Twitter Thread by Mr Kellie Strøm

Mr Kellie Strøm
@kelliestrom

I want to echo Ibrahim's welcome for this engagement with Syrians by @AnnaMcMorrin and @WayneDavid_MP.

At the same time I am overwhelmed with how far we are from where we need to be.

I have such a flood of thoughts, it is hard to know where to

> Words turned into action. Labour leadership in the past would not even meet Syrians, let alone follow up on the meeting with a letter to Gov asking them to do more on Syria! Previous labour used to ask for less, muddy waters and spread disinformation on Syria. What a change!! https://t.co/iB8r7bCqUW
>
> — Ibrahim Olabi (@IbrahimOlabi) December 4, 2020

One difficulty is having too much to say. Another is that so many of my thoughts are by now steeped in bitterness.

I think it is very important to say that Labour's problems on Syria don't begin and end with Jeremy Corbyn and his associates.

There is too much bitterness on Twitter, but I think I need to write a little on mine here, and how it colours my view.

This year's anniversary of the Srebrenica Massacre comes to mind. Labour leader Keir Starmer marked it here:

https://t.co/jaf27nIEuh

Inevitably some couldn't help think of Corbyn's record of siding with mass murderers.

The month after came the anniversary of the Ghouta Massacre. I don't believe Starmer mentioned it. I don't think @lisanandy said anything about it either.

It was after the Ghouta Massacre that Ed Miliband led the PLP in opposing action against Assad.

https://t.co/Pv2aR5k7Fl

Ed Miliband is in Starmer's shadow cabinet.

Labour can't talk clearly about Syria without facing up to the consequences of the choice the party made in 2013.

One consequence of the 2013 vote was that both Labour and Conservatives emphasised humanitarian aid.

But no amount of aid could stop Assad's bombing of civilians.

Ministers recite enormous numbers for UK aid spending on Syria. Those numbers are a measure of failure.

No amount of aid can bring Assad to release a single prisoner from his torture dungeons.

Aid helps keep some of Assad's victims alive. It has also kept Assad's regime alive, allowing the regime to continue its torture and mass murder.

Let's look at the letter by @AnnaMcMorrin and @WayneDavid_MP.

They call for UK action on Assad regime detention and torture. What action?

The regime sustains itself on torture, and torture will continue as long as the regime remains.
https://t.co/beKWIqEPoT

> With @AnnaMcMorrin, I've written to the UK Govt about the terrible situation in #Syria. The international community must do more to address this humanitarian disaster, while ensuring that any future elections are free and fair. Those accused of war crimes must also face justice. pic.twitter.com/be5nHwkbAS
>
> — Wayne David (@WayneDavid_MP) December 4, 2020

They call on the UK to ensure transparency and accountability in elections under the Syrian regime.

This is nonsense.

The regime is sustained by torture and other crimes. Transparent and accountable elections are simply impossible with the regime in place.

So the letter calls for things the UK can't deliver, or at least calls for them within a framing that makes them seem impossible.

Because for them to be possible, you have to think about how to bring about the fall of the regime. And no UK politician wants to go there.

Between these practically impossible and politically impossible choices, there is a third way to work towards a better future inside Syria, which is to focus on transparency and accountability in those parts outside regime control where the UK or its allies are present.

What does that mean and where does it lead?

The past decade has seen the UK and allies seek influence in Syria while avoiding responsibility.

We need to act responsibly, starting with UK and Coalition transparency and accountability east of the Euphrates and in the Tanf Zone.

We need the Coalition to pay reparations to civilian victims of Coalition actions in Raqqa.

We need public recognition by UK politicians that the current Coalition-backed SDF administration falls short on transparency and accountability, falls short on political inclusion.

We need the UK-US Coalition to uphold its legal duty to civilians in the Tanf Zone as set out in Geneva Convention IV.

We need the UK to bring in food and medical aid to Rukban camp as a minimum.

We need the UK to support proper schools and other civilian facilities.

Just these actions could make a big difference, but we need to go further.

The SDF is one problematic ally of the UK in Syria. Closely related is another problematic ally, Turkey.

The challenge is to work with both, and to work for transparency and accountability in both cases.

Realism demands recognition that Turkey is the largest economy in the region, and shares the longest border with Syria.

Realism demands recognition that millions of displaced people in Idlib currently rely on Turkey for protection from the Assad regime.

The UK needs to back Turkish protection of Idlib.

The UK also needs to encourage greater local accountability, civil control and political inclusion in areas now under Turkish control.

That’d be easier if the UK and US were already doing the same in SDF areas and the Tanf zone.

The Coalition’s military policy in eastern Syria has been effectively to arm a minority to rule the majority. It can be seen as a repeat of French colonial practice in Syria, a legacy which laid the foundations for the Assad regime.

For everyone’s sake, we need better than this.

With the knock-on effects of the 2013 vote, Labour had a negative effect on Western policy beyond what MPs that night can have expected…

The UK has little prospect of leading anything post-Brexit.

Western policy on Syria will continue to be led by the US

But a wiser Syria debate amongst those few in UK politics who are still engaged with the issue could yet do some good.

Postscript: Much credit for this glimmer of light is due to @DavidTaylor85 and his colleagues in @LabourCID for years of working for better engagement with Syrians.