

Fact sheet



It is now fifteen years since the launch of the 'war on terror'. In all the multiple locations where military interventions have taken place war continues.

The 'war on terror' was sold as an attempt to make people in the west safe from the threat of Al Qaeda and to bring democracy and freedom to countries where interventions were made. In truth the initial targets for intervention were those chosen by neo-conservative politicians in the US who in the late 1990's developed the Project for a New American Century (PNAC) which aimed to use the US's military power to confirm its strategic and economic dominance in the Middle East and beyond in the face of the growth of China as a world power. PNAC was explicit about the fact that this strategy entailed the maintenance of existing hierarchy and inequality in the region.

The US claimed victory in Iraq weeks after the invasion. However, the strategic aims envisaged by PNAC were not achieved. Twelve years on the US has huge military bases in Iraq and is engaged in continuing bombing. However, the major benefactor of the weakening of the disintegration of the Iraqi state has been Iran. The US was never able to persuade Iraqi politicians to agree an oil law and new developments often involve the Chinese.

Thus rather than strengthening US power the last 15 years have seen a weakening.

US and British military involvement in Afghanistan has not ended. At the moment there is a brigade of British troops (normally based in Edinburgh) in Afghanistan.

Britain is engaged in aerial bombing campaigns in both Syria and Iraq and there is talk of a new engagement in Libya.

Gordon Brown famously said of the British involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan that Westminster would spend what it takes (a commitment with no limit).

Nobel prize winning economist Joseph Stiglitz has calculated the total cost of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan as four trillion dollars (4,000,000,000) – this was before the latest escalation of involvement.

The dictatorial rule of the Assads – father then son, who have maneuvered over the decades to maintain their position and that of their cronies provides the context for the Syrian tragedy. Assad junior collaborated with the US 'war on terror' and provided torture facilities for the programme of extraordinary rendition. Neo-liberal policies leading to unemployment and hunger fed discontent that inspired by the democratic hopes of the Arab spring led to mass demonstrations. These were greeted by the regime with violence and mass detention.

As the civil war has deepened more than 90% of deaths and injuries have been at the hands of Assad as a result of the regimes attempt to stem the rebellion. Assad has been supported and armed by Russia. Bombing by the other 12 nations flying combat missions is contributing further deaths and injuries – IS is responsible for at most 2%.

The Syrian Centre for Policy Research estimates that the death toll since 2011 is over 470,000. In the same time 1.88 million have been wounded and life expectancy has fallen from 70 in 2010 to 55.4 years in 2015.

Around 45% of the population of Syria (just over 20 million have been displaced from their homes). Over 6 million internally and more than 4 million abroad.

Lebanon – smaller than Wales and with a population of around 4 million is now home to more than one and a half million Syrian refugees.

The relative weakness of the US has meant that the civil war in Syria has played out in a context where major imperial powers like the US (and their supporters such as Britain) and regional powers like Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Iran are all fighting for influence in what is both locally a globally a strategically important area. The people of Syria are playing the price of this cynical and ruthless struggle for power.

Britain's role is relatively marginal in the number of planes flying and number of bombs dropped but its role is central as a supplier of arms into the region and in providing political legitimacy for the US.

Edinburgh Stop the War coalition has produced this draft fact sheet. We aim to refine and extend it and produce an online version that links out to other resources. Feedback and suggestions for improvement should be emailed to edinburghstw@tiscali.co.uk