

The civil war in Syria with its attendant disintegration is having its predictable and malign effect. Iraq is now in mortal danger. The whole of the Middle East is under threat.

We will have to re-think our strategy towards Syria; support the Iraqi Government in beating back the insurgency; whilst making it clear that Iraq's politics will have to change for any resolution of the current crisis to be sustained. Then we need a comprehensive plan for the Middle East that correctly learns the lessons of the past decade. In doing so, we should listen to and work closely with our allies across the region, whose understanding of these issues is crucial and who are prepared to work with us in fighting the root causes of this extremism which goes far beyond the crisis in Iraq or Syria.

It is inevitable that events in Mosul have led to a re-run of the arguments over the decision to remove Saddam Hussein in 2003. The key question obviously is what to do now. But because some of the commentary has gone immediately to claim that but for that decision, Iraq would not be facing this challenge; or even more extraordinary, implying that but for the decision, the Middle East would be at peace right now; it is necessary that certain points are made forcefully before putting forward a solution to what is happening now.

3/4 years ago Al Qaida in Iraq was a beaten force. The country had massive challenges but had a prospect, at least, of overcoming them. It did not pose a threat to its neighbours. Indeed, since the removal of Saddam, and despite the bloodshed, Iraq had contained its own instability mostly within its own borders.

Though the challenge of terrorism was and is very real, the sectarianism of the Maliki Government snuffed out what was a genuine opportunity to build a cohesive Iraq. This, combined with the failure to use the oil money to re-build the country, and the inadequacy of the Iraqi forces have led to the alienation of the Sunni community and the inability of the Iraqi army to repulse the attack on Mosul and the earlier loss of Fallujah. And there will be debate about whether the withdrawal of US forces happened too soon.

However there is also no doubt that a major proximate cause of the takeover of Mosul by ISIS is the situation in Syria. To argue otherwise is wilful. The operation in Mosul was planned and organised from Raqqa across the Syria border. The fighters were trained and battle-hardened in the Syrian war. It is true that they originate in Iraq and have shifted focus to Iraq over the past months. But, Islamist extremism in all its different manifestations as a group, rebuilt refinanced and re-armed mainly as a result of its ability to grow and gain experience through the war in Syria.

As for how these events reflect on the original decision to remove Saddam, if we want to have this debate, we have to do something that is rarely done: put the counterfactual i.e. suppose in 2003, Saddam had been left running Iraq. Now take each of the arguments against the decision in turn.

The first is there was no WMD risk from Saddam and therefore the casus belli was wrong. What we now know from Syria is that Assad, without any detection from the West, was manufacturing chemical weapons. We only discovered this when he used them. We also know, from the final weapons inspectors reports, that though it is true that Saddam got rid of the physical weapons, he retained the expertise and capability to manufacture them. Is it likely that, knowing what we now know about Assad, Saddam, who had used chemical weapons against both the Iranians in the 1980s war that resulted in over 1m casualties and against his own people, would have refrained from returning to his old ways? Surely it is at least as likely that he would have gone back to them.

The second argument is that but for the invasion of 2003, Iraq would be a stable country today. Leave aside the treatment Saddam meted out to the majority of his people whether Kurds, Shia or marsh Arabs, whose position of 'stability' was that of appalling oppression. Consider the post 2011 Arab uprisings. Put into the equation the counterfactual – that Saddam and his two sons would be running Iraq in 2011 when the uprisings began. Is it seriously being said that the revolution sweeping the Arab world would have hit Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Yemen, Bahrain, Syria, to say nothing of the smaller upheavals all over the region, but miraculously Iraq, under the most brutal and tyrannical of all the regimes, would have been an oasis of calm?

Easily the most likely scenario is that Iraq would have been engulfed by precisely the same convulsion. Take the hypothesis further. The most likely response of Saddam would have been to fight to stay in power. Here we would have a Sunni leader trying to retain power in the face of a Shia revolt. Imagine the consequences. Next door in Syria a Shia backed minority would be clinging to power trying to stop a Sunni majority insurgency. In Iraq the opposite would be the case. The risk would have been of a full blown sectarian war across the region, with States not fighting by proxy, but with national armies.

So it is a bizarre reading of the cauldron that is the Middle East today, to claim that but for the removal of Saddam, we would not have a crisis.

And it is here that if we want the right policy for the future, we have to learn properly the lessons not just of Iraq in 2003 but of the Arab uprisings from 2011 onwards.

The reality is that the whole of the Middle East and beyond is going through a huge, agonising and protracted transition. We have to liberate ourselves from the notion that 'we' have caused this. We haven't. We can argue as to whether our policies at points have helped or not; and whether action or inaction is the best policy and there is a lot to be said on both sides. But the fundamental cause of the crisis lies within the region not outside it.

The problems of the Middle East are the product of bad systems of politics mixed with a bad abuse of religion going back over a long time. Poor governance, weak institutions, oppressive rule and a failure within parts of Islam to work out a sensible relationship between religion and Government have combined to create countries which are simply unprepared for the modern world. Put into that mix, young populations with no effective job opportunities and education systems that do not correspond to the requirements of the future economy, and you have a toxic, inherently unstable matrix of factors that was always – repeat always - going to lead to a revolution.

But because of the way these factors interrelate, the revolution was never going to be straightforward. This is the true lesson of Iraq. But it is also the lesson from the whole of the so-called Arab Spring. The fact is that as a result of the way these societies have developed and because Islamism of various descriptions became the focal point of opposition to oppression, the removal of the dictatorship is only the beginning not the end of the challenge. Once the regime changes, then out come pouring all the tensions – tribal, ethnic and of course above all religious; and the rebuilding of the country, with functioning institutions and systems of Government, becomes incredibly hard. The extremism destabilises the country, hinders the attempts at development, the sectarian divisions become even more acute and the result is the mess we see all over the region. And beyond it. Look at Pakistan or Afghanistan and the same elements are present.

Understanding this and analysing properly what has happened, is absolutely vital to the severe challenge of working out what we can do about it. So rather than continuing to re-run the debate over

Iraq from over 11 years ago, realise that whatever we had done or not done, we would be facing a big challenge today.

Indeed we now have three examples of Western policy towards regime change in the region. In Iraq, we called for the regime to change, removed it and put in troops to try to rebuild the country. But intervention proved very tough and today the country is at risk again. In Libya, we called for the regime to change, we removed it by airpower, but refused to put in troops and now Libya is racked by instability, violence and has exported vast amounts of trouble and weapons across North Africa and down into sub-Saharan Africa. In Syria we called for the regime to change, took no action and it is in the worst state of all.

And when we do act, it is often difficult to discern the governing principles of action. Gaddafi, who in 2003 had given up his WMD and cooperated with us in the fight against terrorism, is removed by us on the basis he threatens to kill his people but Assad, who actually kills his people on a vast scale including with chemical weapons, is left in power.

So what does all this mean? How do we make sense of it? I speak with humility on this issue because I went through the post 9/11 world and know how tough the decisions are in respect of it. But I have also, since leaving office, spent a great deal of time in the region and have studied its dynamics carefully.

The beginning of understanding is to appreciate that resolving this situation is immensely complex. This is a generation long struggle. It is not a 'war' which you win or lose in some clear and clean-cut way. There is no easy or painless solution. Intervention is hard. Partial intervention is hard. Non-intervention is hard.

Ok, so if it is that hard, why not stay out of it all, the current default position of the West? The answer is because the outcome of this long transition impacts us profoundly. At its simplest, the jihadist groups are never going to leave us alone. 9/11 happened for a reason. That reason and the ideology behind it have not disappeared.

However more than that, in this struggle will be decided many things: the fate of individual countries, the future of the Middle East, and the direction of the relationship between politics and the religion of Islam. This last point will affect us in a large number of ways. It will affect the radicalism within our own societies which now have significant Muslim populations. And it will affect how Islam develops across the world. If the extremism is defeated in the Middle East it will eventually be defeated the world over, because this region is its spiritual home and from this region has been spread the extremist message.

There is no sensible policy for the West based on indifference. This is, in part, our struggle, whether we like it or not.

Already the security agencies of Europe believe our biggest future threat will come from returning fighters from Syria. There is a real risk that Syria becomes a haven for terrorism worse than Afghanistan in the 1990s. But think also of the effect that Syria is having on the Lebanon and Jordan. There is no way this conflagration was ever going to stay confined to Syria. I understand all the reasons following Afghanistan and Iraq why public opinion was so hostile to involvement. Action in Syria did not and need not be as in those military engagements. But every time we put off action, the action we will be forced to take will ultimately be greater.

On the immediate challenge President Obama is right to put all options on the table in respect of Iraq, including military strikes on the extremists; and right also to insist on a change in the way the Iraqi Government takes responsibility for the politics of the country.

The moderate and sensible elements of the Syria Opposition should be given the support they need; Assad should know he cannot win an outright victory; and the extremist groups, whether in Syria or Iraq, should be targeted, in coordination and with the agreement of the Arab countries. However unpalatable this may seem, the alternative is worse.

But acting in Syria alone or Iraq, will not solve the challenge across the region or the wider world. We need a plan for the Middle East and for dealing with the extremism world-wide that comes out of it.

The starting point is to identify the nature of the battle. It is against Islamist extremism. That is the fight. People shy away from the starkness of that statement. But it is because we are constantly looking for ways of avoiding facing up to this issue, that we can't make progress in the battle.

Of course in every case, there are reasons of history and tribe and territory which add layers of complexity. Of course, too, as I said at the outset, bad governance has played a baleful role in exacerbating the challenges. But all those problems become infinitely tougher to resolve, when religious extremism overlays everything. Then unity in a nation is impossible. Stability is impossible. Therefore progress is impossible. Government ceases to build for the future and manages each day as it can. Division tears apart cohesion. Hatred replaces hope.

We have to unite with those in the Muslim world, who agree with this analysis to fight the extremism. Parts of the Western media are missing a critical new element in the Middle East today. There are people – many of them – in the region who now understand this is the battle and are prepared to wage it. We have to stand with them.

Repressive systems of Government have played their part in the breeding of the extremism. A return to the past for the Middle East is neither right nor feasible. On the contrary there has to be change and there will be. However, we have to have a more graduated approach, which tries to help change happen without the chaos.

We were naïve about the Arab uprisings which began in 2011. Evolution is preferable to revolution. I said this at the time, precisely because of what we learnt from Iraq and Afghanistan.

Sometimes evolution is not possible. But where we can, we should be helping countries make steady progress towards change. We should be actively trying to encourage and help the reform process and using the full weight of the international community to do so.

Where there has been revolution, we have to be clear we will not support systems or Governments based on sectarian religious politics.

Where the extremists are fighting, they have to be countered hard, with force. This does not mean Western troops as in Iraq. There are masses of responses we can make short of that. But they need to know that wherever they're engaged in terror, we will be hitting them.

Longer term, we have to make a concerted effort to reform the education systems, formal and informal which are giving rise to the extremism. It should be part of our dialogue and partnership

with all nations that we expect education to be open-minded and respectful of difference whether of faith culture or race. We should make sure our systems reflect these values; they should do the same. This is the very reason why, after I left office I established a Foundation now active in the education systems of over 20 different countries, including in the Middle East, promoting a programme of religious and cultural co-existence.

We should make this a focal point of cooperation between East and West. China, Russia, Europe and the USA all have the same challenge of extremism. For the avoidance of doubt, I am neither minimising our differences especially over issues like Ukraine, nor suggesting a weakening of our position there; simply that on this issue of extremism, we can and should work together.

We should acknowledge that the challenge goes far further afield than the Middle East. Africa faces it as the ghastly events in Nigeria show. The Far East faces it. Central Asia too.

The point is that we won't win the fight until we accept the nature of it.

Iraq is part of a much bigger picture. By all means argue about the wisdom of earlier decisions. But it is the decisions now that will matter. The choices are all pretty ugly, it is true. But for 3 years we have watched Syria descend into the abyss and as it is going down, it is slowly but surely wrapping its cords around us pulling us down with it. We have to put aside the differences of the past and act now to save the future.