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# WHEN THE WORLD NEEDS A DICTATOR

To think we can make these countries model democracies is a fantasy

Australia extended its war again last week. We will join allies such as the US and Canada in air strikes against Islamic State (IS) in Syria.

We were already striking them in Iraq. IS does not stop at the Iraqi border and, from now on, nor will the Royal Australian Air Force.

IS is surely one of the most barbarous and murderous political organisations to emerge in the modern world.

In Iraq we are targeting it to support the elected government — a weak and sectarian one to be sure — but a government which has a real claim to legitimacy.

In Syria the government is run by President Bashar al Assad. Assad heads up a repressive and murderous regime which he inherited, as dictator, from his father before him. He rules through the minority Islamic sect — the Alawites. The Sunni majority does not support him.

Although we carry no candle for Assad, in the murderous world of Middle Eastern politics, when you fight his enemies you inevitably strengthen the dictator.

The real problem in Syria is we can identify many enemies but few friends.

Two years ago the press made fun of Prime Minister Tony Abbott for saying: "It's not goodies versus baddies it's baddies versus baddies."

Of course he was right then and it is still the case now. But these are the choices in the mire of modern Middle Eastern politics. There are no easy solutions. There are no ideal political leaders that lie in waiting one election away from government.

There are disastrous possibilities and there are ones that are less worse.

Last week Defence Minister Kevin Andrews was asked how long the extended campaign against IS would take.

He said: "Two, three years. I can't say for exact terms."

The statement was widely interpreted as an error.

Whether this was because he was



overestimating the time required to defeat IS or, more likely, because he was underestimating it the Prime Minister was forced to "clarify" his minister's comments. He said there was no timeline only that the military would be there "as long as needed".

The Australian Defence Force is still deployed in Afghanistan nearly 15 years after we joined international forces that dislodged another murderous Islamic group known as the Taliban.

The effort was enormously successful in military terms. It involved air and ground forces. A popularly elected government has been in place

for some time. Whether it will survive the complete withdrawal of Coalition forces is now the question. But in Afghanistan there was one big advantage over Syria.

Coalition forces, principally led by the US, put boots on the ground. They were able to capture and hold territory.

IS could be quickly defeated in a land campaign, but no country is volunteering to lead and commit the forces required to do it. If the campaign is restricted to air warfare it is not so much a campaign to defeat IS as a campaign to contain it.

For how long do we want to con-

tain IS? The answer is, obviously, for good. Which makes this a very open-ended commitment. That is why the government should think carefully about the conditions that would constitute a success in Syria. In what circumstances could we consider the job successfully completed?

Suppose the IS leadership is driven out of Syria, who would we expect to govern? Other Sunni groups such as the local Al-Qaeda franchise, are fighting for control. They were the original exporters of terrorism beginning with the World Trade Centre attack — hardly an improvement on IS. Then there are Sunni groups that

claim to be democratic but hardly have majority support. Installing and supporting them would take a huge Western commitment.

More like decades than years. And then there is Assad. He was the guy the West wanted out just a few years ago.

How different things look now. Four years ago the "Arab Spring" began with mass demonstrations against the ruling dictators. In the West people began to delude themselves into thinking that once dictators like Mubarak and Gaddafi were deposed, a groundswell of democracy would rise in free elections leading to humane governments presiding over religious tolerance.

When the dictators were swept away we began to see what came after them was so much worse — the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, the Jihadist warlords of Libya, IS and Al-Qaeda in Syria.

Each time a new political manifestation of Islam emerges in the Arab world it tends to be more extreme than the one it usurps. Power rivalry between different branches of Islam is aiding and abetting it.

The Saudi regime is financing and supporting its own brand of extreme Islamic theology. Iran is arming and funding Shia proxy groups like Hezbollah in Lebanon. The Shia-Sunni divide runs right through Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and many Gulf countries.

There is a war for the soul and leadership of Islam that is spilling blood across the Arab world. Mostly it involves Muslim on Muslim violence but one thing both sides agree on is the marginalisation and repression of Christian and Jewish and other non-Muslim minorities, to the extent they still exist in these societies.

To think we can remake these countries as model democracies is a fantasy. If that is the test of success we will never leave. It may be the best we can hope for is moderate dictators as opposed to obscene ones. Assad is a shocking dictator. Unfortunately, we now know things can get even worse.

Peter Costello is a former federal treasurer.