

Palmerston without Power

The civil war in Syria has now been going on for more than a year, thanks to the involvement of other Middle Eastern powers, the U.S.A., France and the U.K. One of the first public reactions of Her Majesty's government to the re-election of President Obama was to urge him to be more active in removing President Assad of Syria from power. The war must be intensified.

It is worth bearing in mind that modern war is by nature calamitous, especially for civilians. In Syria atrocities have been committed on both sides, as could have been predicted. *Refugee* is a mild-sounding noun that came into prominence during and after the Second World War. Politicians should make an effort to realise the experiences it covers. For Christian refugees (perhaps the most numerous group throughout the region of the "Arab Spring") it must be a severe test of faith to have to abandon house, home, possessions, friends, sometimes family, and to beg in foreign parts. The foreign (or domestic) policy of any civilised state should not inflict the disruption of hearth and home on anybody except for the most compelling and necessary reasons, such as resistance to invasion, when in any case it is often better for civilians to stay put.

To hear Mr Hague or Mr Cameron, nobody would ever suppose that they had no responsibility for Syria, or Egypt, or Libya. On 15 November they began moves towards lifting the EU Syrian arms embargo in favour of the groups indifferently called opposition, dissidents or rebels, who already have enough arms to engage the Syrian army. It is suggested that we may soon follow France in recognising the opposition/rebels, though they do not fulfil the usual requirement of being in *de facto* control of territory. So it is worth bearing in mind that nobody has ever appointed or elected Mr Cameron to govern any of these states. The mayhem is inflicted arbitrarily. The United Nations was founded specifically to resist aggressive war. Her Majesty's Government has been waging aggressive war (whether directly or by proxy) against the internationally recognised governments of Libya and Syria, and thereby *has* been responsible: for causing unquantifiable human suffering and the breakdown of law and order. Why? What reasons are strong enough to stir up civil war in a neutral foreign state? What overriding and absolute demand could justify the British government?

The only available answer is *democracy*. Mr Cameron, we are told, is not worried that the British electorate do not seem to agree with him that democracy is always and everywhere best. The great majority of the English electorate have just shown that they think the appointment of police commissioners is not for them. Mr Cameron nevertheless intends to go on forcing democracy upon us, though thank God! less bloodily than in the Middle East.

The war-by-proxy in Syria is a crusade-in-reverse. It is crusading in the imposition on a Muslim power of Western beliefs. But it does not matter to the new crusaders whether the first and entirely predictable consequence is the extinction of Christian churches much older than Islam. The war is effectively against Christianity.

The other difference from the original crusades is that this cause is not worth any drop of human blood.

British foreign policy is traditionally based on maintaining the integrity of the realm and the national interest. It is new, for instance, that "democracy" in Egypt (in the shape of the Muslim Brotherhood) is preferable to a régime able to negotiate with Israel. The last occasion of ideological British foreign policy was in Palmerston's day. But then Britannia ruled the waves as well as much of the land surface of Planet Earth, so when Palmerston threatened in 1848 to seize Cuba and blockade Seville if the Spanish government ignored his (liberal) advice, the threat was not dependent for its execution on American armed force.

The further stupidity now is that Mr Hague and Mr Cameron do seem to believe that the result of their efforts will be the replacement of the present Middle Eastern benevolent or malevolent despotisms by functioning democracies on the Western pattern. Let anybody still here come back to this column in ten years to test the fulfilment of this expectation. Our own is that Western democracy is not exportable to the Middle East. About this we are not even sorry.