

13 August 2018

Tom Tugendhat MP
Chair, Foreign Affairs Committee
Committee Office
House of Commons
London SW1A 0AA



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Secretary of State

Dear Tom,

Thank you for your letter of 11 July concerning the Foreign Affairs Committee inquiry into Responsibility to Protect and humanitarian intervention and your request for an independent inquiry into the decision-making processes leading to, and the consequences of, non-intervention in Syria.

I welcome the FAC's interest in this important issue, and I share your concern at the impact of the Syrian conflict on civilians. I also agree that decisions not to intervene militarily in conflicts can prove as significant, and as worthy of discussion, as decisions to do so. However, I am not convinced that an independent inquiry would be appropriate in this context.

The circumstances surrounding the UK's decision not to intervene militarily in the Syrian civil war are well understood. On 21 August 2013, the Asad Regime deployed chemical weapons in an attack around Ghouta which left over 800 people dead. The Government of the day found that humanitarian intervention was an available legal basis for military action: the Government argued that, if action in the UN Security Council was blocked, the United Kingdom would not be precluded under international law from taking exceptional measures in order to alleviate the scale of the overwhelming humanitarian catastrophe.

But as you know, Parliament voted against military involvement in Syria in 2013 and so the UK did not intervene militarily. Nor did the United States or other allies. I voted to support military action. And I regret that in failing to act militarily at that time we may have emboldened the regime and encouraged other countries to enter the conflict more forcefully on the side of the Syrian regime. I welcome your committee's continued scrutiny of the situation.

I would, however, take issue with the notion of "UK inaction". Even after Parliament's decision in 2013, the UK has tried to remain engaged in Syria – both to assist with the increasing humanitarian catastrophe and to protect key UK regional interests. The UK is the second largest bilateral donor to Syria, and we have been at the forefront of the humanitarian response providing food, healthcare, water and other life-saving relief. To date, we have committed £2.71 billion in response to the Syria Crisis, our largest ever response to a single humanitarian crisis. Much of this

has been spent in Syria's neighbours, helping them to cope with the huge refugee challenge created by the Syrian conflict.

Through our Conflict, Stability and Security Fund, the UK has also provided a range of support to Syrian civilians and their communities in areas held by the Syrian opposition to help save lives, bolster civil society and counter extremism.

We have also sought to defend the global norms and values so tested in the Syrian conflict. This has included supporting work of the UN Commission of Inquiry to report on human rights abuses and that of the UN's International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism (IIIM), which gathers and analyses evidence of the most serious crimes committed in Syria, with a view to future prosecutions. We have worked with allies through the EU to impose sanctions targeted on specific individuals and sectors involved in committing atrocities.

The UK has been particularly active on the issue of chemical weapons. We led the successful diplomatic efforts this year to strengthen the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons capability to prevent further use of chemical weapons, including by attributing responsibility for these heinous crimes. And when the Syrian regime used chemical weapons in Douma in April 2018, the UK – with our US and French allies – took military action to hit Syrian chemical facilities.

We and our allies have also, of course, taken military action against Daesh in north-eastern Syria, as in Iraq, as agreed by Parliament in 2015. This ongoing international effort means that Daesh now controls less than 2% of the territory it once occupied.

This comprehensive UK approach to Syria has made a real contribution to protecting Syrian lives and defending UK interests. But we should also be honest that none of these activities were fundamentally likely to change the trajectory of the Syrian civil war, particularly once other external powers weighed in on behalf of the Assad regime. Military intervention should always be an act of last resort, and the use of the military force is rightly subject to international legal strictures. We need also always to be conscious that military action creates its own consequences, not all of which can be readily foreseen. We should not lose sight of the fact that, whatever the decisions made in the UK following the chemical attack in August 2013, the prime responsibility for the massive loss of life and destruction in Syria lies in the hands of the regime and its partners.

Yes sir
Jey

THE RT HON JEREMY HUNT MP