EuroCSE Panel Discussion on Syria, House of Lords, 13 March

Presentation by Peter Ford, former Ambassador to Syria

***The Never-ending Western War on Syria***

**A question mark somehow crept into the advertised title for my talk.**

**But there is no question at all. The Western war on Syria hasn’t stopped for over 40 years and is all set to continue indefinitely.**

**It’s hard to say when the Western war on Syria started, possibly as early as the I970s, but with peaks and troughs it has continued unabated through the Lebanese civil war, the two Iraq Wars, the Hariri assassination crisis and forced Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon, through to the naked attempts at regime change, proxy war and direct military interventions starting in 2011.**

**There were brief interludes. We were happy to have Syria as an ally in the war for the liberation of Kuwait, but the West never tried to make that a springboard for better relations. During the brief honeymoon period while I was Ambassador, around 2004 when a reformist government was liberalising the economy and Bashar was being feted in European capitals, the US still held back. And the Europeans, negotiating what could have been a breakthrough trade deal with Syria, still insisted on trying and failing to bend Syria to their will over the political clauses of the agreement.**

***The myth that the West did not intervene forcefully***

**There is a myth that the West did not intervene in the conflict now entering year nine. It intervened massively. Obama oversaw a programme in which over a billion dollars of advanced weaponry was passed to Islamist armed groups. The anti-tank TOW weapons almost turned the tide of the war, and were directly responsible for Iran and Russia stepping up their own military assistance to Syria. Western military control centres were set up in Jordan and Turkey to direct the war effort, and to train Islamist fighters. We encouraged the Saudis and the Qataris to fund huge jihadi armies. Trump cut the direct funding of arms for jihadis but innovated by actually bombing Syria, twice. The West, as in Libya, abused a mandate, this time to bomb ISIS, and spread military tentacles on Syrian territory in the North East and Al Tanf, an occupation which endures to this day. An occupation which looks like being open-ended, and hardly even pretends any more not to be aimed at denying territory to the rightful sovereign state.**

***The war goes on, by other means***

**Now, with most of the fighting over, there is a perception that the Western powers are reconciling to the prospect of Assad remaining in power and that the Western war against Syria is over.**

**Far from it. That war has merely shifted a few gears. And it is the continuation of that war which will largely determine the course of Syria’s development over the next decade or more.**

**The unending Western war takes several forms.**

***Economic war***

**Just last week President Assad highlighted the economic war.**

***Sanctions***

**Sanctions, far from being wound down, are being ramped up. Just last week the EU added more Syrians and Syrian entities to the black list.**

**More significantly, the US some months ago started using one of their favourite bullying techniques, punishing third countries who have the effrontery not to comply with US diktats. Thus sanctions were made applicable to entities transporting oil and fuel from Iran to Syria, not frightening off Iran but causing insurance rates to go through the roof. Net result: millions of Syrians are now shivering through winter because of the scarcity and high price of fuel.**

**Let that sink in. The West gets on its moral high horse to deplore humanitarian abuses including siege, while practising a severe form of siege itself, which puts an entire country under siege. This is a form of collective punishment, outlawed under international law.**

**It’s not just fuel of course. Because of the way sanctions work US dollar transactions involving Syria are criminalised, or, given their opaqueness, cause traders to worry about being caught up in legal proceedings and thus be deterred.**

**The financial sanctions impinge on almost everything, including cancer drugs and prostheses.**

**Taxed about this our government take refuge in disingenuous statements about humanitarian exceptions but this is obfuscation. Western administrations make sanctions so unclear, so imprecise, that even anti- Assad international NGOs complain about them.**

**But the pressures on Western governments even to justify sanctions, let alone lift them, are minimal. Assad has been so successfully demonised as part of the information war waged on Syria that nobody dares to raise a voice.**

***Reconstruction***

**Western powers are not only blocking international support from the World Bank and the UN but putting pressure on Gulf states not to fund reconstruction projects.**

**This is so counterproductive. On the one hand it prevents the Gulf countries from reducing Syria’s dependence on Iran. On the other it compromises the fight to prevent the re-emergence of ISIS. For tell me, which is more likely: that ISIS will reemerge in an economically failed state, where millions of young men are unemployed, or a state which recovers economically and is relatively thriving? So, which is it? Yes, we try to engineer a failed state, another Somalia. We prioritise unseating Assad over eradicating ISIS.**

***Oil and gas***

**The third element of the economic war is depriving Syria of its oil and gas fields in the North East. The main purpose of leaving a token US force there is not to prevent the re-emergence of ISIS. I mean, seriously, how could they? No, the main purpose is to prevent the Syrian government taking back control of Syria’s oil. To keep Syria weak.**

***The continuing military war***

**Then there is the military war. It is not just the continued occupation of the North East and Al Tanf. It is the implied threat of heavy bombing of key command and control centres if the Syrian army dares to advance on Idlib. This was made absolutely explicit by Trump’s envoy for Syria, Ambassador Jeffrey, in the run up to last August’s climax over Idlib which led to the Sochi agreement and de-escalation. Now the Al Qaida- linked groups have taken almost full control of Idlib yet still the US is threatening. The USAF has become effectively the deterrent air wing of Al Qaida, and we, the West, have created a safe zone for our enemies. Now ISIS are flocking back into Idlib, precisely because it is a safe zone. It is total madness.**

***Information war***

**I won’t waste much time on the information warfare still being waged. You can hardly switch on the BBC radio or TV without being subjected to some form of disinformation or other about Syria, now without even any token attempt at presenting an alternative narrative.**

***Lawfare***

**And more recently we have lawfare enter the picture, with various Western-backed groups launching efforts to attack Syrian government figures through international law courts and if possible the ICC.**

**What greater incentive could we give Assad to cling on to power than to proclaim an intention to arraign him before one of our courts of choice the moment he relinquishes power? Never mind, it all fits into the bigger picture of the integrated campaign to continue the war by other means, apparently in the hope that somehow this will force Assad to make concessions in political negotiations. This is pure fantasy.**

***Negotiations***

**Our government says it wants Assad to be made to negotiate seriously on a transition. Negotiate with whom? The jihadi warlords of Idlib? The stooges who wear nice suits and frequent the cafes of Istanbul and Geneva but who cannot put a hundred fighters into the field?**

**And we say: ‘Yes, but Assad can never unite Syria.’ So who can? One of the warlords? Or are we grooming a Syrian Guaido? Or are we waiting for the 12th imam to emerge from occultation? Because that eventuality is just as likely as a figure emerging more capable than Assad of uniting the country.**

**While we indulge in these fantasies, work out our white saviour complexes in the Syrian arena, the people of Syria are paying. And will go on paying unless we come to our senses and at the very least stop trying to make a bad situation worse.**