

Lessons to be drawn from the Syrian Conflict

Notes for a talk to be delivered by former Ambassador to Syria Peter Ford at Hull University on 6 December 2017

This is primarily about lessons to be drawn by us in the West. Of course there are other lessons to be drawn by the Syrian and other Arab participants. But then in our usual navel-gazing Western way we always tend to see the Middle East as being primarily about us, who being powerful have agency, and not about them, the natives, who are less powerful and are therefore are condemned to being reactive. If you think this sounds like the main message of Edward Said's master work, *Orientalism*, you are right.

Lesson 1. Don't trust experts. They nearly all got Syria wrong. Asad will 'gone by Christmas.' 'Syria will be partitioned'. 'The Russians will sacrifice Asad when it suits them'. 'The moderates will prevail among the opposition'. '70,000 moderates will assemble to drive out ISIS'. 'The Russians don't target ISIS, they only target the moderates'. 'Asad isn't really fighting ISIS'.

The 'think tanks' peddling these falsehoods are all on someone's payroll.

Lesson 2. Never underestimate the power of hubris and wishful thinking to distort perceptions of reality. 'The Arab Spring will sweep Asad away'. All the self-delusions went in one direction – that of mistaking a desired outcome for the probable outcome. It goes on still – this month's delusion is that Iran and Russia are close to falling out over the endgame in Syria. Pure wishful thinking.

Lesson 3. Don't let rancour cloud your view. Because we didn't like the Asad government we overlooked the factors militating in favour of its survival. We gave it no credit for having built a system which gave many parties a stake in that survival, not just the Alawites but all the non-Sunni minorities as well as the many Sunnis who did not want an Islamist form of government. Why did the Arab Spring fail in Syria? Essentially because in Syria unlike in Tunisia, Libya and Egypt the population is not more or less all of the same religious persuasion. Issues of sectarianism come into play. The Syrian revolt rapidly turned into a battle for or against Sunni Islamist supremacy.

Lesson 4. Do not overestimate geopolitics. 'Russia will dispense with Asad as part of a grand bargain involving Ukraine or sanctions'. Sometimes what you

see is all there is. Pundits overlooked the simple fact that a loss for Asad would be a loss for Russia.

Lesson 5. Be careful what you wish for. Working for Asad's removal while having no safe replacement for him was reckless in the extreme. It worsened the refugee crisis, prolonged the suffering, and delayed the dismantling of Islamic State. Arguably it contributed to Brexit.

Lesson 6. 'History doesn't repeat itself, but it rhymes'. Why were the lessons from Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya not learnt? Upending a stable secular regime is likely to be akin to opening Pandora's Box. Yet we acted as though our actions wouldn't have consequences.

Lesson 7. Imperialism hasn't died. It now takes the form of 'protecting our allies', 'bringing stability' and liberal interventionism. All three were present in the case of Syria. In attempting regime change we were aiming at protecting Israel, removing a regime which would not accept our preferred model of stability which largely involves having feudal princes dependent on the West, and putting a stop to what in Syria we called Asad bombing his own people but when we did the same in Mosul or Raqqa we called it unfortunate collateral damage.

Our hypocrisy and double standards has been breathtaking. While the losses of civilian life were far greater in Mosul than in Aleppo, while we condoned what our Saudi friends were doing in Yemen, we beat our breasts in anguish about Asad's alleged misdeeds. We are very selective in our indignation.

Lesson 8. Know who your true friends are. Allying with the fountainhead of religious bigotry, Saudi Arabia, and scorning a potent force of resistance against jihadism, Shiite Iran, is an act of self-harm. That Saudi Arabia has over the years proselytised vigorously for its extreme Wahhabi version of Islam and that jihadis of every stripe have drawn inspiration from this is undeniable. That every single act of Muslim terrorism in Europe or America has involved Sunnis and never Shiites is a simple and absolutely crucial fact but one that nobody ever alludes to. Trump on Iran is delusional, so delusional it is almost comic. He stands truth on its head blaming Iran for international terrorism while being unable to point at a single instance where Iran has been behind a bombing or whatever in Europe or the United States.

Lesson 9. US policy never changes, whoever is in charge. Only the veneer over the permanent security state changes. Washington has been waging a 40 year war against Syria. There will be tactical nuances but it's not going to change. Paradoxically Trump's instincts on Syria and Russia have been more sensible

than those of the security state and its echo chambers in Congress and the media. Even a stopped clock tells the truth twice a day.

Lesson 10. Accept that secular leaders in the Middle East have their uses. Don't try to block Syria's recovery from war out of pique because you got it wrong. Obstructing reconstruction and maintaining sanctions can only hinder the return of refugees and make it more likely that the smouldering embers of jihadi extremism will be rekindled after some years. But perhaps that is what some of our leaders would prefer, as long as it was one in the eye for Iran and Russia.

Conclusion

There are many more lessons which could be drawn. I have only touched lightly on the many mistakes and biases of the mainstream media and how they have contributed to the mess which has been Western policy on Syria. We can perhaps go a little more into that in Q and A. But for now let me just underline the take away messages here – that we meddle in the Middle East at our peril, that we are latter day imperialists without realising it, and that our wishful thinking is our own undoing.