A temporary cease-fire was meant to enable that evacuation, and indeed women and children were released unimpeded. But roughly 350 men and boys of fighting age (between 15 and 55) were kept back by Syrian government troops for interrogation, worrying UN officials because there was no third party observer present to ensure detainees were not in danger; and the great bulk remain unaccounted for. About 2,000 deaths occurred in the first two weeks of the Geneva talks.

But the real problem is that Britain and the West should have promoted a negotiated solution from the very beginning. That was always going to be the only way to get Assad – and more important his backers – to shift towards compromise. Even eighteen months after the war began, Assad was reported to be willing to consider the proposal by the UN-Arab League envoy Lakhdar Brahimi for a ceasefire for the four-day Muslim Eid al-Adha holiday beginning at the end of October 2012.

But, instead of urging their friends in the opposition to declare that they would reciprocate if Assad made good on his tentative promise, the

Western powers and the Arab countries – principally Saudi Arabia and Qatar – continued supplying arms to the resistance, continued to demand regime change and to resource the opposition.

That was fatal, not just because it ignored Assad's enduring strength and the reality that there could never be a clean victory, but also because this never was some simplistic battle between evil and good, between a barbaric dictator and a repressed people, as the Prime Minister David Cameron's rhetoric portrayed.

When 'The Arab Spring' first spread to Syria in March 2011 it took the form of non-violent Syrian protesters demanding greater tolerance and democracy from their dictatorial regime. Assad should have offered dialogue and engagement. Instead he violently confronted those demanding change, and sadly, though perhaps understandably in the first instance, the opposition responded in the same manner, giving Assad the battle he wanted. Both sides quickly became blameworthy because the opposition responded with violence, and the regime countered with brutal repression.

The conflict quickly escalated into a civil war: a quagmire into which Britain (or the US and France) should have trodden at deep peril. It involved the incendiary internal Islamic conflict – Sunni versus Shia – with their chief protagonists – Saudi Arabia versus Iran. And, to complicate matters still further, a cold-war hangover: the US versus Russia.

Iran was never going to back off because of its key interests. With Iran's backing its ally Hezbollah intervened in Syria from 2012 – and, concerned about the involvement of one of its main threats, Israel also intervened, introducing another potentially lethal development in the conflict. Refugees poured into Jordan in many tens of thousands. The collateral impact of one million Syrian refugees in Jordan was worrying enough, but the greater risk remains in Lebanon where more than 25 per cent of the population are now Syrian refugees and unlike in Jordan, they are not managed in camps.

A 'good guys versus bad guys' prism was discredited by the increasing infiltration of Al Qaida fighters amongst the West's favoured rebels – and by the barbarous murders by some rebels of innocent Syrian citizens including Kurds.

But even more crucially, that simplistic prism was confounded by another – and, especially for the British Government, uncomfortable – reality: namely that Assad has considerable domestic support. His ruling Shia-aligned Alawite minority form a tenth of the population and were never going to give up power if it meant – as they feared the more the war developed – being oppressed by the Sunni majority. Christians and

other minorities remained similarly nervous about regime change. Together those behind Assad amount to nearly a third of the Syrian people; add in the Kurds, who are fighting for their own individual interests, and the total reaches around 40 per cent. Few of them like Assad or his repressive Baathist rule. But they fear even more the alternative – becoming victims of genocide, Jihadism or Sharia extremism.

Therefore if western military intervention had somehow toppled Assad without a settlement in place, violent chaos would have still have endured – some analysts argue it would have been even worse than before.

Russia, though its interest may also have been ensuring the West could not bring about another regime change post-Libya, feared that anarchy because, like the US and UK, it has key strategic military, economic and intelligence interests in the area; for instance Syria provides Russia's only Mediterranean port at Tartus – and this in a region where the US is very well placed militarily. Russia also has a genuine fear of Islamic radicalism due to own insurgencies, such as in Chechnya.

Another fatal error by the West was to try to prevent Iran as well as Assad from attending a peace conference, because that always was going to block progress from the very beginning. Surely we should by now have understood from Britain's long and bitter experience of resolving the Northern Ireland conflict, that setting pre-conditions always prevents attempts at negotiation from even getting off the ground?

The impasse was partly a product of bitter suspicion at the West's real intentions, with the curse of the Iraq invasion still poisoning trust. Russia, China and their many allies on this issue insist they never authorised the UN backing for military force in Libya to depose Gaddafi in 2011 and refused to be 'tricked' again over Syria. Libya since Gaddafi was toppled – with its people at the mercy of warring militias and Jihadist opportunists and now threats of the country dividing – is hardly a good advertisement for repeating that recipe in the Syrian quicksand.

A political solution was always the imperative. Britain, France, the United States their allies should never have started down the road they did – demanding complete regime change – and, pushing Russia to defend and arm their longstanding ally Assad instead of using its leverage to ensure Assad negotiated seriously. Like it or not, without engagement by Russia and Iran that forces Assad towards genuine compromise, a Syrian settlement simply will not happen.

The Guidelines for a Political Transition approved by the five permanent members of the UN Security Council at the Geneva

conference on 30 June 2012 still provide the best road map for a Geneva 11. The aim is not to finalise all aspects of a future Syrian government or to draw up a constitution. The road map instead provides for a transitional government plan on which to base a future for Syria and in the short term to achieve an indefinite cease-fire. According to a UN communiqué on the subject, the transitional government would exercise 'full executive powers' and include 'members of the present government' as well as representatives from as many groups as possible by 'mutual consent'.

Analysts have interpreted this as not ruling out the possibility that Assad might stay or at least play a part in the short-term – which is sensible actually since why else would he participate? This is key – Russia, Iran and Assad will not move on negotiations if they suspect that end game is already determined by the West. Assad's future should be an issue for the talks, not a pre-condition of them.

The UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon's call on 9 October 2012 for both a ceasefire and an embargo on more arms going to the opposition as well as government forces, should have been heeded. But it clearly was never going to happen so long as the external supporters of both sides clung on to their zero-sum ambitions. And although Russian and Iranian support for Assad is thoroughly reprehensible, it should surely always have been very clear that they would only shift gear towards a more constructive approach on the basis of an international deal based on compromise

Although regime change in Damascus could be the outcome of a negotiated solution, if, as the UK and US in backing the rebels were effectively doing, getting rid of Assad remained a precondition for talks, the carnage was always bound to continue. Transitional arrangements that reach an end point in democratisation are crucial, but their pace must be negotiated, not imposed. In Yemen in 2011 for instance, a hated President did not actually resign but equally did not stand for re-election.

However unpalatable, Assad and his henchmen may have to be granted immunity in order to get them to sign up to a deal: hardly worse than the continuing barbarity and devastation of ancient heritage. All state employees – including the ranks in the armed forces – must be allowed to keep their posts, to avoid a repeat of the chaos caused by America's de-Ba'athification in Iraq. Meanwhile a coalition government of national unity could prepare for Syrian elections.

Britain needs to continue to persuade its friends in the Syrian opposition – and critically their external regional backers like Saudi Arabia – to promote a credible plan for compromise: local ceasefires,

access for humanitarian relief, and names of prospective members of a new government of national unity that will also include ministers from the current Syrian government. Together they can initiate a process of constitutional reform for new parliamentary and presidential elections with UN observers. Only through mutual concessions by both the regime and the opposition can the people of Syria be saved from yet more savagery.

As the continuing impasse around the Geneva 11 talks in Montreux has amply shown, this was always going to be incredibly, tortuously difficult. But a military strike – given that it was never going to have been enough on its own to effect seismic change in the Syrian civil war or fatally defeat the Assad regime – would simply have invited retaliation, more escalation, more civilian deaths and more refugees, inflaming the powder keg. Only through mutual concessions by both the regime and the opposition can the people of Syria and the region be rescued from a nightmare that, if anything, threatens to get still worse.

All the hand wringing and condemnation as atrocity has followed atrocity is empty and pointless.

Three bloody years after the Syrian uprising it is high time for Britain, France and the United States, as well as their allies, including Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, to recognise that neither side was ever going to win the civil war destroying Syria; that their strategy has been disastrous, only serving to feed and indeed provoke ongoing, vicious escalation; and that instead a political solution should be the top priority; if it had been from the very beginning tens of thousands of people may well have been alive today.

The strategy adopted by Russia and Iran has not secured their own interests: war without end and a country increasingly heading to a permanent split can hardly count as a success even in their own terms.

But, tragically, the Syrian conflict must rank as one of the worst Western foreign policy catastrophes of modern times.

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