

Letters

Dear **ARMOR**,

The Russians are in Syria, committing their forces to back up Bashar al-Assad. America and the West recoils in protest at this support for an odious tyrant, without whose departure they see no hope of an end to the bloody Syrian civil war. Putin takes the opposite view, seeing Assad as the only long-term hope for peace and stability. The question of who is right comes down, in the end, to a matter of psychology.

The popular Western view is that people everywhere are, at the most basic level, the same. Everyone wants freedom, democracy and the rule of law. Thus, if a country is ruled by a brutal dictator, which Assad certainly is, his regime reflects his behavior and that of his henchman. Logically speaking, therefore, if you remove the dictatorship and provide a level of education and training, the result should be a peaceful democracy. This is why the West so enthusiastically supported the Arab spring. It is also, of course, a large part of what drove the invasion of Iraq.

Then there is the other view, which sees people in different parts of the world as fundamentally different. Not that everyone in each nation has the same disposition, of course, but that the prevailing temperament varies greatly from area to area. What this view implies, very crucially, is that governments reflect the prevailing temperament of the people and not vice versa.

Thus if people readily accept and respect democratic, humane governments, governments tend to be democratic and humane. If, on the other hand, they obey only brutal and authoritarian rulers, rulers tend to be brutal and authoritarian. In this view if you remove a tyrant, then the result is likely to be not a peaceful democracy, but a new and equally brutal dictator, or anarchy.

Recent scientific studies support this last position in that they show liberals and conservatives to have deep-seated emotional differences with physiological roots. For example, conservatives tend to have a larger amygdala, a portion of the brain involved with emotion and threat. These differences in turn seem to be epigenetic in origin, epigenetics being the new science showing how the activity of genes is affected by our early life experiences – and even those of our ancestors.

The West believes that “moderate” insurgents can defeat ISIS and Assad and bring peace and democracy, if only backed by enough firepower. This flies in the face of experience that the only “moderate” forces to do much against ISIS are the Kurds. Thus, in practice, we are teaming up with unsavory groups such as Al-Qaeda affiliates.

In Putin’s view, the invasion of Iraq and Western support for the Arab spring has undermined brutal but stable governments and brought chaos and bloodshed. It can hardly be denied that the suffering of the Syrian people during the civil war is incomparably worse than anything suffered under the Assad regime.

The same can be said of the situation in Iraq and Libya and elsewhere. Putin believes the only real solution is a regime brutal enough to maintain order, and yet not a threat to anyone else. Assad’s regime is about the best on offer.

Science suggests that he is very likely right.

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*(Editor’s note: Penman is joint director of a research program into the physiology behind human social behavior. Maneuver leaders may be interested in his book, **Biohistory: Decline and Fall of the West**, published by Cambridge Scholars. Penman’s degrees are in history: bachelor’s of arts degree from LaTrobe University, Melbourne, and doctorate, also from LaTrobe.)*