

Withdrawal from the Middle East

The Middle Eastern wars under Presidents Bush and Obama have left the USA and NATO divided over their wisdom and efficacy. No one doubts the bravery and resolve of the troops and the successes of various military actions, but many agonise over the failure to build a winning political and diplomatic strategy around them to help create a more prosperous and more peaceful region. I have written recently about why Mr Trump now wishes to end US direct military intervention in Syria and may review activity in Afghanistan as well.

Recent events remind us that if Western actions and inactions do not help create a peace in the Middle East there is a substantial force for wider instability in the form of many refugees, displaced persons and would be economic migrants. It is not surprising that millions have fled Syria during the extreme violence of the conflict, nor that many have fled Libya or are leaving Yemen. It must be dreadful to try to lead a normal life, turn up for a regular job and sustain a family amidst the bombs, the terror, the warring factions and the armed bands. Many are forced out of their homes by violence, others leave their homes seeing no decent future for themselves in their own country.

The West has attempted to receive more migrants into its own economies, and has spent much money on camps and temporary accommodation for refugees nearer to their homes in the expectation that the wars will end and rebuilding will take place. The best answer is to help restore peace and progress in each of the countries, and facilitate the return of refugees and economic migrants to help restore those places. We need greater emphasis on western diplomacy and encouragement of better government, with support for those places and governments that can sustain economic development and gain some discipline and sensible control over their countries. The endless disruption of Middle Eastern regions and nations by dissident and warring factions causes much of the stress, but is not easily resolved if at all by western military intervention. The best the West can do is to assist and train domestic forces acting for regimes likely to offer some control and economic advance, even though these will not always be paragons of democratic virtue. Judging how many compromises to make in the interests of some peace and stability is never easy. What is clear is that the past actions have allowed substantial turbulence and mass movements of people which have made life much more difficult for them, and have proved disruptive more generally.