

Counter-insurgency expert, David Kilcullen, discusses the situation in Syria

ABC 7.30 Report, Leigh Sales

David Kilcullen, former Australian soldier and counter-insurgency expert, joins 7.30 to discuss the current situation in Syria.

Transcript

LEIGH SALES, PRESENTER: The G7 group of nations will meet in Italy overnight our time, where what to do about Syria will be top of the agenda. The United States has followed up its airstrikes on Friday with strong criticism of Syria's ally Russia, saying it bears some responsibility for the Assad regime's atrocities because it continues to prop up his Government. One of the most astute observers of the big picture in the Middle East is David Kilcullen, who's with us now from Canberra. Thanks very much again for your time.

DAVID KILCULLEN, FORMER AUSTRALIAN SOLDIER AND COUNTER-INSURGENCY EXPERT: Thanks for having me.

LEIGH SALES: The US and its allies want Russia to stop propping up Syria... will it?

DAVID KILCULLEN: No. I mean I think it's a fantasy to think that any amount of rhetoric from the White House and a small number of subsonic tomahawk missiles is going to cause the Russians to back off from a relationship that's been very strong since the early 1960s, the base that was bombed last week was constructed in 1971 for example. So Russia has very strong geopolitical reasons for wanting to maintain a relationship with Syria. It's got a long-standing relationship.

I don't think the Russians are particularly enamoured of Bashar al-Assad, the Syrian President as an individual. I think it's possible that we might see some Russian willingness to consider a change of individuals, but as far as backing off from the regime I think it's highly unlikely.

LEIGH SALES: How do you orchestrate a change of leadership, though?

DAVID KILCULLEN: Well what the American position has been and was until about two days into last week, was that that is a matter for the Syrian

people. And that the international community needs to be working towards a peace settlement that creates an environment within which that transition can be freely elected or chosen by Syrians. And it's interesting that the result of the Khan Shaykhun strike on the 4th of April has seen the American policy go from isolationist to interventionist to sort of somewhere in between, in the space of three days.

I think that's left a lot of people in the G7 as you mentioned, kind of scratching their heads and trying to figure out what it is that is likely to be the US policy going forward.

LEIGH SALES: I wonder if you can answer something that I feel like hasn't been answered in the past few days, which is why would President Assad have conducted that chemical weapons action? Because he was going along relatively smoothly. The rebels were on the back foot. He had the diplomatic and military backing of Russia so now all of a sudden he's back front and centre. Why would he have done that?

DAVID KILCULLEN: The Syrian story is that a Syrian air force jet struck an al-Qaeda weapons dump that had sarin gas in it and that was the cause of the strike. They're not admitting the use of the weapon. That said though a number of independent observers have confirmed that it was most likely a Syrian air force Major-General flying an aircraft from the base that was struck that dropped the weapon.

But your statement's accurate with respect to the big picture in Syria. The recapture of Aleppo back at the end of the last year, really significantly enhanced the Government's position. But Khan Shaykhun which was the town that was struck last week is right on the front line of a really important battle that's going on in north-western Syria. That area is the southern edge of a big pocket of Idlib province and the area up towards the Turkish border that is dominated now by a fairly motley collection of jihadist groups, including al-Qaeda.

A number of other sort of fellow travellers of al-Qaeda and then a group of Turkish-backed militias and it's an area that's been really growing and threatening the regime on its northern flank, even as it's been making some progress elsewhere in the country. Actually Assad is in no way secure in Syria. He is still very strongly under pressure. And that's the reason why you can imagine that this kind of strike would be conducted.

I should say it's not the only chemical strike we've seen in just the last week. In the last two weeks there have been chemical laden rockets launched at the same town and there have been chlorine gas attacks in the same area.

Leigh Sales: I mentioned before this G7 meeting that's happening in Italy tonight our time, are we likely to see anything concrete come out of that?

DAVID KILCULLEN: This is a Foreign Minister's meeting and it's one of the sort of prelim meetings before the main summit. And I suspect that what we're seeing here is the normal diplomatic manoeuvring that happens before a big meeting where people try to figure out what the policy is likely to be going forward. So I don't think we're going to see much resolved out of the G7 meeting. I think the meeting to watch on the diplomatic front this week will be the US Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson, visiting Moscow.

And until last week, the idea of the meeting was going to be focused on how the United States and Russia could collaborate in fighting against the Islamic State. I think it's going to be a very different conversation now and that will be the one to watch.

LEIGH SALES: Do you think there's a risk this conflict in Syria could turn into something much bigger?

DAVID KILCULLEN: I think it already has. You now have a more or less permanent Kurdistan that covers most of northern Iraq and north-eastern Syria. You've got a vacuum from the western border of Iraq through to about the middle of Syria. As Islamic State is under pressure in Raqqa and Mosul and Iraq, it is striking out in other places like in Egypt just yesterday or today.

And you've got the war going on in Yemen. And an expanding conflict in Libya.

Most of those things are linked to the same set of causes that are driving the war in Syria. So I think it's already escaped the lab if you like.

LEIGH SALES: You bring up those terrorist attacks in Egypt that IS has claimed responsibility for killing dozens and wounding hundreds. How would you describe overall at the moment the strength or otherwise of Islamic State? Because after all the US and its allies are meant to be in the region to tackle Islamic State?

DAVID KILCULLEN: It's important to realise that Islamic State isn't one thing, it's actually multiple things. One of the things that it is, is a territorial state-like entity in Iraq and Syria which is very much losing ground. It's under very significant pressure in Mosul, although I think we probably still have until June or July before we see that battle end. It's under pressure in Raqqa and it's lashing out elsewhere in the region, in Libya, Egypt and Europe. Sweden and London just in the last two weeks, as a way of maintaining some initiative and trying to relieve pressure.

And then it's also a whole series of regional groups from South-East Asia all the way across to western Europe.

As we see the caliphate, so-called collapsing in Iraq and Syria, we're likely to see a spike rather than a reduction in terrorist activity outside that region.

LEIGH SALES: David Kilcullen, it's always great to have your company on the show, thank you very much.

DAVID KILCULLEN: Thanks I'm sorry it's not under better circumstances.

LEIGH SALES: Thank you.