

Syria in perspective

Many people in the country agreed with the Prime Minister when she said she had no plans to involve the UK in the Syrian civil war. We also agreed with her achieved aim of not adding to the death toll by the limited and targeted military intervention she authorised.

It would be wrong for us to seek to engage in the civil war at this late stage when Assad supported by Russia is close to victory. No clear Opposition force has emerged that could displace the current regime by force and then go on to establish a decent democratic government in its place. Arming rebels and offering them military support against Assad would pitch us against Russia as well, add to the length and violence of the war and offer little prospect of a good result.

The truth is President Obama decided to leave the Syrian crisis to Assad and Russia. If the West had wanted regime change in Syria as they tried elsewhere then it should have been done years ago. Russia has occupied the space the West left, and now has a strong military presence there in its own right and as advisers and supporters of the substantial conventional forces of the Syrian government. The West's more recent interventions have been air based engagements against the forces of ISIS, which Assad is also fighting intensely on the ground along with Russian help. The West makes sure Russia knows what they are doing to avoid a clash.

The West wishes to enforce the world ban on the use of chemical weapons. Mr Trump has led short targeted strikes against chemical weapons use on two occasions following particularly bad atrocities with their use, but otherwise has confined US action to a supportive role against ISIS. It is true he has also worked with the Kurds, which is a difficult complication in the north of Syria. The Kurds want an independent state. Neither Turkey nor Assad's Syria wishes to give them independent territory and self government, and both see them as enemies.

The recent strikes were against just three installations connected with chemical weapon production and use. There are more such facilities which were not attacked. The UK government argues that it has helped "degrade" the chemical weapons ability of Assad, without ending it. It also argues that the use of "appropriate" levels of force against some of these chemical weapons facilities should act as a deterrent against their future use, as of course the Western Coalition could target other chemical facilities should the regime use them again. Clearly the Western coalition did what it set out to do, destroying three facilities and avoiding any civilian or Russian casualties.

The West has intervened extensively in Iraq, Libya and Afghanistan. It has mainly been there to fight extremist groups like Al Qaeda and Isis and has wished to help establish democratic regimes to replace the dictators it has helped pull down. It has not sought to be taking sides in the Sunni-Shia religious war, though it has often been closer to Sunni Saudi Arabia and her

allies than to Shia Iran and Syria. The USA has a network of allies including the Gulf States, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and now Afghanistan and Iraq. Russia has strong links with Iran and Syria.

It is not easy to see any negotiated peace in the violence ravaged country of Syria, but it is to diplomacy, negotiation and to talking that the allies should now turn. If killing more people solved Syria's problems they would be solved by now. There have been all too many deaths. The future of Syria is not in the West's control. That decision was taken some years ago.