



Rt Hon James Cleverly MP
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

11 May 2020

Dear James,

British policy on Syria

Thank you for your letter of 4 May. We share your concerns about the suffering of civilians and the need to bring about a peaceful end to the conflict. However, your reply does not address the key issues raised in our original letter, which we sent to the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs on 26 March.

In particular, we would be grateful if you would respond to the following:

- You claim that the present regime has lost its legitimacy. Yet the UK's commitment to a transition of power, as a prerequisite of any settlement, has proved unachievable and will remain so. There is no guarantee that a non-sectarian government would emerge following the removal of President Assad, as you suggest. Indeed many Syrians fear that such enforced regime change would create a chaotic situation similar to – or perhaps even worse than – those in Iraq or Libya.
- You give no recognition to the Syrian Government's constructive initiatives (for all its faults, it has the best record in the region for protecting the rights of women, Christians, Shia, Alawites, Druze and other minorities) and make no reference to the Syrian army's defeat of jihadi forces in Palmyra, Deir Ez Zor, Yarmouk Camp, Suweida and elsewhere. You also appear to misjudge the situation in territories formerly held by armed opposition groups, many of which embraced sectarianism and sought to impose the same extremist ideology as Daesh or Jabhat al-Nusra.
- The overwhelming priority of the Syrian people is the elimination of Islamist extremists, who have perpetrated genocidal policies and atrocities on an immense scale, including abductions into sexual slavery, torture, burning civilians alive and beheadings, and who continue to attack areas under the Syrian Government's control. Continuation of the UK's current policies will only help the Islamist extremists.
- We concur that Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's presence in Idlib does not give Russia and the Syrian regime carte blanche to conduct indiscriminate attacks on civilians. But as Coalition generals who participated in anti-Daesh operations in places like Mosul and Raqqa have said, it is impossible to drive out terrorists (who abuse the protected status of hospitals to use them for storing ammunition and weapons and as command and control centres) without a degree of harm to civilians.

- You dismiss the very serious argument that UK-backed sanctions make it impossible for many civilians to obtain food, medicines and medical equipment, causing widespread avoidable suffering and death. You make no reference to statements by UN human rights experts, who urge the UK ‘to refrain at all times from direct and indirect interference with access to food’ and say it is now ‘a matter of humanitarian and practical urgency’ to lift economic sanctions immediately.
- The Syrian people do not regard the UK’s so-called stabilisation initiatives as ‘helping communities recover’, as you claim, but as an illegal military occupation designed to prevent the reunification of territory and to deprive them of their natural resources.

Despite your assurances, our fundamental concerns remain: British foreign policy will not contribute to the stabilisation of Syria but will prolong the suffering of the Syrian people and weaken the stability of the Middle East as a whole. This policy is in need of a fundamental review.

Yours sincerely,

Lord Green of Deddington (British Ambassador to Syria 1991-94)

Peter Ford (British Ambassador to Syria 2003-06)

Baroness Cox

Lord West of Spithead

Lord Carey of Clifton

Lord Hylton

Lord Alderdice

Lord Stoddart of Swindon

Revd Dr Andrew Ashdown

Dr Audrey Wells

Dr John Eibner

Dr Michael Langrish